

# local authorities' experiences of improving parental confidence in the special educational needs process

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# local authorities' experiences of improving parental confidence in the special educational needs process

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All quotations made in this report are taken directly from interviewees involved in the research.

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# Executive summary

## Introduction

The House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2007) highlighted that parental confidence is a key issue in making provision for children with special educational needs (SEN). The Lamb Inquiry brought together a group of expert advisers and a broader reference group of professionals and parents to investigate how parental confidence in the SEN assessment process might be improved. The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned this research to examine the ways in which local authorities work with parents in order to feed the findings into the Lamb Inquiry. The overarching aim of the research is to provide insights into the approach and practice of local authorities' work with parents of children with SEN. The main focus is on the period prior to formal assessment.

The findings are based on telephone interviews with the head of the SEN service (or equivalent) in 26 local authorities. They were selected for evidence of good practice, taking into account, for example, the number of SEN tribunal appeals registered, website accessibility and information from Ofsted reports. They were also selected to represent a range of authority types and sizes. It must be recognised, however, that this research only involved a small number of interviewees and that the pursuit of other/wider perspectives on SEN and parental confidence was not within the remit of this particular study.

## The referral process

Parents' experiences of the SEN process prior to contact with SEN services are highly variable. Some parents have good relationships with school staff and, as a result, have a high level confidence in the system.

The negative experiences of parents are something all local authorities mention but, most frequently, they report that these occur for the minority of parents with

whom they work. Parents' negative experiences can result in an 'adversarial or contentious' stance and an expectation that parents are going to have a battle on their hands.

Parents who are dissatisfied are usually dissatisfied with the outcomes of the process and provision that has been put in place, rather than the process itself. These parents can present to SEN services with 'fighting talk' or feel 'battle weary'.

## Early identification and intervention

In the majority of local authorities work on the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is in its infancy and therefore could not yet be aligned with the statutory assessment process. Information within the CAF can be useful for contextualising the needs of the child, especially when statutory assessments are being made in relation to behavioural difficulties.

Multi-agency work is effective for under-fives, although, once children attend school, there is less emphasis on a joined up approach. Hence, there is a view that schools need to be more engaged with other agencies through Children's Trust arrangements to ensure improved multi-agency input where required.

## Local authority and school responsibility for SEN

Most interviewees thought that parents were not aware of the distinction between the roles and responsibilities of schools and those of local authorities. Similarly, it was suggested that parents may not realise that funding may be delegated to schools and perceive it to be solely the responsibility of the local authority.

Parents' understanding of the different roles and responsibilities can be improved by holding regular

open meetings for parents of SEN children and actively involving them in the process. Parent partnership services can play a key role in this. Their location within children's centres can make them more accessible to parents whilst maintaining their independence.

With most SEN children supported in mainstream school, it is important to acknowledge and resolve any issues between school and local authority as a basis for increasing parental confidence. These could include financial issues whereby levels of additional educational needs (AEN) funding may not be perceived as adequate and the responsibility for paying for provision; increasing requests for formal assessments and statements (despite the delegation of funding); increasing requests for support for children with behavioural difficulties and complex needs.

## Supporting parents

Information is supplied to parents in a variety of formats, such as information packs, leaflets, websites and through face-to-face verbal communication. There are concerns that parents may have varying capacities to adequately access this information. Proactive attempts to widely disseminate information, including the use of children's centres, community centres and schools are seen as particularly effective.

Schools are generally parents' first point contact in navigating the SEN system. Parents are more effectively involved in the process if they are supported by the professional with whom they feel most confident. Hence, all professionals need to be suitably empowered and equipped to effectively guide and advise parents. SEN team officers play a vital role in maintaining a relationship with parents and ensuring that they are kept informed and engaged in the process.

Parental involvement at individual and strategic levels (for example, in consultation exercises) contributes to positive relationships between schools, local authorities and parents. The majority view of those involved in this research is that parents are heavily involved in decisions about their children, and that parents are involved in discussions throughout the process.

## Ensuring appropriate provision and outcomes

Local authorities ensure that the needs of the child are prioritised by placing the child at the centre of decision making and involving parents and young people in reviews. The centrality of outcomes in discussions with parents can be achieved when these discussions are open and transparent and parents have opportunities for contributing.

Close monitoring and review of provision by the SEN team may help to ensure that schools are actively providing the most appropriate support. Child tracking systems may be effective in ensuring that progress is identified and mapped against provision to ensure that what is offered is producing the desired outcome.

Regular and ongoing consultation with parents and a flexible approach to provision may increase their confidence that outcomes will be achieved through the provision in place, and if not, alternative support sourced.

## Local authority SEN team capacity and expertise

The majority of SEN teams are very confident that they can offer schools the support they require and are not considered to be lacking in their ability to provide or source the necessary expertise. SEN teams see themselves in an advisory/facilitating role rather than as direct providers.

There was some divergence between those who believed that building constructive relationships with parents results from experience and individual skills, and a roughly equal proportion of interviewees who believed that there is also a professional development issue and that training could be beneficial.

## Good practice in developing relationship with parents

There are barriers and challenges to the development of constructive relationships with parents, including those

associated with parents' perceptions and level of understanding (the most frequently cited), schools and other agencies, the statutory process, funding and capacity issues, and government policies/targets.

Strategies to counter these challenges include the SEN team's ethos and way of working, which prioritise accessibility, interaction and effective communication with parents. They convey the message that the SEN team's focus is to meet the needs of the child.

Further developments in developing constructive relationships may include: a personal face-to-face approach; a straightforward, but empathetic and understanding attitude; undertaking multi-agency assessments earlier in the process (via a key professional); undertaking needs analysis and having the provision in place to be able to meet all children's needs within the locality.

## **Key points for parental confidence**

There is a need to ensure that parents have good quality, face-to-face contact with SEN professionals at the earliest possible stage in the process. Parents should be encouraged to engage in a collaborative and consultative approach to their child's development within school. Some parents have specific needs of their own. Schools and local authorities can be proactive in reaching these groups.

It should be clear that professionals and parents are talking a common language, in which the needs of the child are central. Parents must be able to identify the roles and responsibilities of the SEN team, so that they are able to seek out the most appropriate support and advice.

The support for multi-agency working should be expanded, including the co-location of teams and the development of virtual teams around the child. Children's Centres have been particularly effective in providing parents with access to a wide range of support.

There is a need to maintain, capitalise on, and take forward the effective multi-agency working that takes

place in the pre-school arena in school settings. Children's Trust Boards' arrangements could have a central role to play in this.

Closer integration of the CAF and statutory assessment for SEN could increase parental confidence that all agencies and services are operating in a coordinated and complementary manner to meet the needs of the child holistically.

Improved joint working between education and health providers would help to provide an integrated service, and would be beneficial to parents whose children have both medical and educational needs.

Remits of, and relationships between, schools and the local authority need to be clearly communicated to parents so they have confidence that each will fulfil its own designated functions and responsibilities.

Confidence in SEN processes and provision could be increased if parents have access to clearer information regarding who is responsible for the support available and how they could access it.

Websites should be updated regularly and local authorities need to assess the extent to which parents are accessing, and are able to access, web-based information.

Parents' forums present opportunities for parents to receive information and raise issues about the SEN process and the support they have received. By responding to issues raised, the local authority can increase parental confidence in the process.

Greater information about, and parental awareness of, the pre-statementing support available at School Action and School Action Plus is required to allay parents' concerns/perceptions that a statement is required in order to adequately meet their child's needs.

SEN teams ensure that the needs of the child are prioritised through embedding and maintaining a child-centred approach to the process. Staff need to ensure that they communicate this culture of working to parents and try to involve them throughout.

Local authority monitoring of the support provided by schools can convey to parents that the provision accessed by their children is regularly reviewed.

Parental confidence is increased when parents feel that the SEN team has included them in the process, taken on board their input, and sourced appropriate provision. Meetings and dialogue are central to this confidence.

A flexible approach to funding provision can instil confidence that the local authority is sourcing the

most appropriate support, tailor-making it to the needs of a particular child. Multi-agency input earlier in the process could help parents' understanding of the extent to which a child's needs are being considered.

Areas for further development include a continued focus on developing effective communication with parents, involving a high degree of face-to-face interaction, and demonstrating understandings of the family's perspective when working with parents.

