



**Children's & Education
Select Committee
Review of Pathways for Children with
SEND**



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Introduction

I am the Buckinghamshire Councillor for Wing and a Member of the Children's and Education Select Committee. In November 2022 I was asked by the Select Committee to set up a scrutiny review into how parents of children with SEND gain initial access to the information they might need to commence gaining help for their child. The review group was established, and I was joined in this by Councillors James, Kayani, Turner and Ward.

The aim of the group was to investigate how parents, when considering that their child might have special educational needs, might find and access the relevant information in order to gain the advice, help and support that they need on the journey to gaining support for their child's special needs.

I would like to extend my thanks to my colleagues on the review group, the dedicated Children's Services staff whom we spoke to, as well as to the Cabinet Member for Children's and Education for her contribution. I would also like to thank Andrew Howard of FACT Bucks, Laura Gomersall of Autism Early Support, Inger Richardson of ADHD and Autism Support and the staff of four schools that shared their views with the group.

Finally, I would like to thank the parents who freely gave their time to share their experiences of what was often a difficult journey to find the support that their child or children needed.

Councillor Diana Blamires
May 2023



Cllr James



Cllr Kayani



Cllr Turner



Cllr Ward

Aim of the Rapid Review

The review was set up with the aim of investigating the pathways to finding information for children and young people with SEND when first trying to access services and support. This involved a) assessing views from different sources with regards to the availability and accessibility of information required by parents to gain support from services for their children and b) gaining understanding on information for services specifically relating to three different scenarios as follows:

1. Getting help before a diagnosis of Autism
2. Getting help before a diagnosis of ADHD
3. Getting help with anxiety and depression

Through looking at the ways parents had accessed the pathways to information to help their children and young people, the review aimed to gain the following:

1. Improved clarity for parents of children with SEND on what help is available and how to access it through appropriate resources and information sources (as per the scenarios outlined above)
2. Greater understanding for parents on the roles and responsibilities of professionals working to support children and young people with SEND
3. Suggest Improvements to the help and guidance available for families on the SEND Local Offer
Suggest improvements to the pathways to help shape and inform the development of a more cohesive strategy

Methodology

In order to gather evidence, the review group held several meetings with Buckinghamshire Council Officers, representatives of local organisations, staff from a range of primary, secondary and special schools and with several parents as follows:

Between November 2022 and February 2023, the review group held 10 meetings with a Council Officers in a variety of roles in service commissioning, working on the Written Statement of Action, Educational Psychology, the Local Offer team, Improvement and Transformation team and areas relating to the provision of SEND services for children and young people.

During February and March 2023, the group made visits to four schools which included a primary, a secondary, a grammar and a special school to gain a range of views and perspectives on this issue. The group also spoke to lead professionals from local organisations providing services relating to special educational needs. The final stage of research conducted by the group was one-to-one meetings with parents to gain an insight into their own specific experiences of accessing relevant information and then of finding appropriate services for their children with needs relating to autism, ADHD, anxiety and depression.

National Context

The Government has been focused on the national need to improve SEND services illustrated by the publication in March 2023 of its plan; “SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan “Right Support, Right Place, Right Time. The plan outlined the Government’s aim of providing “a single national system that delivers consistently for every child and young person with SEND and in alternative provision”.

The plan also set out the Government's intention to create local SEND and alternative provision partnerships, set up a National SEND and Alternative Provision Implementation Board, develop a standard template for Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs), and create a three-tier alternative provision system. The plan provides a welcome focus on rebuilding support for SEN children.

The paper also recognised the importance of earlier identification of needs in an inclusive system and highlighted the need for timely, high-quality services and support in mainstream settings.

