



Slough Borough Council Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Peer Challenge

20th – 23rd September 2022

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

As part of their ongoing improvement work and relationship with the LGA, Slough Borough Council and its partners requested a Children's Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) peer challenge to look at a range of key strategic and operational areas. The Council is facing significant financial challenges and is subject to an intervention notice under Directions from the Secretary of State, with Commissioners in place to oversee both governance and finance following an external assurance review in October 2021. In addition, there is oversight of Children's Services (including SEND) by a Department of Education (DfE) Commissioner. Slough Children First provides children's social care through a council wholly-owned company. The provision of SEND services however, remains with the council.

The focus of the council has been on financial recovery and this has resulted in children and young people not being a priority for the council, despite it being one of the priorities in the 'Doing right by Slough' corporate plan. There needs to be a significant shift in corporate and political commitment towards improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND in Slough.

There is commitment from officers to improve SEND services and there are some signs of improvement and recognition of what needs to be done although staff are still anxious and often feel overwhelmed with the enormity of the task. The Lead Member is determined to make a difference to the lives of children and young people in Slough.

Decision making is slow, exacerbated by infrequent decision making and deferred decisions at a corporate level with no recognition of the impact on families. Performance management is under-developed and the plan that sits beneath the Written Statement of Action is very detailed and it is difficult to track progress. There needs to be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time Bound) plans with a focus on key milestones, capacity to deliver, outcomes and risks. It is not evident there is sufficient challenge at the SEND Strategic Board or how partners hold each other to account. The NHS Frimley Integrated Care Board also needs to do more to scrutinise and monitor progress.

The narrative needs to change from 'we can't do this because...' to 'we will do it together'. A focus on the future rather than the past will build positivity. There are some examples of good partnership working across the local area but this is not always evident.

Schools are keen to share their expertise and improve outcomes and see further improvements in communication with senior leaders in children and SEND services. Further work is however needed with mainstream schools to develop greater inclusion for children with SEND.

The current structure for People (Children) under the Associate Director (AD) for Education and Inclusion is not effective and needs a root and branch review to ensure that the right resources are in the right place and roles and responsibilities are clear. Staff turnover continues to be an issue and recruitment is problematic across children's services, SEND and education finance. There are significant numbers of 'interim' staff and this creates a perception that staff are not invested in Slough and its children.

The use of Capita One is not embedded resulting in duplication of effort at a time when resources are limited. Investment in training, using existing resources will address this.

An audit of resource provision will assist in preventing inappropriate consultations and placement breakdown which is a continual problem due to a lack of understanding of what is available.

Significant numbers of staff working with SEND children, young people and their families work from home on a regular basis in both the council and health. This is creating a perception that staff are unavailable. Face to face contact with children, young people, parents and schools helps build rapport and gives staff an understanding of schools and settings.

Health commissioning is not fully understood by partners and parents and there is currently an inconsistent health offer for children and young people. New developments such as the neuro-development pathway, early help for emotional health and wellbeing and an all-age approach are to be commended but it is too early to determine their full impact. The relationship between the ICB team and school leaders needs to be strengthened so that the role and function of the ICB is fully understood.

The SENDCO (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Co-Ordinator) network is valued by schools with strong local leadership. However, there needs to be a focus on inclusion in mainstream schools to reduce the reliance on specialist placements,

The voice of children and young people with SEND, and their parents is not sufficiently heard, with an under-developed approach to co-production, engagement and participation. Slough has a wide diversity of languages, and cultures and high levels of deprivation. Communication needs to be accessible and culturally appropriate so families can fully understand what is being shared.

The Graduated Response needs to be more widely communicated to ensure schools, settings and parents understand what is expected in terms of process and provision. The EHCP process, including annual reviews, requires a quality assurance process that is robust and monitored regularly. The SEND Panel has increased involvement of headteachers and SENDCOs which is leading to increased transparency, support and challenge although some inconsistencies remain.

The Local Offer needs to be improved through co-production, rebranding and renewed promotion. It is currently not providing the information parents, partners and children and young people need and there is increased pressure on SENDIASS to provide information that should be available on the website.