# 1 Introduction

The House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2007) highlighted that parental confidence is a key issue in making provision for children with special educational needs (SEN). The Lamb Inquiry brought together a group of expert advisers and a broader reference group of professionals and parents to investigate how parental confidence in the SEN assessment process might be improved. The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned this research to examine the ways in which local authorities work with parents in order to feed the findings into the Lamb Inquiry. The overarching aim of the research is to provide insights into the approach and practice of local authorities' work with parents of children with SEN.

The main focus is on the period prior to formal assessment.

The findings are based on telephone interviews with the head of the SEN service (or equivalent) in 26 local authorities. They were selected for evidence of good practice, taking into account, for example, the number of SEN tribunal appeals registered, website accessibility and information from Ofsted reports. They were also selected to represent a range of authority types and sizes. It must be recognised, however, that this research only involved a small number of interviewees and that the pursuit of other/wider perspectives on SEN and parental confidence was not within the remit of this particular study.

## 2 The referral process

This section focuses on the referral process and discusses the following questions.

- At what stage do parents access local authority SEN services?
- What have parents' prior experiences of the SEN process been?

### 2.1 At what stage do parents access local authority SEN services?

It is usual for local authority SEN services not to get directly involved with parents until a statutory assessment has been requested. SEN professionals will, however, have been working with the child, and possibly the parent, during School Action and School Action Plus.

At School Action stage, most parental contact is with the school, although SEN services may make parents aware of further levels of guidance and support available outside of the statutory process, such as the parent partnership service. At School Action Plus stage, direct contact with SEN services is likely to be via specialist provision such as educational psychology, speech and language therapy or occupational therapy.

Where parents request an assessment themselves, SEN services may be in immediate contact with families. In addition, parents may contact the local authority for information (for example, about how the statement process works, how long a statutory assessment will take), which can be provided over the telephone.

Parents may also contact the local authority directly if they have concerns that their child's needs are not being sufficiently met by School Action and School Action Plus. Where there are concerns about the provision that is being made for their child at this stage, a meeting may be arranged. Parent partnership services in some local authorities are involved prior to formal assessment in helping to address parents' concerns.

Links between SEN teams and parent partnership services can be helpful in raising parents' issues for SEN services to address at this early stage.

There is an expectation that parents would be heavily involved with all the work that takes place at School Action and School Action Plus. Local authorities can encourage parents to engage with schools and can help ensure parental involvement at an early stage by insisting that schools obtain parents' signatures on the appropriate forms (such as the Common Assessment Framework or CAF).

The extent to which parental involvement at School Action and School Action Plus is part of a collaborative process between parents and schools in determining appropriate support for a child, or simply a means of securing parental approval for decisions made by the school, is not clear. Parental approval should be regarded as the minimum degree of involvement expected, with a view to developing a more consultative and cooperative relationship.

A number of local authority SEN teams report that they take steps to help schools and parents to work together. Some local authorities have provided training for schools, to improve their understanding of the SEN process and the school's responsibilities within this. Part of this includes working with parents, for example training offered by the SEN Advisory Service for SENCos.

There is an 'accumulation of a process' or a gradual build-up of work with parents before the statutory assessment process. The process itself can be 'softened', for example, by making initial contact by telephone rather than by letter and encouraging parents to come back to talk through issues.

In the main, schools refer parents to the service (usually via a request for a statutory assessment, at which point the SEN team will initiate contact with parents), although health professionals (for example GPs and paediatricians) and social care professionals also occasionally refer.

Parents of under fives (who constitute a large part of the referrals) usually access prior medical advice, for example through a children's centre. Some issues were raised in relation to the degree to which health services are integrated into the multi-agency approach after the pre-school age. In general, it was accepted that joint provision and coordination between SEN services, health and social care is better established within early years provision, and that greater development is required to facilitate similar arrangements at primary and secondary school level.

## **2.2 What have parents' prior experiences of the SEN process been?**

There is agreement that parents' experiences of the SEN process at the school level (that is School Action and School Action Plus) prior to contact with SEN services are highly variable. Some parents have good relationships with school staff and, as a result, have a high level of confidence in the formal process designed to ensure that further expertise is sought if a child does not respond to a series of interventions. Negative experiences of parents are something all local authorities mention but, most frequently, they report that these occur for the minority of parents with whom they work.

An important element of parental confidence at this stage appears to centre on the quality of direct contact and face-to-face interaction between professionals and parents. In some local authorities direct parental requests for a statutory assessment (as opposed to requests from schools) can be interpreted as a breakdown in such dialogue and relationships with parents. In these circumstances the view is that parents are moved to take such action because they have lost confidence in the provision on offer. This issue is also identified within the Lamb Inquiry's report of April 2009, which found that 'Parents would like to have someone who they know well, who knows their child well and whom they trust to help them find out what they need to know (Lamb Inquiry, April 2009, p. 6).

This variability of parents' experiences of the SEN process can depend on a number of additional factors, such as the type of school and degree to which special needs are prioritised. For example, primary schools may have greater opportunities for more regular face-to-

face contact with parents. In addition, professionals working to support pupils' transition from early years to a school setting were said to be particularly supportive of pupils and parents in the context of addressing SEN needs.

Parents' experiences can also vary according to the needs of the child. Parents of children with greater or more complex needs may feel it is more difficult to secure appropriate support. Experiences can also vary according to the professional with whom parents have had initial contact. This is discussed further in section 8.2. Where they have had early contact with the SEN team, parents are more likely to understand how provision is managed. Hence, the point of entry into the system can be crucial to parents' understanding, expectations and confidence in the process.

Parents who are dissatisfied are usually dissatisfied with the outcomes of the process and the provision that has been put in place, rather than the process itself (although some parents express frustration at the complexity of the process). These parents can present to the SEN service with 'fighting talk' or feel 'battle weary'. However, negative experiences are not considered to be the norm as most interviewees feel that parents are less likely to contact them if their experiences are positive.

In general, positive experiences tend to be associated with a proactive parent partnership service and effective caseworkers. When needs are identified during early years, specialist provision can be put in place and a close working relationship is able to develop between parents and professionals up to the point that a statutory assessment is made. This helps to engender a positive experience of the SEN system.

Interviewees articulated the need to maintain dialogue with parents who feel that they are not getting the provision they want, and build relationships by convincing parents that they are talking a common language, focused on meeting the child's needs in the most appropriate way.

One local authority identified a small number of vulnerable parents who have particular needs themselves and therefore require a greater level support in navigating the system than other parents. This could be achieved by buying into a contract with a number of local organisations, for example, those

which support parents with hearing impairments. This has proved very useful in meeting the needs of children in cases where both parent and child are British Sign Language users.

Inherent within the system are a number of factors which make it adversarial and help engender less positive relations between parents and SEN services. The legal system, for example, can inspire in parents negative feelings towards the process. There is an inequality in the system in that parents with sufficient resources can access an independent assessment.

To an extent, the quality of parents' relationships with the local authority is dependent upon their relationship with the school.

*[Relationships between parents and SEN] can start off adversarial and contentious because of parents' experiences*

*with schools. That's not the case every time but, in some cases, by the time parents contact us, relationships can be difficult.*

Parents' previous experiences can affect their relationship with the SEN team. Negative experiences can result in an 'adversarial or contentious' stance and an expectation that parents are going to have a battle on their hands. Several interviewees noted that parents sometimes presented with the attitude that 'we've got to fight for everything'.

Parents can have pre-determined or fixed ideas as to what they expect the outcome of the SEN process to be (for example, placement in a special school). These ideas can be determined by a range of influences, for example, other parents, voluntary organisations and lobby groups. Under these circumstances, developing a positive relationship with parents can be difficult.

### 3 Early identification and intervention

This section looks at early identification and intervention and discusses the following questions.

- To what extent is early identification and intervention informed by a multi-agency approach?
- How are the statutory assessment process and the CAF process aligned? What are the challenges with this?

#### 3.1 To what extent is early identification and intervention informed by a multi-agency approach?

Most interviewees felt that multi-agency approaches (especially with health and social care) to early identification and intervention were in the developmental stages. There are often regular multi-agency meetings within cluster area teams/locality teams (these often take place in schools). These pull agencies closely together and are used to develop a joint action plan.

Multi-agency work can also involve the co-location of teams or a virtual team around the child. The development of children's centres in many areas has facilitated this. The location of parent partnership services within children's centres can make them more accessible to parents whilst maintaining their independence. Locality teams also benefit children who would not normally meet the threshold for social work support, enabling appropriate support to be put in place for children with a range of needs.