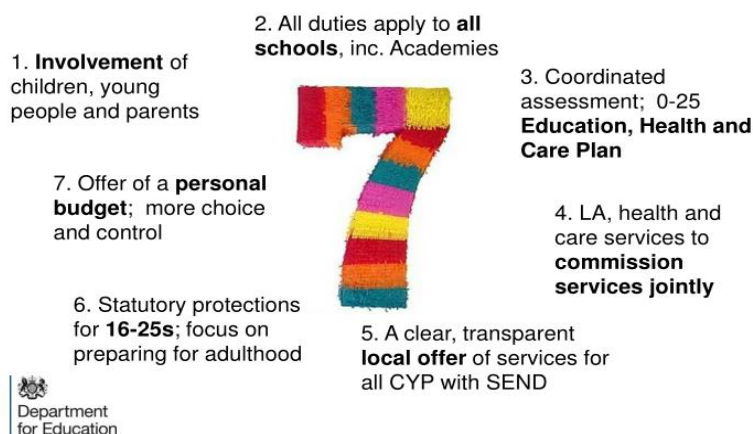
Earlier identification of needs relies on parents being able to access help in a timely and clear way to seek identification and understanding of their own child’s situation and bring about appropriate support. It was noted by the group that 90% of parents who believe their child has one of these conditions turns out to be right because this is the reason it’s so important to do much more when parents first believe their child has a condition.



Local Context

Between 28 February and 11th March 2022 the Care Quality Commission and Ofsted jointly inspected the services provided for children and young people with special educational needs (SEND) in Buckinghamshire. The aim of the inspection was to judge the effectiveness of the area in implementing the special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) reforms as set out in the Children and Families Act 2014. It was noted that the Covid pandemic had created various impacts into service provision including an increase of children and young people presenting with neurodiverse conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalcula and Tourettes.

Children & Families Act 2014 - Highlights



In response to the inspection, the council and the Integrated Care Board provided a written statement of action (WSOA), which was submitted to Ofsted in August 2022 which gave details of the local area’s extensive plans to address the three areas highlighted as requiring improvement.

As part of the WSOA one of the outcomes the authority wished to achieve was that “families are well informed about available services and support and report positively on their experience of their child’s needs being identified and met.” The council, Integrated Care Board and its many partners began extensive work to achieve the actions stated in the WSOA in many areas of its service provision. This work is overseen by the Children’s Services SEND Improvement Board which provides external challenge to drive improvements at pace and scale.

The review group therefore, sought to investigate what the experiences were for both parents and professionals when finding or sign-posting information about services in the initial stages of parents’ journeys into SEND services. This access to services was found to be

through a variety of places; schools, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators, health services, parent groups, the “Local Offer”, by word of mouth and referrals.

Summary of Recommendations

The Children’s and Education Select Committee review group wish to recommend that:

Availability of Information

Recommendation 1

The review group supports the ongoing and review on Buckinghamshire’s “Local Offer” to be customer-focused for children, young people and their parents. We recommend a more user-friendly approach with simple language, and suggest the inclusion of inserted videos, clear links to first port-of-call contact lists for each area of diagnosis and examples of pathway diagrams.

Recommendation 2

The Cabinet Member for Children’s and Education and the Chairman of the Children’s and Education Select Committee write jointly to the Government to recommend a change of name of “The Local Offer” in order to make it easier for parents to find when searching websites for their first access to information.

Communications Planning

Recommendation 3

The county-wide communications plan being developed for SEND should include promotion of our Local Offer, and this must include further promotion via social media.

Recommendation 4

A neurodiversity resource pack should be developed with key contact information about the Local Offer, charities, relevant organisations and health professionals so that it could be given to parents by all agencies as an initial signposting tool.

Recommendation 5

The neurodiversity resource pack should be promoted in all relevant forums e.g. Headteacher and Governor network meetings and it should also be shared with all Councillors in order to assist them in their casework with residents.

Training and Network Development

Recommendation 6

The Council support the implementation of the training qualification for all SENCOs as stated in the Government's SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan.

Recommendation 7

The SENCO meetings network be extended to ensure that all SENCOs have the opportunity to attend regular meetings for the purposes of sharing best practice and timely information.

Recommendation 8

The Cabinet Member for Children's and Education and the Chairman of the Children's and Education Select Committee write jointly to the Government to recommend a substantial increase in the number of university degree places for Educational Psychologists nationally, to enable educational psychologists to give greater support to schools on work relating to neurodiversity in children and young people.

