

Additional Needs & Disabilities Task Group – Oral Evidence Session with SCC SEND Case Officers

1:00pm on Wednesday, 1 May 2024

In Attendance:

Cllr Jeremy Webster (Task Group Lead)

Cllr Bob Hughes

Julie Armstrong, Scrutiny Officer

Witnesses:

SEND Recruitment, Retention & Workforce Development Manager

One SEND Case Officer from each quadrant: NW, NE, SW, SE

Notes:

Cllr Webster: Are you aware of how disgruntled parents can become with caseworkers?

NW: We get about 50/60 emails a day. The other week I had four phonecalls an hour, so it can get constant phonecalls and you've got other work to do as well so you can't always get back to them. I do understand it from the parents' point of view. If they don't hear from you at all then that's when they get uptight.

Cllr Hughes: If you're not there, do they simply leave a message or does it get picked up by a corporate desk of some kind?

NW: It varies, sometimes we get a phonecall through LSPA so that goes through single access and we get a message saying so-and-so's trying to get hold of you, can you call them back. Sometimes they call you directly or they'll send a text now. Some of our parents work for Surrey so they see you as well.

NE: I have a child with SEN. I wasn't happy with the Local Authority so I thought, what is the best way to affect change and make it better, so I decided to come work for Surrey. I try to set up a communications strategy with my schools. The SENCo knows how to reach me quite quickly. We do have parents that shout quite loud. One has always been courteous but he was shouting, screaming and calling me all sorts of names, personal. He sent me 10 apology emails, but because we are that first point of contact, we are the ones that take the brunt of it. Some parents don't understand we don't have any decision-making powers. That frustrates them as well because they say, Why are we talking to you and not your manager, why aren't you attending mediation? I think the process is not clear yet for many parents. Especially when their child is going through the assessment process, new parents find it difficult to grasp what is happening, who's doing what. As the messenger we had huge delays with Educational Psychologists (EPs) being able to perform assessments, it was very hard to deal with. I come from that point where I know what they're going through, so I do sympathise. We all do, we all understand the frustration, but it's still very hard, it affects your

wellbeing. I felt I was in a position where I was failing my families. Even though you're not meant to take it personally but there comes a point where you're constantly being battered, 'You're not doing anything'. It did affect me a lot, it was harsh. I did have the support from my manager and my senior manager but I think we all know retention of employees in this Surrey department is not very good so, we changed managers three or four times in less than a year. That also has an effect because parents are like, OK your senior manager last week was this person and now you don't have any, what's going on? They feel like the system is broken and they have no recourse.

SE: I think we all experience a lot of stress from the feedback we get from parents and I think a lot it's just to do with the sheer volume of work that we've got and the lack of staff, we are never fully staffed. Some people will not have a Case Officer for a period of time and so that's when a lot of the complaints come in, that's when parents are getting really irate because they're getting no communication. If they phone in it'll go to duty and mostly it gets picked up but a lot of things slip through the net when you don't have a Case Officer, and that's what builds up resentment over time. Once you get to the PFA (Preparation for Adulthood) stage with older children, parents are fed up with the system, they've been through it for years, they've been back and forth to panel and waiting on responses from us for years. Another big factor is that parents don't understand our role, and it is quite complicated to explain. Because of this they all have different expectations, it varies wildly. Some think we've got 30 students, some realise we've got 200. For other professions, a doctor for example, everyone's got set expectations, they know they might have to wait a long time in a waiting room. Because they don't understand our role, what we're able to achieve, that we don't make decisions etc., they maybe have unrealistic expectations and that's why they get angry.

Cllr Webster: How many cases do you have?

SE: It's never very accurate for PFA, people drop out of college for example. My team at the moment are mostly 177 but I've noticed other people have a lot less and I don't know why, I don't know if that's due to a management decision.

Cllr Webster: Is it due to experience?

SE: It might be.

NE: We get caseloads based on schools. In the North East, 177 is a very conservative number. We're always doing extra work.