There is an expectation that a lot of multi-agency work has already been undertaken by the time the SEN team gets a request for a statutory assessment, possibly indicating the SEN team's later involvement in the process. The CAF can be used to coordinate this work and this would provide evidence of prior multi-agency work for the statutory assessment.

In early years settings, children's needs may be identified by health professionals and they can be

identified later by schools. This is usually determined by the type of need, for example children with a congenital sensory impairment or physical disability are likely to be picked up by the health services prior to attending school, whilst those with specific learning or behavioural needs are more likely to be identified within school. There is a view that, whilst multi-agency work is effective for under-fives, once children attend school there is less emphasis on a joined up approach. Hence, there is a view that Children's Trust arrangements could be used to ensure improved multi-agency input where required.

There are mixed views about the relationship between education and health service providers. In some areas there are still barriers that need to be overcome (for example, issues related to wrap-around care). In other areas the relationship is good, for example, there is representation from health on SEN panels and joint funding is available between health and education for children with specific needs (for example, for the provision of speech and language therapy).

SEN teams work closely with other agencies by having regular meetings and sometimes undertake joint work, for example, with health colleagues and with educational psychologists. There is a view that local authority SEN teams are becoming increasingly responsible for pulling multi-agency elements together through a person-centred review. A key worker assigned to a case acts as a broker and carries out this collating function.

Interviewees felt that the SEN teams are responsible for taking the lead in specific areas of multi-agency work, across both early years and school settings. For example, one SEN team has provided the impetus and funding to set up a joint early years language initiative, which allows health professionals to provide staff training in early years settings to enable teachers to identify and support young children with speech and language difficulties. This has been especially important in identifying needs amongst children whose parents were not taking them to clinics. In another example, a local authority has an early years assessment forum which is

a multi-agency group, chaired by the head of SEN, which focuses on pre-school children. More broadly, some local authorities have begun to merge their services to facilitate better multi-agency practice (for example, the SEN team has merged with colleagues in social care to form the Children, Families and Learning Team).

### **3.2 How are the statutory assessment process and the CAF process aligned?**

This section focuses on the statutory assessment process and the CAF and discusses two questions

- How are the processes aligned?
- What are the challenges with this?

#### **How are the statutory assessment process and the CAF process aligned?**

In the majority of local authorities work on the CAF is in its infancy and, whilst teams are aware of the need to consider how the CAF can be aligned with the statutory assessment process, this is not yet possible because the CAF itself is not fully developed.

In most cases, those going through the statutory assessment process are already part of the CAF process and the CAF forms a significant part of the evidence for the assessment. Whilst the CAF can be drawn on, it does not preclude the need for reports from professionals because it is not sufficiently detailed. In addition, it is likely that earlier interventions via the CAF process have not been successful if a statutory assessment is required. The information within the CAF

can be useful for contextualising the needs of the child, especially when assessments are being made in relation to behavioural difficulties. However, the SEN team can also get direct requests for assessments which are outside of the CAF process.

In one local authority that involves parents in the planning and design of integrated assessment the CAF is used for all children, that is there is no distinction between children with a CAF and children with a statement. The CAF is part of the initial assessment and the review process. The information in the annual review is used to complete the developmental parts of the CAF. Screening questions prompt those involved to do a pre-CAF. If there is a concern in any area other than SEN they are prompted to initiate a CAF.

#### **What are the challenges with this?**

There is lack of clarity about the process and problems with alignment because of the strict timescales required for the statutory assessment. There can be delays obtaining necessary information from other agencies.

The importance of evidence from schools must be emphasised and local authorities must try to ensure that they receive good quality information about what schools are doing. This raises issues about who is responsible for providing and collecting information and the quality of information exchange between agencies.

It can be difficult to get parents to sign up to the CAF process because it can imply that they are not doing their job properly. This can mean that very needy families withhold their consent and prevent issues being picked up at an early stage.

## 4 Local authority and school responsibility for SEN

This section focuses on the distinction between local authority and school responsibility and addresses the following questions.

- What is parents' understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of schools and local authorities?
- To what extent do schools call on the SEN team to offer additional support for children? What are the tensions with this?

### 4.1 What is parents' understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of schools and local authorities?

Very few interviewees feel that parents have a clear understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of schools and local authorities. Most feel that parents are reliant upon the advice of schools and that the quality of this advice varies. In particular, interviewees commented that parents are not made sufficiently aware of the degree to which funding is delegated to schools, causing them to overestimate local authorities' responsibilities in providing for their child. This suggests the need for better information and dialogue with parents at the earliest stage so that they have a firm understanding on which to base their expectations.

However, some interviewees also suggested that the division of responsibilities between schools and the local authority is only relevant to parents insofar as it enables them to pursue appropriate provision for their child. There is a concern that decisions are regarded within the context of the 'professional knows best'. Although this might indicate that some parents have confidence in professionals to provide the necessary support for a child, it may also contribute to the

problem as it does not encourage parents or professionals to be proactive in seeking out positive communications and clear information.

*The majority of parents wouldn't understand the distinction [between the responsibilities of schools and local authorities]. All they see is that the child needs support to help them through. When support is not seen to be in place, it is probably the local authority that is held responsible.*

Parents can find it hard to grasp which roles are to be performed by the school and which by the local authority. Parents tend not to be aware of subtle distinctions, for example the role of a specialist teacher compared to that of a speech and language therapist. Their understanding can be school-led and there may be an assumption that, if a child has a need, they should have a statement. If a statement is not granted, this could lead to dissatisfaction, a loss of confidence with the system and a belief that the child's needs are not being met. Parents' understanding of the roles of different people can be developed by having strategies in place to address this, for example regular open meetings for parents of SEN children and actively involving them in the process.

Parent partnership services are considered to be important in meeting with parents and helping to signpost them to appropriate sources of support. They are very active in supporting parents and get involved if there are difficulties between parents and schools. Parents tend to value the opportunity to discuss issues relating to their child's development face-to-face. Parent partnership services also generate a lot of information for parents but, a note of caution: 'We need to think about how awareness is raised. Just having information is not good enough.' Hence, services need to be proactive and not just provide information without ensuring that information can be acted on.

## 4.2 To what extent do schools call on the SEN team to offer additional support for children?

This section focuses on the following questions.

- What is the extent and the type of additional support required?
- What are the tensions?

### What is the extent and the type of additional support required?

In most local authorities schools call on SEN teams 'fairly frequently' to provide additional support for children despite the fact that they are already providing extra resources in schools for young people with statements. This is usually to do with financial constraints rather than a lack of expertise. Given that a large amount of funding is already delegated to schools, it was felt that schools should be encouraged to build their own capacity to continue and only seek the advice of SEN services when additional expertise is required.

The level of additional support required varies from one school to another. Schools with a higher number of SEN children tend to be better equipped to deal with SEN issues and may not ask for additional support, whilst those with a small number of SEN children tend to ask for more help. This may be because teaching staff in schools with a higher number of SEN children have greater levels of expertise available to them and, usually, a higher level of general awareness and experience in meeting children's specific needs. This suggests that there are schools that feel confident in meeting children's needs and those that do not. Schools are generally the first point of contact for parents and this could have implications for parental confidence in meeting children's needs.

Several local authorities have found it beneficial to provide training and support to SENCOs in both special and mainstream schools to ensure that all schools are able to provide appropriate support, advice and guidance to parents.

*We run a strong SENCO induction programme ... they get a feel for what is going on across the authority and where they fit into the process.*

The type of support requested is generally directed towards capacity and volume of support, rather than extra provision. For example, one local authority indicated that provision is sometimes offered during assessment of a child's needs, where those needs meet strict criteria set by the SEN panel, for example children with severe medical conditions or a child with severe behavioural difficulties. It can also be about addressing specific needs in exceptional circumstances. The SEN team are sometimes asked to attend meetings to provide 'a bit of extra clout from the authority', a view on the changes being proposed or to input their knowledge of the SEN process. This suggests that some schools lack confidence in their own capacity to manage the SEN process, and value the expertise and support of the local authority team.

### What are the tensions?

With most SEN children supported in mainstream school it is important to acknowledge and resolve any possible issues or tensions between schools and local authorities to promote parental confidence. Tensions can be addressed through meetings with SENCOs, meetings across areas to share practice and through training and awareness raising about who is responsible for what.