Overall, staff across the local area are trying to make improvements but this is often difficult due to financial constraints, capacity and recruitment difficulties.

2. Key Messages

- There are strong relationships between partners in Slough, probably the strongest they have ever been, which is providing a good foundation to build future improvement.
- There are clear 'green shoots' but improvement is hampered by the lack of corporate and political prioritisation and the speed of decision making across the local area.
- Limited resources are hampering the pace of improvement.
- Progress co-production with all relevant stakeholders as this is crucial to the local area if it is to deliver lasting improvements for children and young people with SEND

3. Key recommendations

There are recommendations at the end of each theme which will help you in delivering both the areas included in your Written Statement of Action and other improvements in SEND across the local area. The following key recommendations are vital to improve the lives of children and young people with SEND.

- Significantly strengthen corporate and political commitment so that every Slough child matters and senior leaders at all levels 'own' their children.
- Improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND needs to be prioritised by all partners so they can hold each other to account for progress made.
- All partners must be fully invested in the action plans to improve and measure progress in relation to outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
- The SEND Strategic Board should provide robust challenge to partners to ensure that improvements for children and young people with SEND progress at pace. Consideration of risk should be an integral part of the Board's work.
- Ensure the right resources are in the right place to maximise the capacity across the system and provide children and young people with SEND, and their families, with the support to which they are entitled.
- The voices of children, young people and their families need to be heard and fully acted upon to deliver impactful change, including improving and relaunching the Local Offer, with a strong focus on promoting independence and preparation for adulthood.

4. Summary of the peer challenge approach

The fundamental aim of a peer challenge is to help councils and their partners reflect on the provision in the local area for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities, in consideration of the Children's and Families Act 2014, the Equality Act 2010 and the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Regulations 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice 0-25 2015. This was a very focussed peer challenge on specific key lines of enquiry.

It is important to remember that a peer challenge is not an inspection; it provides a critical friend approach to challenge the council and their partners in assessing their strengths and identifying their own areas for improvement. The approach involved reviewing the local area self- evaluation, documentation and data; sample reviews of education, health and care plans; interviewing a range of children, parents/carers and staff from early years settings, schools, colleges, other providers, council and health commissioners and provider organisations. A number of visits to early year's settings and schools were carried out alongside a range of focus group sessions. It is important to recognise that the findings are based on this range of activity. Slough Borough Council is encouraged to reflect on what the findings mean in relation to the area as a whole.

The Peer Team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and their participation was agreed with you.

The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Slough Borough Council were:

- **Lead peer** – Caroline O’Neill, LGA Children’s Improvement Adviser and former Strategic Director Children, Adults & Families, Gateshead Borough Council
- **SEND Peer – Caroline Cannon**, Strategic Lead for Inclusion and Specialist Support Services - Middlesbrough Council
- **Health Peer – Sara Barr-Frost**, Director of Nursing and Allied Health Professionals - Wigan, Wrightington and Leigh NHS Trust
- **Education Peer** – George Gilmore, LGA Associate, School Improvement Adviser and former Special School Headteacher
- **Challenge Manager** – Jill Scarr , LGA

The Process

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. A review of 16 Education, Health and Care Plans was also carried out by two experienced LGA Associates prior to the on-site stage. The team then spent 4 days onsite at Slough Borough Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 70 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 25 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 240 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 6 weeks in Slough Borough Council.

This report provides a summary of the peer team’s findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (20th -23rd September 2022). By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

5. Scope and Focus

The peer challenge focused on five key themes. The report includes the good practice we heard about and areas which you might want to consider further.