SW: I don't know how it's meant to work, but we just went through key stage transfer down two Case Officers in our team of five. Significantly impacted, we had to pick up two more caseloads of work. We got it done on time.

Cllr Webster: Have you experienced disgruntlement as well?

SW: Definitely with disgruntled parents, less so with not knowing what I do. That might be because I'm new so I tend to explain it to everyone, This is what I do. The fact that it has to go to someone else and we have to wait for the decisions to be made. They try to give me all the evidence, but if they're requesting a change it has to go through this process. Especially around the key stage transfer, we've had a lot of upset phonecalls. Your caseload just grows through the year. We can start off with somewhere near 177 but in low 200s now, they just keep coming in.

Cllr Webster: Is accumulating the evidence and crafting the words in the EHCP a key part of your role?

SW: Yes.

Cllr Webster: How confident are you in doing that?

SW: It depends on the quality of the reports I get, which varies massively with the EP or SaLT (Speech and Language Therapist) reports. It's got a lot better since I started, there's been a push. They're having team meetings and getting people to use this format.

Cllr Webster: How do you find the contributions of the schools?

NE: Sometimes the school will say the child is specialist when the panel has agreed the child is mainstream. That's where the friction starts when the school and the Council don't agree. I think it's an unspoken truth, certain schools that have high academic attainment and that's what they want to project to prospective parents, they don't want SEN children. SEN children bring their stats down. I know it for a fact because I've worked in schools as well.

Cllr Hughes: How much training do the teachers get?

SE: There was one school the SENCo had no training, she was the PE teacher the day before.

NE: The schools have the same problem that the County has. They can't hire or keep staff. No one works in SEN for the money.

SE: It feels like parents' resentment is maybe coming from the teachers. It might be an easy response for the SENCo to put the blame on the Local Authority.

NE: They achieved so much in lockdown in classes of four or five children, they flourished. So when Covid ended and everybody went back to school, parents said my child needs a small class environment to progress but we don't have enough specialist places for Surrey. In our quadrant parents believe the one that shouts the loudest will get what they want. They tend to copy MPs and councillors into emails. I've had MPs and councillors contact me on Teams, they need to talk to my manager. Social media is a big problem.

Cllr Hughes: This is a system that doesn't work and you're the ones 'sent over the top' in war terms, you get the flack.

SW: We see SENCos every two weeks and they know they can contact us. I have so many children in my caseload, families we've agreed a specialist placement and we have to say, Have you tried AP (Alternative Provision), a nurture farm, swimming lessons? Because we can't send them to mainstream, it's not suitable for them, and we don't have anywhere else for them to go. So that's where I see a lot of the relationships break down, especially when the children are five or six and the parents know if they get the input now they could make such progress.

Cllr Webster: When you get into these difficulties, what level of support are you getting and what would you want?

SW: I have very good support pastorally. I had a call that went on for an hour with a parent who had lots of difficulties herself, that was quite a harrowing call, I called my manager and had a debrief. It wasn't angry or aggressive, it was just really sad. I'm not a social worker. A lot of the call was listening and just being there which is fine, I want to be there for families, but I didn't get any work done in that hour.

SE: I've had a couple of really angry people and I've spoken to my manager because it helps to talk when someone's been verbally abusive on the phone. Some want emails all the time.

Management suggest putting a communication plan in place, we'll update you every three weeks. But it's just one more task to add to the endless list of tasks you've got. Sometimes your update is there's no update, which is awful.

NE: They say to me that I 'speak parent' because I know their anxiety. In my team I do have really good support from the area manager, he's been there for a while. Our senior case manager seems to every time leave for better pay.

NW: In North West the senior case manager is pretty constant, 5 or 6 years. It varies.

SE: We've never had both the area manager and service manager positions filled in the time I've been there.

NE: We do have a constant area manager, constant service manager, it's at the senior case manager level there is a high turnover.