#### Financial tensions

Additional educational needs (AEN) funding may not be perceived as adequate and there are tensions around what local authorities and schools should each legitimately be paying for.

#### School and local authority responsibilities

Funding is delegated to schools and there is an expectation that the school meets the needs of its pupils. The local authority may contribute more where schools appear to have done all they can reasonably do to support children with SEN. However, there is a need for clear understandings of what the school is expected to provide and what the local authority is expected to provide.

Quality First Teaching, which is focused on removing the barriers to learning, supports this focus on meeting the needs of all pupils. Local authorities were positive about the increased level of responsibility that schools are willing to accept.

### **The increasing number of requests for statements**

There is continual pressure to undertake formal assessments. One authority is seeing a rising number of requests for assessments despite changing their funding model so that schools could have greater flexibility to meet a wider range of SEN needs without recourse to a statement. There is more discussion about the impact on the workload of SEN teams in section 8.2. Complex cases also put a lot of pressure on the team to meet timescales and undertake the case work as problems continue to come up (this has been a recent trend).

### **Children with behaviour difficulties and complex needs**

It is difficult to assess how much support children with behaviour difficulties need and 'schools are faced with

trying to educate the majority'. Some interviewees felt that children with physical disabilities may be easier to identify and support in a mainstream school environment – through, for example, the provision of particular pieces of classroom furniture or equipment. Areas where schools have identified that they would like further support include physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and other health therapies. In many cases, therapists are able to advise teaching staff on appropriate ways to support a child, but it can be challenging for teachers to identify a need for this support and to deliver it in the classroom. Schools can find it difficult to provide the necessary support for pupils with challenging behaviour. As such, parents may be more confident that SEN needs will be met in some areas than others. This issue is reflected in the view of one respondent who considered that a significant number of the permanent exclusions of children with statements were children with needs related to behavioural difficulties. This is thought to be a potential source of tension, as schools may assert that these children's behavioural needs are too significant to be met within mainstream educational provision.

## 5 Supporting parents

This section looks at the support provided by the SEN team for parents and covers the following questions.

- How does the SEN team ensure that parents are able to navigate the system and have confidence in it?
- What is the role of the local authority commissioning process in ensuring parental confidence?
- To what extent are parents involved in decisions about their children?

### 5.1 How does the SEN team ensure that parents are able to navigate the system and have confidence in it?

This section focuses on the ways in which the SEN team ensure that parents are able to navigate the system and have confidence in it. It focuses on the following questions.

- How does the SEN team help parents to find information?
- How does the SEN team help parents to find appropriate provision?
- What are the issues with provision of information?
- How are parents involved in decision making?

#### How does the SEN team help parents to find information?

Information and guidance leaflets or 'information packs' are provided as normal practice. These include information on how the statutory system works and local authority and school roles and responsibilities in the process.

There is a degree of variance regarding the adequacy of the information and the means by which it is provided. Whilst most interviewees suggest that considerable

attempts have been made to provide accessible information, there are still some barriers. These include, (in several local authorities), a large number of spoken languages as well as literacy and cognitive difficulties experienced by some parents. The statutory letter to parents is also said to contain too much information and to be inaccessible for parents. Some authorities try to include information to simplify this and increase its accessibility (this can also entail telephone or face-to-face meetings with parents and the SEN team, or parent partnership service representatives).

Information (including that relating to services offered at the local level and links to information on the DCSF website) is available on the local authority website. Again, there are contrasting views on the standard and quality of these, with some interviewees suggesting that they need to be more accessible. There are some concerns about the over-estimation of parental access to the internet, and of their confidence in finding and effectively using web-based material. There is no evidence to suggest that local authorities are tracking website usage by parents, but one local authority had asked Mencap to conduct an independent review of their website, to find out how user-friendly and useful it is to parents.

Personal contact is the preferred means of conveying information to parents. Local authorities try to use a 'face-to-face' approach but leaflets and websites can facilitate and support that process. Capacity issues can constrain SEN teams' ability to communicate all the necessary information to parents. Parents can access the SEN team by telephone and several local authorities facilitate surgeries and drop-in sessions for parents whose children are undergoing statutory assessment.

The navigation of the SEN system generally begins with the school. It is important that local community centres, children's centres and schools are able to point to additional resources that might be available.

Confidence in the system is:

*more a matter of confidence in the people who are administering the system: the schools, the psychologists and speech and language therapists.*

There is a view that parents should be helped to navigate the system by whoever they feel most comfortable with, such as a SENCO for example. Although one local authority mentioned that:

*if parents feel they're being fobbed off with someone who's not able to take a decision then this increases their frustration.*

In one authority, a telephone enquiry from a parent regarding the statutory assessment process was said to lead to an information loop, whereby:

*the parent will be talked through the process and referred back to the school and the parent partnership service. The loop is closed. We don't take referrals or talk to a parent without informing the school that we have done that.*

## **How does the SEN team help parents to find appropriate provision?**

The SEN team helps parents find appropriate provision through:

- parent partnership services
- the role of SEN case officers
- the role of the educational psychologist
- parents' groups
- wider parental engagement activities by the local authority
- schools.

### **Parent partnership services**

The SEN team has close links with the service, which provides telephone or face-to-face support for parents (this is crucial). The service is proactive in contacting parents at the beginning of the process (although in some local authorities, parents' permission is required before a parent partnership representative can contact them). Parent partnership services are valuable and proactive, in terms of visiting schools and providing literature. In one case, the appointment of a former member of senior school staff to a key role in the service was seen to be crucial in reassuring parents and bringing school experience to the process. The SEN

teams generally promote and encourage the use of this service amongst parents because of its independence. Relationships between SEN teams and parent partnership services are described as positive and constructive. In some cases, the service is co-located with the SEN team, facilitating faster and more effective communication and interaction. However, it was noted that the location of parent partnership services within local authority offices could threaten to dilute its impartiality and also discourage some parents from accessing its services. Some interviewees highlighted the benefits of locating parent partnership services in accessible locations, notably Children's Centres.

### **The role of SEN case officers**

The caseworker meets the parents to explain the process. They have dialogue and meetings throughout the process and have regular contact at key times to keep parents updated. It is considered good practice, whether the decision is for statutory support or not, that parents are invited for a meeting (usually at school) to explain the decision, discuss support, reassure them and increase their confidence that the most appropriate action for their child has been taken:

*We've got very experienced case officers, who are very sensitive to parents, who will spend a lot of time on the phone giving reassurance and guidance and advice. [Parents] get very reliant on that relationship with their case officer, and will make a good relationship and will phone up regularly to find out what's happening. We've had very positive feedback about that from parents.*

### **The role of the educational psychologist**

At least one local authority cited the role of educational psychologists in helping parents to access appropriate provision. As part of their interventions with children with SEN, educational psychologists may conduct home visits through which they engage and involve parents in the support which is offered to their child, for example, by discussing or recommending the support parents can offer their children in their homes.

### **Parents' groups**

Some local authorities have forums for parents of children with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) and SEN, allowing them to share concerns and issues. This is a chance to have their say and get their voices heard. Outcomes are noted and acted upon. There are also parent support groups which are run by voluntary agencies. The local authority can tap into these and

encourage specialist teachers to go to their meetings to develop relationships with them.

### **Wider parental engagement activities by the local authority**

One local authority noted the work of an entirely separate team, which focuses solely on parental engagement in the local authority, for example running events with parents and delivering residential weekends for parents and their children. This was considered to be a key part of the local authority's general approach of working in close partnership with parents which therefore had benefits, albeit indirectly, for the way in which the local authority SEN team supported and worked with parents through their services.

### **Schools**

Local authority SEN teams try to ensure that parents are aware of, and understand the role of schools, in providing support for their children, especially where budgets are largely delegated. Often, this involves discussions and meetings with parents (and sometimes visits to schools) to assure parents that appropriate support is available.

### **What are the issues with provision of information?**

The lack of sufficient and appropriate information can leave parents with the perception that, in order to meet the child's needs, an SEN statement is required. However, it was suggested that if they are given information about how the child can be supported without a statement earlier (in most cases this is not discussed until the assessment has been completed and a decision made) this could be helpful in managing parents' negative perceptions. Hence, providing more information (at an earlier stage in the process) about School Action and School Action Plus could mediate this situation. This would entail greater discussions at the school level, with an enhanced focus on identifying appropriate outcomes for the child, rather than on securing a statement. This could help to avoid the development of entrenched positions and increase parental confidence in the process.