Themes:

- Leadership and governance of SEND across the local area
- Capacity and resources (including finance)

- Working with Key Partners
- Systems and Processes
- Local Offer

In addition, you asked the team to specifically focus on the following areas which we have responded to in the relevant themes:

- How effective is the local area strategic planning in meeting the needs and delivering good outcomes for children and young people with SEND?
- What are the governance arrangements in the local area? And how effective are they at driving improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND?
- To what extent do leaders understand the challenges of the local area, have sufficient expertise to improve outcomes?
- How effective are leaders at holding each other and their services to account for outcomes for children and young people with SEND?
- Review current team structure effective to deliver statutory duties and services of a good quality? (set in the context of the local area, Written Statement of Action and the Safety Valve Program)
- Review effectiveness of training and development programme to ensure workforce has the necessary skills and experience to deliver high quality services for children and young people with SEND
- How well is the SEND code of practice understood by all partners and implemented (including education, social care and health services)?
- Review the effectiveness and efficiency of the processes and systems for assessing and meeting need (including data and IT Systems)
- Assess the effectiveness and accessibility of the local offer.
- Co-production of local offer with children, young people and their families?

6. Main Findings

6.1. Leadership and governance of SEND across the local area

It is not apparent that children are a priority in Slough. The focus on the financial situation of the council overshadows the focus on improving outcomes for children and the lives of children with SEND. The financial position in the council should have resulted in a strengthened focus for children from the partnership as a whole, in particular health, but there is little evidence of this. There should be a recognition that partners across the local area fully accept their responsibility for the SEND priorities and drive the solutions. Money takes precedence over children. It is recognised that the council is in a difficult financial position but from conversations during the review, it is apparent that the leadership of the council has other priorities, despite one of the priorities in the 'Doing it right by Slough' corporate plan 2022-2025 being '*A Borough for children and young people to thrive*'. Corporate and political commitment needs to be significantly strengthened so that every Slough child matters and senior leaders at all levels 'own' their children.

The Integrated Care Board (ICB) talk of SEND as a priority, but there needs to be more evidence of the ICB holding the system to account for the collective and individual risks and priorities for SEND.

There are strongly committed officers in children's services and across the partnership who are determined to improve SEND services for children. As a result, there are 'green shoots' in terms of relationships and willingness to work together, and an understanding of what needs to be achieved to make a difference. The Lead Member is also an asset to improvement, being visible, accessible, passionate and determined to improve children's services.

Due to the recent history in the council, the peer team heard that staff feel overwhelmed and at times feel traumatised and anxious. This does not promote a positive working environment. Despite the difficulties there is a positivity amongst some staff who are striving to make a difference to children and young people with SEND.

Decision making was described by staff and partners as slow. There are a large number of priorities being tackled at the same time and there is an absence of time to pause and reflect, check that the priorities are correct, timelines are realistic, the level of importance of priorities and whether they are having the desired impact. There is the added complexity of how this work is viewed at a senior leadership level in the council – at both senior managerial and political level, and a lack of understanding of how lengthy decision-making impacts on the lives of children and their families. Corporate decision-making meetings, particularly around resources, are too infrequent and decisions are often deferred which slows down progress in improving outcomes. In addition, six monthly progress update meetings to members are insufficient to monitor progress at a political level,

Performance management around the SEND Improvement Plan is unclear. The local area's response to the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) was the production of an improvement plan which is known as Document 11A. This is a very detailed document which includes progress on all elements of the Written Statement of Action. There is so much detailed information it is difficult to see clearly where there is progress or improvement. There are some deadlines that have not been met. The document does not have SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time Bound) targets, identified resources needed to deliver actions, key milestones, outcomes or risks.

Capacity to deliver everything in the WSOA is insufficient across the local area and there needs to be some prioritisation to identify some quick wins across health and the local authority and build confidence with partners, including schools, settings, parents and carers. A review of the plans should also be built in to ensure they are still appropriate.

An overall performance dashboard with a narrative around exceptions will highlight the areas where progress is being made and areas of risk. It is unclear whether there is performance management expertise to support this work although there is a SEND Project Manager on a six-month contract to support the work on the WSOA. Progress is reviewed at the SEND Strategic Board.

It is also difficult to see where there is sufficient challenge around improvement at the SEND Strategic Board. Similarly, there is no focus on risk. The SEND Strategic Board minutes provide information relating to updates across the various workstreams but there is little evidence that partners are challenging each other or that risks are being discussed.