Recommendation 9

A programme of neurodiversity in-school training be developed for all teachers and wider school and nursery staff.

Recommendation 10.

All secondary schools should be encouraged to deliver neurodiversity talks in school to foster a greater awareness and understanding of neurodiversity amongst pupils.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Following careful consideration of the information received during discussions and by gaining the viewpoints of officers, organisations and parents, the review group wish to report the following observations, key findings and recommendations.

In several meetings the review group heard details of how during the Covid pandemic there had been a substantial increase in demand for services which, along with difficulty in recruiting in some areas, resulted in additional challenges for providers.

A “whole system” approach was being taken to address the issues found by the SEND inspection and this encompassed education, health and social care. The work focussed on a needs-led approach, early intervention, assessment and diagnostic pathways and post assessment/diagnostic support. Parent dialogue groups were being consulted on the detail of the actions in the written statement to gain their perspective of the work.

The review group heard from the officers from different areas and services as follows;

- Buckinghamshire Council SEND Improvement Programme, Educational Psychology, Local Offer team and Comms Team
- Autism Early Support
- ADHD and Autism Support
- Oxford Health Foundation Trust
- Buckinghamshire Healthcare Trust
- Families And Carers Together Buckinghamshire (FACT Bucks)
- Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), headteachers and teaching staff from special, primary, secondary and grammar schools
- A specialist teacher
- Parents of children and young people with autism, ADHD and anxiety/depression.

As part of the early research for this review the group considered the Portsmouth Model of service provision for SEND services which was held up as an example of good practice. The model included:

- A “Profiling Tool” based on 9 dimensions (sub-profiles) that can be used by non-clinicians in a wide set of contexts alongside families to help assessment of need
- A Training programme - 100s of trained professionals across the children’s system to use the profiling tool alongside children and families
- A bank of resources and strategies for families to use - shaped to the child’s neuro-profile
- A reduction in demand for formal diagnosis - but not a ‘switching off’ as many families will continue to benefit from formal diagnosis
- A multi-disciplinary team that can provide help, advice, support and guidance

Following its implementation, feedback was very positive, with comments from parents to say that both the parents and teachers understood their child's differences much better than before. It was considered that the "bank of resources" and a wider training programme should be part of Buckinghamshire's approach.

Availability of Information

The Council provides the "Local Offer" detailing many areas of help for parents of children and young people with SEND and information for professionals. However, many people we spoke to had not initially heard of it. One parent commented that she didn't know of the local offer so didn't know to look for it. In the end another parent told her about it but she felt that the name was off putting. This view was reiterated by others hence the review group looked at the Local Offer site in further detail.

Through analysing several other local authorities' versions of the "Local Offer" and by speaking to parents, organisations and officers, the group gained an overall sense that "The Local Offer" on Buckinghamshire Council's website, although award-winning and full of useful content; needed to be revised thoroughly to make it more user-friendly for both parents and professionals. Other local authority versions of the Local Offer had inserted videos of key members of the SEND officer team and the service Director, stating their role and part in the mission to help parents of children with SEND. This was considered by the review group to be very reassuring and gave an understanding of the local authority's aims to help children.

Schools and staff from organisations reported that information was difficult to find and the site difficult to navigate. From a networking perspective it was difficult to find which SENCO was attached to each school and where other key contacts were listed.

Feedback from parents included that the Local Offer should be designed with an awareness of how the parents might be feeling when they first embark upon research with a view to finding appropriate services for their SEND child. The FACT Bucks survey of 2022 recorded quotes from parents which included: "It feels like we are constantly having to fight to get the right support for our child" and "It's always so stressful" referring to how hard it is to get to the service information required.

The group heard many elements of feedback supporting this issue and points included that the Local Offer pages were very hard to navigate, that contact lists were not easy to find in the website, and it was not clear where to go for support for the different aspects of neurodiversity. One parent suggested that it would be helpful to have links to You Tube videos and that information could be grouped according to the type of neurodiversity.