There is some divergence of views regarding the amount of information parents should be given. Some local authorities believe that they should be as transparent as possible and give parents information

about **all** the provision available. Others believe that this can result in unrealistic expectations and promote the pursuit of inappropriate provision. In the words of one respondent 'sending a list of in-borough and out-of-borough provision gave the impression it was a 'catalogue' or 'shopping list'. As a result there is the view that parents should be given **sufficient** information to make an informed choice relevant to the needs and circumstances of their child. The majority view is that there is a need to strike the right balance between transparency and a responsibility not to overload parents by supplying them with surplus, or less specifically relevant information. None of the interviewees commented that, once the process of assessment had started, there was a deficiency in the information available to parents.

### **How are parents involved in decision making?**

Within this section the focus is on parents' strategic involvement in decision making. The discussion in section 5.3 focuses on parental involvement in decision making in relation to their individual children.

Interviewees are generally positive that parental involvement at individual and strategic levels contributes to positive relationships between schools, local authorities and parents. One local authority, for example, has had a long-standing involvement with an authority-wide inclusion strategy whereby parents of children with statements/who have had contact with the SEN team are routinely asked to comment on inclusion, their individual experiences of SEN and how clearly the local authority is explaining their children's issues. In addition, at a strategic level, parents are invited to comment on the local authority's strategic development in various arenas, including, for example, the disability strategy.

Further means of parental involvement in decision making include the involvement of parents in service evaluation at the end of every statutory assessment. In one local authority, a conference focusing on parental involvement in the SEN process was seen as reflecting the local authority's commitment to keeping parents central to the decision-making process. Furthermore, in several authorities there is evidence that parents are able to influence policies and procedures through participation in consultation exercises. In one, parents

are selected by other parents to participate in the development of policies, procedures and strategies.

## 5.2 What is the role of the local authority commissioning process in ensuring parental confidence?

In some authorities this is an area for development and it is acknowledged that, currently, parents may not get the total package they need because the commissioning process is under development. In other authorities, however, schools are seen as the key means of accessing support, especially where considerable funding has been delegated.

Some local authorities are pro-active in researching what parents' needs are and what services are required. There is growing confidence that they are willing to do that and are able to ask how parents want to spend the money: 'It's quite a dramatic move forward and a step in the right direction.' The mechanisms for consultation have an influence on the content of such research, as one local authority noted:

*we are tending to consult on issues as defined by us, but this is partly due to the lack of more formal consultation processes at present.*

Parental confidence is enhanced by building capacity locally and demonstrating the wide range of provision that the local authority is able to draw on. In addition, the local authority has to be willing to buy in expertise, so that parents are confident that the necessary support will be sourced from wherever it is available. One local authority, for example, is providing funding to facilitate joint commissioning of occupational therapy (with the health provider), a facility which parents felt was lacking. This contributed to increasing parents' confidence. In another authority it was suggested that closer relationships/joint commissioning arrangements with health providers are required. In another example of the capacity of parents to have a say in the range of provision offered by the local authority, one area has responded to a gap in provision for the sensory needs of children in the local authority. In this case, a parent had alerted the local authority to the gap, suggested a professional who may be able to temporarily address the need and the local authority has used this person and others to do so.

Parental confidence can be enhanced by providing flexible provision which can be accessed as and when required. In one local authority, where most of the SEN budget is delegated to schools, a bank of speech and language therapists has been set up for the whole of the local authority. This provides flexibility so that, whichever school a child attends, they are able to have access to this service.

## 5.3 To what extent are parents involved in decisions about their children?

This section focuses on two questions.

- To what extent are parents involved in decisions?
- How is their involvement ensured?

### To what extent are parents involved in decisions?

The majority view is that parents are heavily involved in decisions about their children:

*We always start by talking to the parents*

*We don't make any big decisions about children without involving parents*

*No decision is taken without parents being on board.*

*A huge amount of consultation goes on.*

However, there is also a view that the decision is made by the local authority and parents are then informed and the decision explained to them. In such circumstances, including, for example, a situation where a decision has been taken not to issue a statement, interviewees highlighted that there will still be considerable communication and dialogue with parents to reassure them that this is the right decision and that their child's needs will be met in the most appropriate way. Hence, not being directly involved in the decision does not mean that parents have no further role in the process of supporting their child.

Parents can, however, feel they are 'being done to' because of their own school experiences, because

choices are very limited or because local authorities have not communicated effectively. There are concerns especially about parents who are less confident or less able to verbalise their worries/issues.

As a result of ineffective communication, there may be a mismatch between perceptions of what the parents want and what schools offer. Parents can find it difficult to articulate what they want for their child and this can be misinterpreted by the school as a request for extra hours of provision. Hence, there needs to be a shift in the focus of discussions away from inputs and outputs – number of hours – towards concentrating on identifying and ensuring appropriate outcomes for the child. The local authority can play a role in ensuring that targets and outcomes, rather than level of support, are at the centre of discussions.

The complexity of the child's needs may also impact on the degree to which parents are involved in decision making. Complex cases could typically involve parents attending meetings with the school, parent partnership service, specialist service providers and the SEN team. One interviewee described this as a 'negotiated process' with the parents which is designed to 'find a pathway through to find the situation that will bring the best outcomes for the child'. By contrast, more straightforward situations may entail lower levels of parental involvement.

## How is their involvement ensured?

Parental involvement is ensured by having:

- **Dedicated case workers:** The case worker facilitates parental involvement by working closely with the family, engaging them with the options and arranging for them to go and look at provision.
- **Parent partnership services:** If there are difficulties, parent partnership services visit parents at home and talk to them:

*The Parent Partnership Service is a real problem to us, I'm proud to say. We do fund this and it gives us a few headaches on behalf of parents and that is right.*

- **Ongoing opportunities for dialogue:** SEN teams ensure opportunities for dialogue and involvement in the process by making meetings accessible. Parents are involved in the initial assessment and in reviews as a matter of routine.

- **Person-centred reviews:** Person-centred reviews can help to facilitate involvement of the child and the parent:

*We have tried these and they are expensive but 'really fantastic' for getting the views of young people with complex needs. They are a good way of establishing a pathway forward for them.*

In this local authority, the educational psychologist and Connexions personnel are responsible for carrying out these reviews which provide highly detailed accounts of the nature of a young person's needs and the most appropriate means of meeting them.

- **Visits to out of school placements:** Local authorities recommend that parents look at out-of-school placements once it has been decided that it is appropriate. This helps to give parents confidence as it ensures that they feel included within the process.

- **Local authority strategic priorities:** Appropriate strategic priorities can help to facilitate parental involvement. In one authority, for example, one of the priorities is 'think family', and it is focused on what is it like from the family perspective. Another has focused on improving local authority provision as a strategic priority so that children do not have to be placed a long way from their local area.

- **Parental inclusion in the SEN panel:** One local authority involves a parent in the SEN panel (alongside SEN officers, advisers, educational psychologists and headteachers), where decisions about whether to go ahead with a statutory assessment are made, and a wide range of issues and concerns about SEN are considered.

## 6 Ensuring appropriate provision and outcomes

This section focuses on how the local authority ensures appropriate provision and outcomes and it covers the following questions.

- How does the local authority ensure that the needs of the child are prioritised above the needs of the system?
- How does the SEN team ensure that securing outcomes is central to discussions with parents?
- What systems are in place for monitoring the appropriateness of provision?

### 6.1 How does the local authority ensure that the needs of the child are prioritised above the needs of the system?

Local authorities ensure that the needs of the child are prioritised by placing the child at the centre of decision making and involving parents and young people in reviews. It is the local authority's responsibility to ensure that the needs of the child are paramount (not the needs of the parent or the school). It is important that the head of SEN is accountable for ensuring that this is the case. Many interviewees responded to this question with a cultural standpoint or premise that 'it is obvious that the needs of the child are prioritised and drive the system'.

Provision must be flexible.

*If you are too specific in a statement that could cause problems for schools and that doesn't allow them sufficient flexibility. But if you are not specific, parents may think that ... there is not enough provision being made. There is a balancing act, but the law is fairly clear that the provision has to relate to the child's needs rather than the needs of either the school or the system.*

An example was given where the requirements contained in a statement were deemed, by the headteacher of a special school, to be so demanding that

it was not possible for this school to comply. As a result, the SEN team suggested that the young person was not able to attend this school, which in their opinion, would have been the most appropriate setting to achieve significant outcomes. This perhaps highlights the need for greater communication between the school/providers and those responsible for creating the statement.