Scrutiny and monitoring progress towards improving outcomes for SEND children should be considered at the highest level in the council and the NHS Frimley Integrated Care Board.

There is a need to change the narrative in Slough so that all officers and partners are focussed on the future, not the past. A message that 'we will do it together' will encourage staff, reassure partners, and assist Slough to deliver better outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The peer challenge team heard repeatedly, the current narrative, 'we can't do this because...' and this language can be perceived as an excuse for the lack of progress.

Although partners report communication has never been as effective as it currently is, under the direction of the current Director of Children's Services (DCS) and Associate Director (AD), there needs to be more ambition across the wider system for improving outcomes for children across Slough. In reality there were many examples of great work in partnership across the borough, but this has not been evidenced as an output of the WSOA. Are the actions in the plan actually achieving improvement or are improvements being driven by the relationships on the front line?

The school leaders that spoke to the peer challenge team are ambitious to improve the outcomes for children with SEND and are committed to work with other schools, settings, parents and partners across the local area. They are keen to share staff expertise to support curriculum development, opportunities for inclusion and promote more effective engagement with parents and carers. School leaders reported that there had been improved communication with senior leaders in children's services.

Recommendations

- Create a culture of ambition around 'what we will do for children with SEND' rather than a narrative around the history and what can't be done - This must be led and driven at the highest level by senior political and corporate leaders
- Develop SMART action plans to replace document 11A and for each of the 4 task and finish groups to deliver the priorities within the Written Statement of Action.
- Develop a performance and risk management framework around the SMART Action Plans which should also include the introduction of a Challenge and Risk Log for the SEND Strategic Board
- Fully exploit the commitment and expertise in schools to share good practice between schools and promote effective inclusion for children and young people with SEND
- Create an opportunity for a strengthened focus on SEND by holding partners to account equally at the Integrated Care Board. The risks need clarity with collective plans and mitigations

6.2. Capacity and resources (including finance)

The current structure for People (Children) sitting under the AD for Education and Inclusion does not effectively deliver improved outcomes for children with SEND. It is recognised that due to one of the Associate Directors (AD) leaving in November 2021,

the responsibilities were added to that of the Associate Director for Education and Inclusion without the appropriate resources. This has resulted in a structure that has a number of group managers reporting directly to the AD, who manages diverse and complex services. The structure is fragmented and needs to be reviewed, going back to the basic principles of 'form follows function' - What do you need to deliver the services that will improve outcomes for children? A review of roles and responsibilities will assist managers to deliver improved, measurable outcomes for children and to be accountable for them. This will need to be done within existing budget provision. Members of the peer challenge team will be able to support the council to develop a new structure. It is recognised that some additional resources have been agreed in SEND services and the new posts are currently advertised. Successful recruitment to these posts is critical to improving outcomes for SEND children because current capacity is insufficient.

The relentless scrutiny of the council across a range of functions by DfE, Ofsted, DLUHC and Commissioners absorbs a significant amount of officer time and energy which can impact on the ability to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

Staff turnover is high and recruitment to permanent posts is often difficult. This is impacting on the delivery of plans across the system partnership. There are a significant number of interim staff employed by the council, not only in children's services and SEND services but in the corporate centre. The team heard there are also difficulties in recruiting finance staff with SEND experience which may impact on the Safety Valve programme. The description of 'interim' staff creates a perception that there is a lack of personal investment and commitment to children with SEND. Staff are employed to fulfil a role and it should not make a difference whether they are permanent or interim. The peer team were told that the constant change due to interim staff leaving and new ones coming in often created a change in priorities and ways of working and this is impacting across the partnership. The council and ICB's most senior leaders should set the direction of the service and ensure that those coming into the organisation know what it is and what can or can't be changed. Innovation and new ideas in any organisation are important but equally getting the basics right and having some stability is fundamental to improvement.