In the FACT Bucks parents survey of 2022, it was noted that: an increased proportion of respondents had heard of the local offer (66% vs 56% in 2021), though about the same number (75%) had never used it. Those who had used the Local Offer at least once gave mixed and worsening responses about the helpfulness of the information in it. When asked to rate it on a scale where 1 was "not helpful at all" and 5 was "very helpful", 37% [29% in

2021] rated it 1 or 2 and 16% [35% in 2021] gave a rating of 4 or 5.” It is noted that a new survey has been carried out in 2023 and so these figures may have changed.

Requests for development from parents and officers included;

- the use of video clips of our professionals to introduce “The Local Offer” and explain their own particular roles in supporting parents (such as the Surrey example)
- visible front page contact lists
- diagrammatic examples of pathways that children and young people follow from the first point of contact
- grouping information for parents to access according to the issues experienced such as “what to do if your child does x...” or “my child can’t pronounce words...”

The group considered that these would speed up the process of the parent accessing appropriate information for their child and feeling supported more speedily.

Parents also suggested that easy-to-use guides and example clips of conversations would be really helpful in accessing key information. This would help raise awareness of issues and provide reassurance as well as providing some strategies and support whilst waiting for an assessment and formal diagnosis. Another parent noted about the Local Offer that “clarity is the key for the concerned parent”. The group agreed with this statement, noting that knowing where to go initially for relevant information would help to alleviate the stress of “not knowing where to go” as stated by another parent.

The group were pleased to support the on-going work through the Local Offer Advisory Group to regularly update the Local Offer and noted that the inclusion of additional new content was driven by the SEND Improvement Plan. The review group commended the monthly work by the group and the team of officers supporting it, to check website content, amend broken links and regularly take user feedback into account. It was noted that the Local Offer contained a wealth of information from many sources and that keeping it up to date required some shared responsibility with the relevant organisations and outside sources of information.

However, from the user’s point of view, as outlined above, there are improvements that could be made to enhance the website experience and ensure that parents feel more reassured and more confident about their next steps in securing support for their child or children. The review group therefore recommend that:

Recommendation 1

The review group supports the ongoing and review on Buckinghamshire’s “Local Offer” to be customer-focussed for children, young people and their parents. We recommend a more user-friendly approach with simple language, and suggest the inclusion of inserted videos, clear links to first port-of-call contact lists for each area of diagnosis and examples of pathway diagrams.

The name “Local Offer” had been set nationally by central government. However, parents, organisational representatives, and Officers all told us that the name “Local Offer” was not only ambiguous but also not indicative of the site’s purpose, which meant that it was extremely difficult to find as a parent searching for information to help their child in the first instance. Its existence is not well known amongst relevant professionals; *“as a teacher, it is not helpful that I had not heard of this until I was seeking support for my child, and a friend pointed me in the direction of The Local Offer”*.

Many other councils had kept the name as it was, as the Government had stipulated but one had inserted the words “for SEND” which the group felt was appropriate.

Reviewing the name to include the word “SEND” would enable parents to find the Local Offer and the information it contains more readily in Google searches and thus increase the likelihood of earlier intervention leading to better outcomes. It would also make it more obvious what the Local Offer pages related to.

Recommendation 2

The Cabinet Member for Children’s and Education and the Chairman of the Children’s and Education Select Committee write jointly to the Government to recommend the change of name of “The Local Offer” in order to make it easier for parents to find when searching for their first access to SEND information.

Communications

The lack of awareness of the Local Offer was stated as a national issue and could be addressed both by changing or developing its name as outlined above, but also by raising awareness of it through promotion via social media as well as more traditional routes such as training. It was also suggested that it should be advertised in school planners and via newsletters/Headteachers Bulletins.

The group were aware that work was underway by the council’s officers to develop a communications plan, although the group were not aware of the details. The group considered that this should be co-ordinated with other agencies and charities to allow for clarity of shared information and support. Therefore the review group recommend that:

Recommendation 3

The county-wide communications plan being developed for SEND should include promotion of our Local Offer, and this to include further promotion via such elements as social media, training and advertising to include school planners.