Local authorities monitor the way schools spend delegated funding, for example, through an annual monitoring visit (discussed in more detail in section 6.3). It is good practice to develop good relationships with schools so that they are willing to share what they are doing. For example, one local authority stated it aims to develop such relationships, and ensure transparency, by inviting headteachers and SENCOs to their Statutory Assessment and Monitoring Panel, where appropriate. This is intended to enable those providing the educational services to better understand how decisions are made on a needs-led basis.

Obstacles to appropriate provision and outcomes include financial constraints. Budgetary constraints include money for staffing as well as for development: 'To be effective you have to have the capacity to be responsive.'

The statutory processes or framework can create obstacles, for example having to meet deadlines. The speed of processing (and the performance indicator/target) means that some assessments are processed without key information (for example, a medical or educational psychology report) and that attention is therefore diverted away from the child's needs. In addition, parents may need more time to come to terms with an assessment. There is also a view that increased time is needed to allow the SEN team to build relationships with parents, in order to capitalise on their expertise and knowledge of the child, as a basis for creating a statement that will help to provide the most appropriate outcomes.

Trying to link up the health provision with the educational provision and ensuring they are aligned is problematic: 'Getting a good needs analysis of that specialist health provision is proving quite difficult.'

## 6.2 How does the SEN team ensure that securing outcomes is central to discussions with parents?

Most interviewees highlighted a range of ways in which they could ensure that outcomes are central to discussions.

In order to ensure that outcomes are central to discussion, the SEN team is said to:

- be honest and realistic with parents
- be focused on the needs of the child
- use a transparent decision-making process.

Parents are involved through the individual planning process and this is supported by Quality First Teaching, which is very outcome focused.

In order to instil confidence in parents, the local authority has to demonstrate to parents consistency in their decision-making as to how needs are met and funded. This includes having a clear rationale for what is included within statements. It is helpful to provide sufficient detail so that schools are clear about what is expected. Where there are difficulties due to finance, the SEN team make every effort to resolve the situation, for example, by reminding schools of their legal obligations.

Perseverance and attention to detail is key in maintaining a focus on how to secure specific outcomes during discussions with parents. It is essential for the SEN team to:

*look in every nook and cranny to determine exactly what it is that parents are frightened of and why they want what they want. Why, for example, they might think that an out of borough placement would be better than provision within the authority.*

The SEN team needs to be able to explore these concerns with parents and ensure that decisions are taken on an educational basis (that is, focused on achieving outcomes).

## 6.3 What systems are in place for monitoring the appropriateness of provision?

Schools are monitored through the SEN framework, within which they have to demonstrate how they have used the resources that have been delegated. This can involve providing annual reports detailing how funding has been spent as well as reports detailing the academic, social and behavioural progress of individual young people. Such monitoring can be overseen by a dedicated SEN monitoring and evaluation team, which, in one local authority, has developed a child tracking system through which schools are questioned about the progress of individual pupils.

In one local authority, the delegation of funding was accompanied by the establishment of a monitoring and evaluation system. Through a formal cycle of visits by a locality advisor and the educational psychologist, data are collected and analysed to determine which schools are most effectively meeting needs and which ones require further support or advice. Alongside, and allied to, these 'monitoring' roles, another local authority's special needs support team ensures that every school gets termly support from the team's teachers. This involves an overview of the school's provision as well as consideration of the school's interaction and relationship with parents. Additional support or advice is given where necessary.

Parents' views are monitored through a range of mechanisms, including parents' forums and parent questionnaires, which are used for getting feedback on the service provided. SEN officers are proactive in linking with voluntary groups.

In individual cases, consultation with parents is carried out through the annual review process and there are ongoing discussions with parents, young people and professionals. There is a risk that the sole focus is on the instances where parents have problems and not when parents are satisfied with the service. In addition, capacity issues may mean that statements do not contain exit criteria, making it difficult to revert

to School Action Plus. It is suggested that additional resources could support the employment of monitoring officers to effectively oversee the progress made, and the continued relevance of a statement's content, throughout its duration.

The decisions taken by the SEN team in one local authority are subject to scrutiny and quality assurance through the actions of a weekly SEN advisory panel, comprising professionals from the SEN, education and social care sectors. This panel allows a wide range of views to be given prior to a decision being made,

'making sure that we're not making maverick decisions'.

There needs to be an increased focus on the measurement of outcomes rather than a concentration on process assessments. This involves a strategic assessment of whether or not the gap in outcomes for children with SEN is narrowed and, where it has narrowed, by how much. This could be applicable at school, local authority and national levels, with the 'value-added' for these pupils being monitored (and contributing to a school's overall performance rating).

## 7 Local authority SEN team capacity and expertise

This section focuses on the local authority SEN team capacity and expertise and it addresses the following questions.

- Does the SEN team require additional expertise to meet needs?
- How do SEN teams ensure their ability to build constructive relationships with parents?

### 7.1 Does the SEN team require additional expertise to meet needs?

Interpretations regarding the composition and nature of SEN teams varies. Approximately one third of interviewees perceive the composition of the team to be limited to the casework and administration of the statutory assessment process. The majority of local authorities view the SEN team as performing a wider function in supporting children, working within or alongside other specialist support services such as educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, portage, communication support, literacy support and educational welfare services. A small number of interviewees consider special schools and outreach services to be part of the SEN team. These differences in perspective are likely to be a reflection of variations in the structure and distribution of staffing and resources across local authorities, as well as developments in good practice leading to compositional changes within SEN teams (for example, the separation of funding and assessment to ensure that the former does not drive the latter). This can have implications for the views of local authorities about the extent and type of additional expertise required.

The majority of SEN teams are very confident that they can offer schools the support they require and are not considered to be lacking in their ability to provide or source the necessary expertise. SEN teams see

themselves in an advisory/facilitating role rather than as direct providers.

Teams vary in size and range of roles and therefore have different capacities. In addition, how SEN teams define their composition can influence their view on whether they have the required expertise in house. For example, one interviewee spoke of a team of 200 to 250 people (which was seen as including educational psychologists, specialist advisors and so on), whilst others defined the team as the small team focused on managing the statutory assessment process and therefore stated that they accessed additional specialist expertise from a wide variety of sources, as and when necessary.

Where there are gaps, the team undertakes research to find out about new syndromes and taps into relevant training, as well as accessing the expertise of others (for example, educational psychologists, medical experts and advisory staff). They may also buy in additional services. It is common for SEN teams to commission outreach services from special schools. In one instance, the SEN team has funded the development of Key Learning Centres within special schools and has built up their confidence and expertise so that they are better placed to offer advice to schools. There are also instances of SEN teams drawing on external expertise to assist with tribunals, including the expertise of a solicitor when necessary.

### 7.2 How do SEN teams ensure their ability to build constructive relationships with parents?

There was some divergence between those who believed that building constructive relationships with parents results from experience and individual skills, and a roughly equal proportion of interviewees who believed that it is also a professional development issue and that training can be beneficial. The former believed that personnel are hired with the required skills because it is an essential focus of the work.

*I'd like to think that we are all selected for a variety of qualities, which will include the ability to speak appropriately to parents ... the need to make relationships with parents is a very difficult thing.*

Another local authority responded by saying:

*the success of the SEN section is about the people in it – it doesn't matter what qualifications they have, it's about empathy.*

Building constructive relationship with parents is also something which is addressed through individual performance management.

A wide range of training was mentioned including, for example, a casework accreditation scheme, customer relations and communications training. However, some services undertake more specific training on building relationships with parents, for example, mediation training from the regional Disagreement Resolution Service and training with a focus on managing difficult conversations. Several interviewees highlighted the need to be able to access, or draw upon the expertise of, specially trained professionals. Interpreters, for example, are valuable in the development of positive and constructive working relationships with some parents.

There is also a lot of 'on-the-job training', involving 'manager to officer' skill transfer. In addition, cases are discussed within teams and staff learn from each other: 'It is what we do every day. We get a lot of practice at it.' One interviewee noted that strengthening relationships with parents (and inclusion of their views in assessment/statement documentation), was common

to the performance management objectives of SEN team members. There is a lot of discussion amongst team members and having social workers on the team is helpful in terms of securing and developing constructive relationships with parents. At times this includes accessing the specialist support of colleagues in the local authority. One local authority, for example, has used its principal educational psychologist to provide specific training on how to work with parents whose children have autistic spectrum disorder (ASD).