Capita One is not being used to its full potential resulting in duplication and a lack of robust management information. In order to provide management information, a tracker has been created using an Excel spreadsheet but the team heard this is not infallible. Information is then entered onto the Capita One system. When resources are stretched, duplication of effort is not helpful. Individuals are also using their own spreadsheets to track their cases. There are staff that are knowledgeable about Capita One who can be used to train staff in its use. Although there is a short-term impact on taking this resource out to train staff, the longer-term benefits will result in less time being spent on maintaining spreadsheets and the consequent risks of data being lost or incorrectly recorded. Staff within the SEND team would also benefit from an enhanced induction and training around the SEND Code of Practice so they fully understand all the statutory requirements.

There is not a clear understanding of the SEND provision across the local area resulting in inappropriate consultations and the breakdown of placements. The local area needs to complete and publish an audit of resource provision. This information would be shared with schools, officers and parents. This should not be seen as a review but what

is available in schools at the present time. Schools should contribute to this audit by describing the provision they currently provide. This information will become a position statement enabling a consistent understanding of what SEND provision is available. The audit will provide a baseline for a next steps resource provision review which should be completed as soon as possible and linked to strategic SEND place planning for the next 5-10 years. This should form part of the DfE Safety Valve work.

Once the audit of current provision is complete, and an identification of where specific SEND training needs are in the system, a workforce development plan should be produced and training commissioned. If training cannot be delivered from existing council resources, the considerable expertise within Slough schools or external providers could be engaged. There is also considerable expertise in the schools that can be utilised to train other staff in schools and settings. This could be by using an outreach or hub and spoke model.

With the large number of staff across the local area regularly working from home there is a perception from some partners that staff are unavailable and inaccessible to respond to parents and professionals. Automated responses to e-mails which say 'we will respond within 5 working days' is seen as unhelpful when families and partners are in need of support as soon as possible. This approach is resulting in alternative routes being used. For example, parents and school leaders contacting the Associate Director, elected members and the Lead Member directly, rather than the member of staff most appropriate to their enquiry. An increasing number of parents are also accessing the SENDIASS for support.

The number of days staff are expected to be in the office was cited as being 2 days per week by some staff and managers and 3 days per week by others. SEND caseworkers regularly attend meetings with schools and parent via Teams rather than attend the school in person. Regular caseworker visits to schools, to meet children and families and engage with school staff, are important to build rapport with families and have an understanding of their personal situation. Visits to school will also promote a greater understanding of SEND provision. Schools would like to see the reintroduction of EHCP multi-agency planning meetings before the EHCP is drafted which worked very well pre-COVID. This is another example of where the value of face-to-face contact has been lost. The team were told that some professionals were working remotely at some considerable distance from the local area with little, if any, face to face contact with children, young people and their parents. This results in relationships being more difficult to establish and perpetuates the perception that the family's situation is not of great enough importance to some members of the workforce.

Recommendations

- Restructure the People (Children) area under the Education and Inclusion service as a matter of urgency. This will provide clarity about roles and responsibilities, which needs to be communicated to all partners, and will provide the AD with a structure which will assist them to deliver improved outcomes for children by delegating responsibility to appropriately experienced staff and holding them to account. A revised workforce training plan should be included as part of this process.
- Train all staff, as a priority, in the use of Capita One so there is only one system in place that records information and data which will improve performance and increase efficiency.

- Urgently complete and publish an audit of resource provision and communicate this to partners and stakeholders so there is a clear understanding of what is currently available in Slough, and which will facilitate place planning to meet the needs of all SEND children and young people.
- Ensure that both council and health staff return to more face-to-face meetings and office based working wherever possible This will build relationship and communicate to partners and parents that they are a priority.

6.3. Working with key partners

The investment from health in Slough is patchy. The commissioning of services is not fully understood by schools and parents and indeed partners. There are areas of development that are having a positive impact, for example the neurodevelopment pathway, early help for emotional health and wellbeing and the all-age approach will improve outcomes, which are to be commended. However, the commissioning of health services for Slough results in an inconsistent offer to children and families with SEND and partners talk of health partners not being sufficiently active. Partners feel health has not become fully represented again since Covid restrictions were lifted.

