

## **CHILDREN, FAMILIES, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE SELECT COMMITTEE**

Item under consideration: REPORT OF THE ADDITIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES: PARENT AND CARER EXPERIENCE TASK GROUP

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Date Considered: 12 September 2024

1. Many parents and carers of children with additional needs and disabilities in Surrey have lost trust and confidence in Surrey County Council's ability and willingness to meet the needs of their children. That is the finding of a task group set up to determine how the Council can better support them.
2. Finding out parents and carers' experiences, views and feelings lent itself to a qualitative study and a series of focus groups was carried out. Eight hours of rich data were systematically analysed. Although the sample of 25 cannot be generalised to the population, triangulation was used to strengthen insights. A focus group with SEND case officers, data on complaints relating to the SEND Service, and the volume and nature of SEND cases highlighted in a survey of Members, all reinforced that problems described by parents were not isolated incidents. These included not having an SEN school place and their calls and emails not being responded to.
3. The Task Group concluded that, if the SEND Service is to achieve its strategic ambition of hearing and involving families in the decisions that affect them, it must do more to embrace the principle of co-production.
4. The report of the Task Group was presented to the Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee on 12 September 2024. The Chairman of the Task Group said that despite being affected by their research they had kept the response proportionate. To contribute to the Council's customer engagement transformation programme, the 81 key engagers in this Service needed to be given the correct tools for the job. He applauded pockets of very good practice but reflected that these did not appear to be widespread, and proposed that partnering with schools to upskill staff in SEN should be the future.
5. The Committee Chair recognised there were many issues with SEND at a national level, however the task group's recommendations set out what could and should be done at a local Surrey level to make a difference to parents and children. She advocated that these were done without delay to avoid further loss of trust.
6. The Committee wholeheartedly and unanimously agreed all recommendations put forward by the Task Group.

### **Recommendations**

It is intended that, should Cabinet agree them, all the recommendations that follow are implemented over the next 12 months.

The Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Select Committee recommends that:

### 1) **Staffing and training**

The AND workforce must be appropriately sized to meet demand and better equipped to cope with the challenges of the role:

(a) All officers in the Inclusion and Additional Needs teams should have compulsory (i) training in SEND legal obligations from IPSEA and (ii) training in neurodiversity and needs of families from a charity with lived experience, such as National Autistic Society.

(b) Increase the number of permanent, customer-facing case officers by 50% to 120, to help ensure EHCPs are both child-centric and timely.

(c) Revise the case officer job description so that it reflects the need for difficult and complex interaction with customers, to ensure recruitment is geared towards the needs of the role.

(d) Given that case officers are recruited from a diverse range of backgrounds, a more thorough induction in the first month of employment should include: (i) clear guidance in how staff are expected to deliver and what is held to be important, (ii) the Code of Practice, (iii) the self-presented real-life experiences of parents and carers to foster empathy and (iv) how to de-escalate aggression stemming from personal trauma.

(e) Make a level 3 qualification in SEND casework compulsory for all case officers to be completed in their first 12 months, and provide them with appropriate study time to achieve this.

(f) Provide therapeutic supervision for case officers, a supported space in which they can reflect on the impact of the work on them.

(g) Award a new senior practitioner role to experienced and resilient case officers who display excellence in customer focus, who will move around Surrey quadrants and not be tied to a particular school-based area.

### 2) **Communication**

Support for families must be more personal and easier to access:

(a) SEND case managers must improve the attention they give to parental experience. They should be trained in a person-centred approach to support, develop and spread good practice, and relieve pressure on the front line to afford case officers the time to consider how to communicate with parents and carers in a way that avoids conflict, and for example,

(i) Communicate through face-to-face conversations at every stage possible;

(ii) Individualise communication plans based on parental preference e.g. some prefer to hear from the case officer regardless of progress, while others do not want regular contact reporting no news;

(iii) Add a more personal and empathetic narrative to the automated holding response that emails will be responded to within 5 working days.

(b) The guide for parents and carers of children with AND should:

(i) Include a jargon-free explanation of the statutory EHCP process, making clear what roles different officers do at each step of the way;

(ii) Be distributed by schools termly with their newsletter (SEND Support Advisors to request);

(iii) Be digitally distributed by Member Services to all Surrey county councillors to assist them in their casework and help in their role facilitating communication.

(c) Produce an easy-read version of the EHCP Governance Board (EGB) Terms of Reference, simplifying language wherever possible to aide understanding, and automatically make available to parents and carers in good time before a Panel decision is due.

### **3) Timeliness monitoring**

The system used by Inclusion and Additional Needs teams needs to enable full monitoring of Key Performance Indicators:

(a) Develop a way SEND case managers can monitor the response times of parent and carer communications with case officers, and review performance monthly at Director level.

(b) Such monitoring may require a reduction of the multiple and varied means of contact to leave only those which can be sent to a centralised database. This would enable communications to be distributed between colleagues to cover when the recipient is not at work.

### **4) Quality assurance**

To mitigate a decline in quality during the clearance of the backlog, annual reviews due in the next 12 months are brought forward to the earliest possible opportunity.

### **5) Process**

The excessively complicated EHCP procedure needs to be improved, for example:

(a) Create more opportunities for co-production with families, including checking with parents before the EHCP Governance Board makes a decision, that it is privy to all information they were expecting.

(b) The Task Group supports the exploration of AI technology to support with internal admin and free up case officers to focus on relational work, but stresses this should be non-customer facing. It recommends a comparison of performance before and after its introduction.

## **6) Dispute resolution**

When only 2% of Local Authority decisions are being fully upheld at tribunal, there is a need to reduce the number reaching that stage. For example,

(a) A Tribunal Officer should be assigned to familiarise themselves with case law and reflect on common causes of tribunals, in order to ascertain swiftly following a case being registered if it is worth pursuing.

(b) A business plan should be prepared to evidence the merits of expanding the mediation and dispute resolutions pilot and extending it beyond 12 months.

## **7) Training for schools**

SCC should lobby the Government to continue the Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools (PINS) in the future, and should encourage more schools to take up the offer. SEN and building relationships with families should not be the sole responsibility of one person in a school. To achieve this:

(a) When the PINS programme ends, neurodiversity advisors in conjunction with Family Voice Surrey facilitated parent groups should continue to work with schools to upskill ALL teaching staff (not just the SENCo, and including senior leadership) and help them to instil (i) a strong understanding of neurodiversity and inclusive education principles and mental health and (ii) the importance of engaging with parents and carers of CYP to incorporate their perspectives into classroom activities.

(b) Training should reflect that the primary needs of CYP aged 2-25 with SEN are autism and speech, language and communication, closely followed by social, emotional and mental health needs for six to 25-year-olds. Training should be varied in order to reflect the autistic spectrum, include Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), and be followed up by checking that knowledge taught has been acquired.

(c) Data on key indicators and outcomes of the PINS pilot needs to be collected and analysed to make an evidence-based plea to extend the DfE's programme funding beyond March 2025.

(d) The pilot's achievements need to be vigorously promoted amongst education settings, involving families in its promotion.

**Fiona Davidson, Chair - Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture  
Select Committee**

## **Background papers**

[Report of the Additional Needs and Disabilities: Parent and Carer Experience Task Group 12 September 2024, Item 6](#)

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