Recruitment Manager: From what I can see across the four quadrants, the senior case managers has been quite stable but perhaps not in the North East, they've had locums put in lately so that's very unsettling for the case officers when managers keep changing. But generally across Surrey it is reasonably stable. A high turnover of case officers, some teams more than others, the South East has experienced a lot of change and some change in management in the South East as well which has destabilised things a bit for the staff. We're trying to look at how to improve retention but it's difficult and it's a very stressful role.

Cllr Webster: What are the reasons they're giving you for leaving?

Recruitment Manager: A number of permanent staff are leaving and going into the agency locum world. There are higher rates that can be achieved. Not the same job security of course, not being part of the Local Government Pension scheme. So some are leaving for money and to have a change, it's very variable. For case officers it's a lot of stress and we've seen some people with mental health difficulties, work-related stress and periods of sick leave. Some of our agency workers if they work into a caseload that's not been covered for a while they walk into a nightmare situation so they might just do their three-month stint and think I'll try another Local Authority.

NE: A lot of families move into Surrey when they have a SEN child because even though it's a system that's not perfect, it does have good schools. The system is not built to sustain the influx. Parents that are in Surrey tend to be a bit more demanding, they know their rights. Some can afford to pay for a private EP, a private SALT, I find it's another level of discrimination. I can see they paid and the panel consider them and others wait six months. There is an imbalance, it is quite demoralising for us.

SW: What I'm seeing is that we don't have the school places. The parents that lodge the appeals and kick up a fuss might get a place. I have a child held back in infant school because we don't have a special place for him and the parents are lovely and understanding and you almost want to tell them, actually you need to put in an appeal because we don't have anywhere for him to go. All I want to say is please go to tribunal, but you can't say that.

NE: I do say that. I actively encourage my parents to exercise their right to appeal. They bump up to the top of the list for placements.

NW: Sometimes I have done.

SW: It's a real mix being in Surrey, some parents can and some can't.

SE: Some don't understand their rights, they might not be well-educated, they're not shouting the loudest at all, they're at a disadvantage.

SW: It's our job to advocate for those children.

NE: I want to go back to social media, something I've brought many times to my superiors. There are these forum groups that I used to be part of as a parent, our names got on them, named and shamed. It's horrendous, we get called all sorts of names, they think we're all sitting drinking coffee, laughing at them for not doing our jobs. A friend will come to me and say, 'Look what they write about you'.

SE: I've heard of other people in that situation.

NW: I had it once a long time ago.

NE: There is no privacy expectation for us as caseworkers. Emotional wellbeing of case workers is something that needs to be looked at. I was referred to Occupational Health. I had a Zoom call with a woman who ticked some boxes and that was it, there was no follow-up.

Cllr Webster: Parents have said Surrey don't know the law. Have you read the Code of Practice (CoP)?

SW: Not in full.

NW: We're not decision-makers, panels make decisions.

NE: I tend to read a lot of case law, that supersedes interpretation. Different people interpret the CoP differently.

Cllr Webster: As part of your induction do you recall going through the legalities in some depth of the jobs you're now doing?

SE: I was asked about Code of Practice in the interview, so they suss out whether you've got some knowledge of it at the interview.

Recruitment Manager: One of the job requirements is to have a good knowledge of the Code of Practice.

SE: And we have had a bit of training in it.

Cllr Webster: How do you feel in conversation with the solicitor?

SE: We know the basics that we need to know, the most important parts of it.

SW: We know what we need to know for the job. The important pieces are going to come round to you when you ask a question of your line manager, so I save that bit because that's the bit that will keep coming up, that's the FAQ.

NE: When I sit in meetings with solicitors I'm fairly confident. When they try to push I'm told I'm being confrontational. They're being paid by the family so obviously they're pushing for that, but I have no problem telling them actually you're wrong, they're offended. My area manager will say, this is my counterpart in the legal department, send it over to her, she'll look over it and give you a legal answer.

Cllr Webster: How do panels work in your view? What the parents are portraying to us is that they don't know what goes on at these panels.

NW: It varies [whether COs attend]. Post-16 panel we do go to. The pre-14 we don't generally go to, just do paperwork.

