



executive summary

local authorities' perceptions of how parents and young people with special educational needs will be affected by the 2011 Green Paper

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Policy context

There have been a number of recent policy developments related to the well-being and support of young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Learners with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LLDD). Previous reviews by the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2006) and Bercow (DCSF, 2008) have provided a better understanding of the issues surrounding provision for young people with SEN/LLDD. In addition, the recent Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills review (Ofsted, 2010) suggested there was an over-diagnosis of pupils requiring School Action support and highlighted the varying provision of SEN/LLDD services in local authorities (LAs). The drive to further support and improve outcomes for parents and young people is the focus of the current SEN and Disability Green Paper (DfE, 2011). The Green Paper proposals have a strong emphasis on local decision making and autonomy and reflect the government's localism agenda. In the light of these ongoing developments and their implications for families, schools and LAs, the Local

Government (LG) Group commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to capture LA perspectives of how the parents of children and young people with SEN/LLDD will be affected by the SEN Green Paper. The aim was to identify key implications for LAs in the light of the proposed changes, by collecting information from LA staff responsible for children with SEN and LLDD.

Key findings

Interviewees supported the main thrust of the Green Paper, especially early identification, improved parental engagement and collaborative working between professionals. There was widespread support for a single assessment, and LA staff agreed that there was a need for better integration, commitment and accountability across agencies. Interviewees agreed that the proposed single 'Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan' should be statutory for all agencies involved.

The proposal for greater partnership working with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) was also welcomed by interviewees. The key strengths of the VCS were identified as flexibility, more choice in provision and greater parental confidence and trust, as parents perceive organisations in the VCS as independent. With appropriate training, it was felt the sector could provide an information, advice and guidance (IAG), support and advocacy role. However, interviewees expressed reservations about an assessment role for the sector. They also wanted further clarification about where responsibility for monitoring and holding the VCS accountable would lie, in the event that agencies were unable to cope with new demands.

There were mixed views on the proposed single category of SEN. Although a single category was welcomed as a way of preventing underperforming pupils being wrongly diagnosed with SEN/LLDD, there was concern that this could result in some young people with SEN/LLDD who currently receive support being left unsupported in the future.

Interviewees welcomed the Green Paper's emphasis on greater choice for parents, but pointed out that parents would still only be able to express a preference in respect to school choice, as schools would not always be able to meet young people's needs. Interviewees felt this lack of clarity (in referring to 'choice' rather than 'preference') could lead to unrealistic expectations by parents. Interviewees were in favour of parents having personal budgets to spend on services for their children with SEN/LLDD, because they thought this would encourage more involvement and improve confidence in the system. However, they pointed out that giving parents such additional responsibilities would mean that parents would need greater support.

As recommended in the Green Paper, all LAs in the study were already working with other authorities and several had established integrated working across services within their authorities. In some cases, education and health agencies had pooled their funding for these young people. Less capacity and greater demands as a result of reduced funding in LAs were identified as possible barriers to agencies working more collaboratively in future.

Implications for policy and practice

Interviewees were positive about the Green Paper and welcomed the proposals, in principle. However, they highlighted a number of implications for practice.

Interviewees felt that proposals for increased parental choice and the use of personal budgets would not reduce bureaucracy or simplify the process for parents. Additional responsibilities could result in parents becoming more overwhelmed with the process, and they would need additional support.

Interviewees felt that intervention in the early years would save costs in the long run, but is likely to be most successful at identifying children with complex needs. For needs which develop gradually, further support would be required to ensure that all young people's needs are identified.

The requirement for agencies to work collaboratively through the EHC Plan will place greater demands on agencies. This could have implications for current proposals to reduce the timescales for assessment, as involvement from different agencies could serve to lengthen the process.

The proposal for a single category of SEN could result in some children with moderate needs being unable to access support. LAs would welcome an assurance that all young people with SEN/LLDD will receive appropriate support in future.

Interviewees welcomed an increased role for the VCS and additional key worker support for parents. However, they suggested that a growth in the number of professionals and providers could result in inconsistent approaches, highlighting a need for both accountability of the VCS and workforce development within the sector. In addition, interviewees felt that the VCS were not always neutral and could have a vested interest in promoting certain types of provision for parents.

Evidence base

The findings are based on qualitative telephone interviews with seven LA officers with responsibilities for SEN/LLDD and four interviewees from Parent Partnership Services across nine LAs. Interviews were carried out in May 2011.



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