In a few local authorities, meetings are held with parents' groups so that the team gets the parent perspective on their experiences of the assessment or the review process. In one authority, a national charity facilitated a talk by parents of children with SEN to SENCOs. It was said to be particularly valuable to hear directly from parents, what they think is good, and what needs improving, in the service provided. For example, one local authority's Assistant Educational Officer in the SEN team is part of the group developing a city-wide parenting strategy. Several others noted that there had been some input (from, or facilitated by the local authority) focused on developing links with harder to reach groups of parents.

There was some reference to training or capacity building in relation to statement writing, with one interviewee noting that, despite funding constraints, team members were still able to participate in a regional statement writers group. This gives a valuable opportunity to share experience and disseminate good practice. In addition, the weekly statement panel gives officers a chance to share with, and learn from, other SEN team members, contributing to increased team working and consistency in statement preparation.

## 8 Good practice in developing relationships with parents

The final section focuses on good practice in developing relationships with parents and it addresses the following questions.

- What are SEN teams doing to develop constructive relationships with parents?
- What are the barriers to developing constructive relationships with parents?
- What approaches are used to counter difficult relationships with parents?
- What would SEN teams suggest could be done differently to improve relationships with parents?

### 8.1 What are SEN teams doing to develop constructive relationships with parents?

The SEN team's ethos and way of working is integral to the development of constructive relationships with parents and thereby engendering parental confidence. The head of service and SEN officers prioritise accessibility, interaction and effective communication with parents. They communicate the message that the SEN team's focus is to meet the needs of the child.

Local authorities are developing constructive relationships with parents through parent participation forums/groups (which are often run by voluntary agencies), consultation with parents via SEN reviews and parent partnership services, which are said to be very effective at making parents feel supported.

At a more strategic level there are customer satisfaction surveys, the findings from which are fed into business planning and service design. Some education officers are looking at research through 'Aiming High', which is focused on transforming best practice into common practice for disabled children.

### 8.2 What are the barriers to developing constructive relationships with parents?

A wide range of barriers or challenges were identified, including those associated with parents' perceptions and level of understanding (the most frequently cited), schools and other agencies, the statutory process, funding and capacity issues, and government policies/targets.

#### Parents' perceptions and level of understanding

Parents' views of the process are closely linked with whether they get the outcome that they want or not. They are unlikely to criticise the process if it delivers the outcome that they want. The challenges or barriers to the process are therefore strongly related to the outcome.

Parents can have unrealistic expectations and the involvement of solicitors can exacerbate this issue. According to some local authorities, solicitors rarely want to mediate with them. They prefer to resolve the situation by pursuing the tribunal process. However, one local authority is working with local solicitors on this issue (see section 8.3)

Parents' negative perception of local authorities is one of the most common challenges. Related to this is the view expressed by some local authorities that there is a difficulty in capturing a representative view of parents' opinions and issues. The difficulty being that, unless parents actively make their voice known (either through the parent partnership service or parent support groups), then it can be difficult for local authorities to know how to reach the wider population of parents whose children have SEN: 'How do you get the views of the silent majority?'

The difficulty for the SEN team can be around getting to know the parents and understanding their perceptions

before being able to 'move things on'. This can be difficult within the imposed timescale and militates against providing immediate support.

There are barriers associated with particular parents. There can be difficulties associated with non-English speakers, parents with learning difficulties and parents with mental health problems, in particular, in ensuring their understanding of the process. In these instances the support of parent partnership services and social workers can be helpful.

### Schools and other agencies

The SEN team is not in control of what is said to parents by schools or other agencies. The school/parent/local authority relationship is crucial. Some interviewees suggested that schools can sometimes use parents to lobby the local authority for more resources on their behalf. This can cause potential tensions or difficulties in the local authority/parent relationship.

Parents' expectations can be closely linked with the 'messages' from professionals with whom they have contact. Health professionals were cited as sometimes unrealistically raising parents' expectations and thereby making the work of the SEN team more difficult.

### The statutory process

There are barriers to do with the formal assessment process itself. The statutory letters that have to be sent to parents are not accessible, can be unhelpful and overwhelming. It can be difficult to make the information on a website accessible for parents. The decision-making process is too long and needs streamlining to ensure timely intervention.

### Funding and capacity

The pressure and volume of work results in the SEN team having less time to work with parents and to develop effective working relationships with them. The rising number of children with ASD requiring assessment was cited as a particular problem.

The need to have access to sufficient support services and the allocation of AEN funding were also cited as barriers. There was a suggestion that the AEN funding needs reviewing.

### Government policies/targets

The national performance indicator/target, which focuses on the completion of the assessment process within the timescale rather than the quality of service offered to parents, was also cited as a barrier. It would be helpful to have one overall measure of parental satisfaction and/or measure of the quality of assessment which includes parental satisfaction as a critical component.

Government messages were said to create problems:

*The message that you can't have what you want is difficult when the Government is promoting the message that parents can indeed have what they want. That comes down to the amount of money ... it may be a matter of using it more effectively and the Government being willing to say to parents that there are limits of what can be expected of the system.*

## 8.3 What approaches are used to counter difficult relationships with parents?

The following approaches were highlighted as valuable to trying to counter difficult relationships with parents.

- **Parent partnership services:** These are used to help allay parents' fears:

*If a parent rings us and we can tell that they are very anxious or very upset we will either ask them to come in and meet with us or we'll ask our parent partnership service to go round their home if they would prefer.*

- **Explaining what's happening**

*Sometimes it's just about explaining what's happening ... because parents don't know the intricacies of how the statutory assessment process works or how local authorities work.*

- **Flexible funding**

*One of the strategies I use is to make money available ... What I am doing is liberating people to become a bit more creative in those solutions. We're saying if you need some money to do it, let's do it. Some flexibility in budgeting and some confidence in being able to do that, gives a more open environment where we can actually meet children's needs.*

- **Appeals resolution officer:** In one authority, the parent partnership service and local solicitors will contact the SEN team if there is a potential issue over need, provision or placement so that it can be resolved without recourse to formal paperwork:

*It is our policy to avoid tribunal if humanly possible ... to achieve that we have appointed an Appeals Resolution Officer ... We have focused very strongly on trying to resolve disagreement ... There is some confidence amongst parents that we are far more open to that approach than perhaps we used to be.*

- **Early communication with parents:** It is necessary for the SEN team to have effective and early communication with parents in order to provide accurate information about the process, details of school and local authority responsibilities, and to manage parental expectations.

## 8.4 What would SEN teams suggest could be done to improve relationships with parents?

There is a range of suggestions as to what could be done differently to improve relations with parents.

### Effective communication with parents

A personal approach to communication:

*When we do our evaluations through the parent partnership, I always write personally to each parent who has participated in that to thank them for their input and mentioning whatever they have raised. That's a pretty good way of word spreading. It builds confidence.*

### Consistency of staff

'Parents find it very frustrating when they get a different person every time they ring up.' One local

authority emphasises the importance of face-to-face communications by suggesting that a role similar to that of an education welfare officer is attached structurally to the local authority SEN team. The person in this role would be able to spend the majority of their time with parents, developing their confidence in, and understanding of, the local authority.

### A straightforward and understanding attitude

*Right from the very basic first relationships with parents, people, specialist teachers, headteachers have to be honest with parents and approachable and understand and put themselves in the parents' shoes.*

### Review the assessment procedure

The assessment procedure itself is thought to raise parents' anxieties. It was described as 'using a sledge hammer to crack a nut'

*It is such a thoroughly negative procedure for everybody. We have a catalogue of what's gone wrong which then demonstrates that you have to do something.*

This includes review of the statutory letters, which are inaccessible for parents and are not helpful.

### Multi-agency assessments earlier in the process

It is thought that having one multi-agency professional (a 'hybrid' professional) who works with the parents and is able to look at provision 'across the board' is helpful as this makes procedures more streamlined and thereby increases parental confidence. Similarly, it is suggested that parents would like one interface with the local authority and the use of the lead professional may help give parents more confidence.