NE: In my experience we don't go but I've never heard of a panel that wasn't fully staffed. If for example the area manager is not available today, they will assign someone else that will attend in his place.

SW: When people are not there they are postponed. That's rare.

SE: I don't think SENCOs are invited to the SE panels.

SW: They're always on Teams.

NE: In the North East they do meet in person sometimes, in Dakota. Panels are on Wednesday and there's always a decision on Friday.

Cllr Webster: How many cases per panel?

SW: We have a limit of 30, maximum 35 panels between 10-2/3.

NW: That includes 5/6 on whether to issue an EHCP. Some asking for more funding, private report, special school.

Cllr Webster: How effective do you think these deliberations are?

SW: I think they're good, really in depth.

Cllr Webster: Is there a constitution available? Does it exist in writing what a panel does and who should be there?

SW: I haven't seen one if there is one. I personally don't think the panel is causing any tension. We get very clear communication from them. For a complex case you have debrief, if there's difficult news to pass on.

Cllr Webster: At what point in the system does it break, where do the gears crash?

SW: A lot of it comes down to meeting deadlines, we cannot meet them. They're unrealistic.

NE: They're set in stone in the Code of Practice.

SE: We're not conforming to the deadlines with reviews much at all because it's just impossible, due to the lack of staff and the volume of work we've got. We know when our deadlines are, we want to do it, we just can't.

NE: As an example, the key stage this year we managed it a bit better. Last year I remember key stage deadline which is set in stone, 15th February, we were up until 4am working to meet the deadline. Two weeks later we had a whole team meeting and the AD said well done and I said, At what cost? All of us had to take days off after that.

SE: And also it doesn't feel well done when you're sending out a lot of EHCPs that have just got the school type named and no actual place, I don't feel like I have done a good job then. That's a really big thing, one is that the deadlines are unrealistic with the staffing levels that we've got; the other thing is that we just don't have enough schools, special schools specifically. If we had more staff and more schools, we could do so much better.

SW: My manager really makes sure we leave at 5 and that you turn your phone off at the weekend. So in that respect I think it's a great job when you've got the right manager and team around you that all do that. There's almost no point working late because you will never catch up, I could work all hours of the day and I would never be on time for most of these statutory deadlines. Parents say, 'You're meant to get back to me within four weeks, where's my draft?' and I can't say, 'In a pile with 50 others'.

SE: We all have a whole load of emails sitting in an inbox. It must be difficult for parents because they can't understand why we haven't answered them; they might think we're twiddling our thumbs, but actually it's just so difficult to get round to them.

NW: The EHCP is issued about a year after you've had the request and it's supposed to be a 20-week process. I think it's getting better but in the last year we had the EP shortage. We were trying to make the numbers look better. We were behind on the whole load but the newer ones were being seen before the old ones to make the numbers better.

SW: Are we all using the Recovery Team? I think it's a huge bone of contention.

SE: We don't have a clue what they're doing, 'cause we don't have communication with them.

NE: The Recovery Team was meant to come in and help with our workload, take over all the statutory new requests. But I don't want the Recovery Team to touch my cases.

SW: I didn't give them over and they insisted.

NE: They are agency staff, well-intended but I think they are being pushed to do all this work quickly, get these plans issued, and the end result are not good plans.

SW: I think their insistence to meet deadlines sometimes comes at a cost, and is damaging our relationships with the families.

SE: It's quite depressing for us as well when you know they're getting paid twice as much as us, and yet they're doing a basic task like putting an EHCP into the system.

NE: If I was 20 years younger, I would go work for an agency.

SW: Their main job was to work on the backlog of EP cases to make sure all those plans were then issued and mainly they really stick to these statutory deadlines but it seems to be at a cost of everything else – so sometimes plans are issued where there's been no report included from SALT because it hasn't been received on time, there isn't a school named because the school that they're at currently said they can't meet need but the deadline is approaching therefore plans are finalised regardless. This means some tasks get redone, which is difficult because you then have to say, the Local Authority's changed its mind on this, because you're contradicting, it's really awful. I've had recovery plans issued where the evidence wasn't included - it was submitted but not included - so the child then goes to mainstream when they need special.