The existing and developing models of health delivery have not been effectively communicated and therefore are not fully understood by parents, families, schools and other partners. An example is when a family are seen by a nursery nurse and not the health visitor. It is described as a negative - 'we have not been seen by a health visitor', not understanding that the nursery nurse visit has a valuable role as part of the skill mix that is required to deliver the Healthy Child Programme which is led by the health visitor. Schools, parents and officers in the council describe the difficulties of getting the appropriate therapy support. As a result, there is a difference between what health partners are delivering, planning to offer, and what parents, schools and other partners are expecting children to receive. There is clearly an opportunity to work in co-production with partners and parents and to strengthen relationships and communication.

A new full time Designated Clinical Officer (DCO) was appointed at the start of the year by the ICB to cover the Frimley geography. There is still more to do across all the agencies and partners to help people understand the role and function of a DCO. Further work is also needed to strengthen the relationship between the ICB team and school leaders to understand the role and function of the ICB. The DCO is leading on one of the immediate priorities of delivering the quality improvement required for EHCPS.

The dialogue between local area professionals and schools has improved and the local area's leadership of the SENDCO network is strongly valued by schools. Work needs to continue with schools to assist them to meet the needs of children with SEND, identify areas of strength and good practice to develop greater inclusion for children with SEND in mainstream schools.

Parents, children and young people feel that their voice is not sufficiently heard and participation and co-production is under-developed. There has been very little work carried out in the area of co-production and this is something that needs to be considered across a range of areas including the local offer and service delivery. Partners are not utilising Special Voices, the parent carer forum to engage with parents, and this is an area that needs to be strengthened. There is also an opportunity to work

with Arbour Vale school to develop effective procedures for co-production and consultation.

Communication methods do not reflect the cultural diversity of the local area or the high levels of deprivation e.g. digital poverty. There is a wide diversity of first languages in Slough and many families do not have access to IT. Communication with parents needs to be culturally sensitive. Schools are well placed to advise the Council and health on the communication preferences of families and the most effective strategies to communicate with parents. Parents themselves can also be used to support other families. There needs to be a prompt and substantial move away from e-mail communication to telephone and in-person communication, restricting the use of Microsoft Teams. Individuals may be able to speak and understand spoken English but find written communication, including forms, difficult without translation.

Recommendations

- Ensure the principles of co-production are understood by parents, children, officers and partners in the local area, and that these principles lead to the effective development and delivery of high quality co-produced services for children with SEND and their families.
- Prioritise the quality improvement work for EHCP's with partners and develop an ongoing quality assurance programme.
- Communicate the health offer and model of delivery and work in co-production with children, young people, families and partners on any developments.
- Strengthen links with parent carer forums
- Work with schools and settings as a resource to assist with the communication with parents and families and value families as an asset for providing community support
- Move away from the over reliance on e-mails to parents and carers to a more person-centred approach through telephone calls and face to face contact. This will help those parents where English is not their first language and will help build rapport and trust.
- Increase the pace around the work of the participation and engagement sub-group to ensure the voice of children, young people and families is heard and acted upon
- Initiate regular meetings of senior managers from the local area with Special Voices and the wider parent community to build trust and promote openness
- Engage community representation and trained staff to ensure that communication with children, young people and families is clear and understandable

6.4. Systems and Processes

There is an increased scrutiny of a school's use of the Graduated Response at the SEND Panel before an Education, Health, and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) is considered. However, the Graduated Response is not universally understood and consistently applied. Details of the Graduated Response need to be published – this

should describe what schools are expected to provide and what parents should expect schools to do. This information should be shared effectively with parents and carers by the SEND team, SENDIASS (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information and Advice Services), Special Voices, schools and settings and be provided in the context of parents' communication preferences.

In terms of nursery provision, there is a lack of understanding regarding the planning and placement process for children accessing specialist nursery provision, funding arrangements for this provision and consistent planning of placements for children as they move from nursery to school. The offer was not clear and the communication between settings and officers is often poor. As previously mentioned in the Capacity and Resources section of the report, there is a need for more face-to-face engagement, when requested, and a clearer understanding of sufficiency planning. All of this has an impact on the children waiting for provision. Nurseries are trying to meet the needs of their children without the plans and provision being in place. For some children, their needs are known at a very early stage, often at birth, but the planning for their needs is not always available at the earliest opportunity.