### Analysis and meeting of children's needs

Undertaking a needs analysis and being able to meet all children's needs within the locality are the aspirations of some local authorities for instilling confidence in parents. One called for a move to a situation where there is a real analysis of children's needs. 'This is not just about delegated funding but a change of mindsets as well.' Another stated:

*I'd like a situation where parents, schools and all other professionals felt confident that we could be meeting needs within the locality for a greater number of children.*

## 8.5 Key points for parental confidence

This section draws together the key points raised in previous chapters and draws out implications for parental confidence in SEN.

### Referral and prior experience

Parents need good quality, face-to-face contact with SEN professionals at the earliest possible stage in the process.

There is a need to ensure that parents' first experiences of the SEN process are positive. Parents should be encouraged to engage in a collaborative and consultative approach to their child's development within school.

Parents should be encouraged to understand that professionals and parents are talking a common language, in which the needs of the child are central. Parents must be able to identify the roles and responsibilities of the SEN team, so that they are able to seek out the most appropriate support and advice.

Some parents have specific needs of their own. Information must be accessible by these parents. Schools and local authorities should be proactive in reaching these groups.

### Early identification and intervention

Multi-agency approaches to SEN provision should be expanded, including the co-location of teams and the development of virtual teams around the child. Children's centres have been particularly effective in providing parents with access to a wide range of support, information and advice underpinning their involvement in the SEN process.

There is a need to maintain, capitalise on and take forward the effective multi-agency working that takes place in the pre-school arena in school settings. Children's Trust Board arrangements could have a central role to play in this.

Multi-agency involvement, led or coordinated by a member of the SEN team, could contribute to

increasing parental confidence that appropriate support was being provided.

Closer integration of CAF and statutory assessment for SEN could increase parental confidence that all agencies and services were operating in a coordinated and complementary manner to holistically meet the needs of the child.

Improved joint working between education and health service providers would help to provide an integrated service, and would be beneficial to parents whose children have both medical and educational needs.

### Local authority and school responsibility for SEN

Schools are often parents' first point of contact with the SEN process. As such, the remits of, and relationships between, schools and the local authority need to be clearly communicated to parents so they have confidence that each will fulfil its own designated functions and responsibilities. Documentation, supported by face-to-face dialogue from parent partnership services could provide clarification and reduce tensions in the system.

Proactive efforts to involve parents more in the process, through open meetings, for example, may help increase their understandings of, and confidence in, the system.

The information provided to parents should be accessible, useful and effective in raising parent's awareness and understandings. Parents need to be able to act on the information they are provided with.

### Supporting parents

Information provided to parents, contained in the statutory letter, and in relation to local authority support services, needs to be made more accessible. Confidence in the system, the process and the provision could be increased if parents have access to clearer information regarding who is responsible for the support available, and how they could access it.

Websites need to be updated regularly and local authorities need to assess the extent to which parents

are accessing, and are able to access, web-based information.

Schools, children's centres and community centres (amongst others) should be used proactively to hold and disseminate information about SEN support to parents.

Face-to-face delivery of information is valued by parents. SEN teams' increased capacity could help facilitate this.

Parents' forums present opportunities for parents to provide and receive information about support and the SEN process. Confidence could be increased if the local authority considers and responds to issues raised. Local authorities need to be proactive in consulting parents. The involvement of a parent representative on the SEN assessment panel may communicate the wider message to other parents that their interests are being meaningfully included.

Greater information about, and parental awareness of, the pre-statementing support available at School Action and School Action Plus is required to allay parents' concerns/perceptions that a statement is required in order to adequately meet their child's needs.

Parental confidence may be increased when there is visible flexibility in the provision available, so that parents can see that packages of support are tailored to the (changing) specific needs of their child. The local authority's ability to commission provision from a range of sources was seen to be valuable in this.

Facilitating parental visits to particular placements or provision may assist in increasing their confidence in the support available.

## **Ensuring appropriate provision and outcomes**

SEN teams ensure that the needs of the child are prioritised through embedding and maintaining a child-centred approach to the process. Staff need to ensure that they communicate this culture of working to parents, and try to involve them throughout.

Local authority monitoring of the support provided by schools can convey to parents that the provision accessed by their children is regularly reviewed. Good relationships

with schools can increase transparency and inspire parental confidence. In addition, the implementation of child tracking systems means that schools can be challenged on the level of progress made by individual pupils. A dedicated SEN monitoring and evaluation team may increase parental confidence that there are regular and on-going checks on pupil outcomes.

The development of closer working relationships between the SEN team and parents can contribute to greater parental input into the process, resulting in increased confidence that the specific needs of the child are being addressed by the provision put in place.

## **Local authority SEN team capacity and expertise**

SEN teams, whether large and including SEN providers, such as educational psychologists and specialist teachers, or small with a core focus on undertaking statutory assessments, are confident in their ability to ensure appropriate provision for children with SEN.

Parental confidence is increased when parents feel that the team has included them in the process, taken on board their input, and sourced appropriate provision. Meetings and dialogue are central to this confidence.

Relationship building is a central element of parental confidence. Effective working with parents can come from the inherent qualities and experience of SEN team members (and management/leadership) as well as being enhanced through training. Professional development and on-the-job training can expand the ability of strategic and operational staff to ensure that parents are, and feel, central to the SEN decision-making process. Of particular importance are opportunities for parents' groups and representatives to share their experiences and perspectives with SEN staff.

Opportunities for sharing experiences within and beyond local authority SEN teams could be beneficial, especially in relation to statement writing.

## **Good practice in developing relationships with parents**

The SEN team ethos and way of working is integral to the development of constructive relationships with

parents thereby engendering parental confidence. Constructive relationships can be encouraged by increasing opportunities for parent participation, enhanced involvement in consultation and provision reviews, and through the parent partnership service. This can be reinforced through strategic research and evaluation of parental perspectives, and incorporation of findings into planning and service design.

A flexible approach to funding provision can instil confidence that the local authority is sourcing the most

appropriate support, tailor-making it to the needs of a particular child. Multi-agency input earlier in the process could help parents' understanding of the extent to which a child's needs are being considered.

Areas for further development include a continued focus on developing effective communication with parents, involving a high degree of face-to-face interaction. In addition, demonstrating understanding of the family's perspective when working with parents could increase confidence.

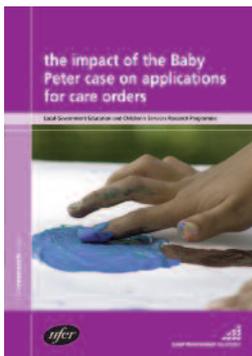
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# Recently published reports

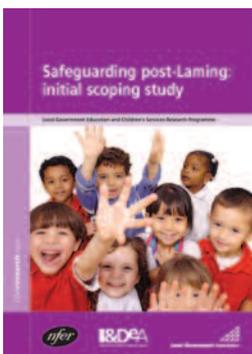
The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by the NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at [www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/)



## The impact of the Baby Peter case on applications for care orders

This study looked at the impact of the case of Baby Peter Connelly on LAs' applications for care orders and child protection more widely. There was evidence of a rise in applications for care/supervision orders and LA staff reported implications of the increase in care orders on staff workload, morale, recruitment and retention.

[www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/BPI01/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/BPI01/)



## Safeguarding post-Laming: initial scoping study

This review looked at research since 2009 (following the Laming review on safeguarding children). The database searches identified 48 relevant items, including good practice guidance, quality assessments, interagency training and information sharing. Website searches found 41 items, most were responses to the Laming report. The report summarises the main findings and identifies potential areas of further research.

[www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGM01/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGM01/)



## Supporting local authorities to develop their research capacity

This report sets out the findings from an LGA-funded project that complements Local Authority Research Consortium (LARC) research by examining staff views on the perceived benefits and challenges of being involved in practitioner-led research.

[www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LAL01/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LAL01/)

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How can we help parents to understand the special educational needs (SEN) process?

What sort of information and support do they need?

This report details the results of research with SEN officers (or their equivalent) in 26 local authorities, covering:

- the referral process
- early identification and intervention
- local authority and school responsibility
- supporting parents
- ensuring appropriate provision and outcomes
- local authority SEN team capacity and expertise.

In addition, the research gives valuable insights into good practice in developing relationships with parents and the key points local authority staff need to know for ensuring parents' confidence in the process. These include, for example, involving parents in the process, talking without using jargon, ensuring parental access to clear information and, most importantly, ensuring a child-centred approach.

This report is key reading for all those involved in the multi-agency approach to SEN – local authority staff, teachers and those working in child health and social care.