Communications needed to be “palatable, easily accessible and co-ordinated” stated a lead officer from a local organisation. Many professionals are involved in the communications links around children and young people with neurodiversity; educational psychologists, school staff and SENCOs, health professionals and the officers working for local

organisations, national charities, and the council. However, school was often the first port of call for parents.

The Review Group believe that a simple resource pack or sheet signposting to relevant and helpful links e.g., to the “Local Offer”, and to local organisations and national charities would be really helpful for parents to be given when they first realised, they might need to access assistance, and to see where they might go to access the wealth of information available to them. This would complement the information found from further investigation by parents/professionals and would form part of the raft of resources such as had been successful in Portsmouth.

The review group would like the resource pack to be available to all agencies to hand out in hard copy format. The group acknowledge that hard copy can become out of date but suggest that this could be minimised by the provision of minimal information such as names/ links and would help accessibility for all parents.

Recommendation 4

A neurodiversity resource pack should be developed and used across all agencies as an initial signposting tool to e.g. The Local Offer, charities, relevant organisations and health professionals.

The review group considered that the resource pack should be promoted via relevant school-related and health partner forums. It would also be helpful to share it with all Buckinghamshire Councillors to enable them to sign-post residents to appropriate information when dealing with relevant SEND casework or enquiries.

Recommendation 5

The neurodiversity resource pack should be promoted in all relevant forums e.g. Headteacher and Governor network meetings and that it should be shared with all Councillors in order to assist them in their casework with residents.

Training and Network Development

The review group heard from a lead officer from an organisation that “the experience a child has with SEND at school depends on a key factor: how the school understands and deals with SEND issues “. The level of understanding of a child or young person’s SEND needs by their SENCO as well as other teaching and support staff is therefore key to good outcomes for children and young people.

The group heard from parents of support they received from SENCOs and this was crucial to them. For example, we heard of an instance where a SENCO realised that other students in the same class as one autistic child did not understand their autistic traits and so training was arranged for pupils in school to help their understanding. Through the meetings with

parents and staff the group were made aware of the high level of demands on SENCOs and the high level of care often given by them.

However, it was considered important that all SENCOs (and other professionals) gained up to date information on for example, diagnoses for different elements of autism. One parent noted that their child's indications of autism were missed, and another's behaviour was dismissed as being "naughty". The group considered that this training could only benefit everyone.

The implementation of the SENCO training qualification referred to in the Government's plan, to be rolled out uniformly across the county's SENCOs is a key part in ensuring the training level is consistent and supportive to the county's SEND children. Staff's ability to refer children onto the right pathways for diagnosis, as well as both signpost and give support within school is crucial. Sometimes there can be more than one condition which present together such as anxiety and autism, so it is vital that SENCOs understand complex behaviours and co-existing conditions and, in our view, training will support this. With this in mind, we recommend that:

Recommendation 6

The Council support the implementation of the training qualification for all SENCOs as stated in the Government's SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan.

The SENCOs that the group spoke to found the SENCO network meetings to be highly beneficial but it was noted that they did not consistently cover the whole county. As SENCOs play such an important support role it was considered that the network should be developed as this would help to ensure that information sharing is consistent. For example, there was a growing understanding of autism in girls, and more information could be shared on this. One parent noted how a specific type of autism "pathological demand avoidance" was not accepted by some professionals to exist. Information sharing on such issues would not only help the professional development of SENCOs and the teaching staff that they work alongside but ultimately the children who they are there to support.

It was considered that meetings could be held on-line and recorded to ensure consistency of information sharing as it was noted that the demands of the role meant that SENCOs might not always be able to attend in person.

Recommendation 7

The SENCO meetings network be extended to ensure that all SENCOs have the opportunity to attend regular meetings, for the purposes of sharing relevant and timely information.

Waiting times for diagnosis were a key frustration for parents. The review group heard how £1.1m funding had been committed to reduce waiting times for children to see a Community Paediatrician to improve the situation, as more support was needed for assessments.