There is a lack of robust quality assurance processes around Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) resulting in inconsistent and outdated plans. Current quality assurance processes are focussed predominantly on education and not a widely inclusive process. There is limited input from social care in the EHCP process. Annual reviews do not always lead to updated plans. The completion of EHCNAs, EHCPs and the prompt updating of plans following annual reviews must be a priority. This activity must be tracked, performance targets set and closely monitored and progress regularly reported. This prompt completion of assessments and the updating of plans should build confidence with parents and schools and support a more effective and targeted consultation process that more closely matches children's special educational needs to available provision.

During the course of the week, it became apparent that preparation for adulthood is underdeveloped. Children's and adult services need to work closely together to plan transitions for children with SEND which will support them to become as independent as possible in adult life. The Children with Disability Team does work closely with adult services to enable appropriate, quality transitions but this needs to be expanded to young people who may not be known to that team.

The increased involvement of headteachers and SENDCOs in the decision making at SEND Panel is valued. This is leading to increasingly transparent decisions and support and challenge to schools where there is incomplete or inadequate evidence to support a decision. There are, however, some apparent inconsistencies and the reasons why decisions are reached are not consistently communicated to schools.

There is evidence of increasing challenge regarding funding and placement decisions at the SEND Panel. However, there is a lack of understanding across settings and key staff in SEND services regarding the place planning and strategic planning processes for SEND. As a result, this leads to placement decisions that do not reflect local provision.

It is important that there is a shared understanding regarding the place planning process for all staff to ensure consistency and transparency. Alongside this there should be a SEND Sufficiency Strategy in place, which is approved by the SEND

Strategic Board, and which outlines how the local area will meet short, medium and long-term demands. This should be co-produced with families.

Recommendations

- Reinforce the application of the Graduated Response on a regular basis with all partners and ensure it is well understood
- Introduce a systematic quality assurance and performance management process for monitoring the compliance and quality of EHCPs and Annual Reviews
- Explain and clarify the reasons for decisions made at the SEND Panel
- Ensure strategic place planning for children with SEND is influenced by robust data, feedback from stakeholders and clearly communicated to all partners.

6.5. Local Offer

The Local Offer is outdated, undervalued and offers limited information for children, young people, families and partners. It is also difficult to navigate. It is not owned by all partners equally and it is unclear where it sits and where responsibility lies for updating the information. There is no recognised branding which identifies and promotes the use of the Local Offer across the local area. Resources have been identified to manage the content, however the plans to co-produce the content with children and young people and their families are unclear. There is a need for increased pace around this key priority for the local area.

As a result of the Local Offer being so limited an increasing number of parents are accessing the SENDIASS. Parents often consulted SENDIASS to understand their rights, the statutory timescales and the processes regarding EHCPs and annual reviews. This information should be easily accessible on the Local Offer.

Parents describe the Local Offer as not effective in promoting independence for both parents and their children as there is limited information about what services are available to them or where to go.

Recommendations

- Work with children, young people and families to review and update the Local Offer which will include accessibility, a clear rebranding of the website or other applications, leaflets and posters
- Identify a lead partner who will hold all partners to account for the contribution and updating of the Local Offer
- Ensure that the Local Offer is promoted by all staff and partners, including the third sector
- Provide regular training for young people, parents and staff on how to navigate the Local Offer and access services
- Monitor use of the Local Offer, through appropriate measures, to ensure it is used effectively

7. Next Steps

The Local Government Association would be happy to discuss how we could help you further through the LGA's Principal Adviser Mona Sehgal, telephone 07795 291006 or

e-mail mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk and Alison Michalska, the Children's Improvement Adviser, telephone 07920727626 or e-mail alisonmichalska@icloud.com

Thank you to everyone involved for their participation. In particular, please pass on thanks from the peer challenge team to Chinwe Nwofor and Deborah Bowers for help prior to the peer challenge and during the on-site phase.