SE: They have their own panel. I only found this out by accident. They don't communicate with the case worker.

NE: The tribunal team are going to have a very busy couple of years.

Cllr Webster: What do you understand by the end-to-end review? Are you aware that people are looking root and branch at what you're doing?

NW: Yes I've met with a couple of people about systems, caseloads and looking at how things can be made better as a service.

NE: I think it's being fluffed, window-dressed to look better than it is. We've got emails explaining the finding so far and I think a picture is being presented with things omitted. When my manager told me about this today I said, yes I'm coming, because it's the first time our voice is actively being sought and listened to. We've been saying for years that our workload is not manageable. The ones making the decisions say we should be able to

maintain a caseload of 177 or whatever. In reality that's just not possible. It's not realistic and I don't think the end-to-end review will portray the reality.

SW: We've had people come round to ask us about the job and get opinions and they sit with us, but a lot of the time it's focused in the systems we're using, EHM the new (Liquidlogic) system. It's doubling our workload 'cause it's awful. It doesn't work and they're insisting that it's done on there. It slows us down. We're already struggling to meet deadlines and now you have to use a system that makes you repeat things three times in a row.

SE: It's because they didn't pay for the full package.

NW: For example you can't do a spell check on there.

SE: It's more efficient to use Word. And there are glitches.

SW: You can't track changes or download.

Recruitment manager: I think we're conflating two different reviews – the end-to-end review and another one on the system.

SE: I've been asked in the end-to-end review, generally about the workload and how we manage communication.

NE: The wrong information gets downloaded for us on EHM. I've had a major GDPR breach last week because of that. As a caseworker I don't have the time to go and check each plan that the person that is there as parental responsible is all correct.

Cllr Webster: If someone's out and you're asked to take on a case, how do you access all the details about that case?

SW: We share our work trays within the team.

Cllr Webster: So there's no problem about picking up work?

SW: No. At the moment yes, because two of our case officers left so their trays got closed before the new people started so they can't pick up anything from the two old people's trays. So every time that person A wants something, I have to go into person B's tray, pick it up myself and then reassign it to them.

SE: I think Wisdom is working against us, that's a bit of a worry. It used to be we just kept everything on the I drive, so every student had their own folder with all their documents in it and if you wanted to get to know a case you'd just go through the folder. Just now we're having to upload everything onto Wisdom which is quite laborious. People are still keeping things on the I drive because it's more convenient, and just putting the most important things on Wisdom but not everything, so you go to Wisdom and you're not getting the full picture of the student. It's quite worrying, what impact it will have on the student's cases.

Cllr Webster: To improve your work satisfaction what one or two things would you do?

NW: It's the numbers. A reduction in caseloads, more caseworkers. I used to go out to meet parents, built a bit of a relationship, now it's more admin. Face-to-face would improve the quality of the relationship.

NE: Same. More caseworkers to make the caseload manageable so we can go and visit the schools. Nowadays meetings are on Teams because no capacity. We only attend either emergency reviews and transition reviews – year 5 and year 9, nothing in between. It would

be nice to foster those relationships with SENCOs. Also better pay, it's not reflective of the responsibility and workload.

SE: Also more case officers so we can do a better job, and more special schools.

SW: More case officers, more schools. Immediately, if we could use the I drive to make work quicker.

SE: We just want to be able to do the EHCP on a word doc. The system has potential and it might make things better but enforcing it before it's ready. It sounded great in theory but that's not what it's done. The system goes down quite a lot and without the I drive, we can't do our work. Coming back to pay I don't think there's enough credit for the skills you need to have that aren't down on the job description. Anyone could do this job but they wouldn't do it well or stay.

NE: The good thing that I have experienced is support from our direct managers. Working for Surrey has been the best employer I've worked with. It allows me to fulfil caring responsibilities, that flexibility I've not encountered elsewhere.

SE: That flexibility makes you feel respected.

Next steps:

Witness session with SEND leadership and management.

This page is intentionally left blank