The group heard from many sources how educational psychologists play a key and valued role in assessing children and young people. The work of trainee educational psychologists was particularly valued by school staff who reported that having more assistance by the trainees would assist the children and young people concerned and would speed the process up to a formal diagnosis. It was noted that 90% of children and young people referred to educational psychologists for assessments of SEN where a neurodiverse condition is potentially indicated as part of their assessment go on to receive a formal diagnosis from the relevant health professional. This high percentage was supported by work undertaken earlier in a child's timeline to assess their needs, and trainee educational psychologists contributed to this work.

The group heard that the council had to apply for trainee Educational Psychologists each year to the university consortium. Central government had pledged an extra £21million to train 200 educational psychologists nationally per year with an incentive of a doctorate for those who work for a local authority for at least two years after graduating. However, many more students awaited places. 12 universities and one NHS trust were running the government scheme. However, as an authority, we would have to bid to recruit trainees as would other local authorities.

It was noted however that the increase in work for educational psychologists in this authority in the last year alone was 61%, which followed an increase in 2021. This meant that our small number of trainees allocated to Buckinghamshire by the university consortium, as well as the qualified educational psychologists, had to focus their time on the statutory input required on the Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), rather than the work alongside SENCOs on assessments. It was also noted that it was very difficult to recruit full time educational psychologists but easier to recruit agency locum staff.

The Review Group believe that the Council should lobby Government for an increase in the total number of trainee places nationally to combat the increased demand, therefore we recommend that:

Recommendation 8

The Cabinet Member for Children's and Education and the Chairman of the Children's and Education Select Committee write jointly to the Government to recommend a substantial increase of the number of university degree places for Educational Psychologists nationally, to enable educational psychologists to give greater support to schools on work relating to neurodiversity in children and young people.

The group heard from both parents and officers that early intervention and the awareness level of teachers could be pivotal to a child's success. Awareness of the different profiles and indications of a neurodiverse condition was crucial. The group also heard from Officers how important it was to educate peers about neurodiversity.

One parent stated that her child felt misunderstood and was "treated as naughty" in year nine. However, following an inset day training for the teaching staff in the child's school on neurodiversity, on entering year 10 the child felt that the teaching staff's attitude towards them was more positive and that the everyday support presenting in the classroom had improved. This was crucial to the child's wellbeing, attendance levels and their academic progress in school. Another example was given where a SENCO acted quickly to refer a child to CAMHS as they recognised both the child's need and that they would soon be too old to qualify for the CAMHS service.

Recommendation 9

A programme of neurodiversity in-school training be developed for all teachers and school and nursery staff.

The review group heard how schools were addressing the education of children on neurodiversity via the "circle of friends" approach and education on anti-bullying. Members also heard from schools of valuable examples of talks presented in person in school, which had made a considerable difference to the attitude of peers to their neurodiverse colleagues.

It was considered that links could be explored to the work already being undertaken e.g., the National Autistic Society's "early bird" training programme or the training linked to the roll-out of the Autism Standards in Schools.

One SENCO gave an example of an older pupil who chose to deliver a talk in their school about their experiences with neurodiversity which had a beneficial impact on the whole school's understanding of the difficulties of the condition and encouraged a wider acceptance amongst pupils of their neurodiverse peers. Whilst not all children would want to speak about their own neurodiversity, it might be possible that some of the older children or alumni would do so. Some schools have a Neurodiversity Committee where children are able to share their experiences and feed back to school staff on adjustments. This additional level of two-way communication helps to give support to the neurodiverse pupils in the school.

Recommendation 10.

All secondary schools should be encouraged to deliver neurodiversity talks in-school to foster a greater awareness and understanding of neurodiversity amongst pupils.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the review group considered that across both the council and its partner agencies, a wealth of hard work was underway to improve access to the information around SEND service provision, including much through the work on the SEND Improvement plan. The group noted that crucially, the improvements needed to be co-ordinated with all services and partners to close the gaps in information provision.

The review group hopes that their recommendations will be welcomed, and that even if these can only make a small difference to the provision of information to SEND, then that will be beneficial.