

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Peer Challenge

23rd November – 26th November 2021

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

There is a commitment across political parties to improve Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) services in Southend-on-Sea which should provide the drive to challenge and scrutinise progress. Improvements have been made since the Ofsted/Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspection in 2018 and the recent reinspection confirmed progress in three out of the four areas identified in the Written Statement of Action. There is confidence from partners in the leadership of education including children's services, and there is a strong parent voice to shape service provision and delivery. The pandemic has developed some positive partnership relationships which will be important in moving forward.

There needs to be a common language and understanding of what the SEND Strategy will deliver which is understood by everyone, most importantly by parents. Schools need to be challenged and supported to be more inclusive and work with parents to ensure that children with additional needs receive the right support, particularly through SEN Support. In addition, the early help offer, including short breaks, needs to be better communicated so that families understand the range of support available to them. A strength-based approach should be taken and a focus on what can be provided rather than what can't.

There is work still to be done in relation to joint commissioning and it is recognised that to ensure things are done properly, progress may be slower. There is a good working relationship between partners, in particular with the Southend SEND Independent Forum (SSIF) who are seen as equal partners and are at the forefront of co-production. The Neuro-development pathway development is a good example of this.

Families who receive support from the Children with Disabilities Team are positive. Staff care about the children and families they are working with and take a child-centred approach. However, to access support the assessment process is through a safeguarding lens. This is causing frustration and a degree of fear and mistrust for families who feel their parenting is called into question. Families are often left without support at a time when they are in crisis as a result of not meeting the criteria. Children and young people with mental health needs are not always able to access support which is causing additional strain on families. Lifelong support for some families is needed where there is a child or children with additional needs.

Long waiting times for an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) diagnosis means that families are often struggling to manage the home and school situation. Professionals would benefit from neurodiversity training to help them understand what the impact of this means for family life whether or not there is a diagnosis and how the most appropriate support can be provided.

Short breaks are available and easy to access, although the grant is smaller than in many other councils. Greater investment in short breaks may prevent higher costs at a later stage, for example if there is a breakdown in the provision of care at home.

The Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment Panel make decisions following well-structured discussions and there is evidence of learning and development across partners. Through analysing a range of data, complaints, tribunal decisions and observation of the panel there are too many needs assessments being refused. This is often due to lack of evidence in paperwork, particularly when it is a parental request to

assess. There needs to be a consistent understanding of the graduated approach in schools and good communication between schools and parents to reduce this number.

Restructuring of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) team in education has led to an improved relationship with parents and carers. There is a commitment to person-centred planning, but some parents feel the current process is mechanistic and lacks empathy and understanding in relation to children and families.

The work of the Education Psychology service is highly valued and is seen as caring, understanding and approachable. There is scope to use this experience and knowledge to embed co-production across the partnership.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Information Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS) is well regarded by parents and carers but there are some concerns regarding impartiality due to the line management arrangements by the Council's SEN service. Consideration needs to be given to changing this in line with the Minimum Standards for SEND Information, Advice and Support Services.

Families told the peer challenge team they have to battle for services and if they could see what the route was it would feel easier to navigate. The different parent and carer groups in Southend provide a range of support to parent and carers of children with SEND and this is valued. The Southend SEND Independent Forum (SSIF) is beginning to make a difference at a strategic level and those involved feel listened to.

However, not all parents in the various groups the peer team saw feel listened to or seen as equals around the table. There should be a mutually respected relationship between all partners, including parents and there is an opportunity to co-produce a set of expectations around relationships.

The children and young people in Southend spoke positively about the range of activities available to them. However, it was difficult to see the involvement of children and young people with SEND in some parts of the service and how they shape provision. Co-production with children at all levels needs to be explored, including through schools.

A small number of parents are angry and distressed about their lived experiences and the historic lack of support. Complaints are not always being resolved to the satisfaction of these parents and this is causing levels of distress and trauma for those involved. Relationships are being compromised and the Council, in collaboration with partners need to find ways to address this as it is hindering the continued improvement of services as resources are diverted to addressing the significant number of complaints.

The Council and its partners have a significant challenge to build trust and confidence with this group of parents and families.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

- **Enable the Portfolio Holder to regularly sample casework as part of the performance monitoring and quality assurance process** – This will ensure that the Portfolio Holder has oversight of some of the issues for children and

young people with SEND and their families. Auditing the casework will bring their lived experiences to the fore.

- **Consider developing training to specifically look at cross-party scrutiny and challenge of SEND and working with residents with SEND issues –** Councillors have both professional and personal knowledge of SEND and this can be used in cross-party scrutiny. Additionally, ward members have casework where SEND is an issue and support to enable them to handle this appropriately will be helpful.
- **Use the feedback from the peer challenge to refresh the draft SEND Strategy –** The document needs to put children, young people and their families at the heart of everything and be written in a way that professionals, parents and children can all understand. Using the communication expertise in the Council will ensure that the language used is appropriate for all audiences.
- **Consider how to increase the pace of support and challenge to schools and settings to firmly embed the graduated response –** Special Educational Needs Support (SEN Support) in schools is inconsistent leading to some children not having their needs effectively identified or met at the earliest opportunity. It is important that the inclusion work across all schools means no child is left behind
- **Develop clear timescales and outcome measures for the joint commissioning roadmap –** The current roadmap is not sufficiently detailed to track progress and impact.
- **Ensure there is a clear system wide understanding of the graduated response –** The role and responsibilities of schools and settings in identifying and meeting needs should be clearly articulated for schools, multi-agency partners and most importantly parents and carers.
- **Review, update and rewrite the threshold of need document and ensure everyone understands the pathway –** The pathway to access SEND services at all levels is not universally understood and the route to the Children with Disabilities Team is through a safeguarding lens which is not always appropriate.
- **Introduce specific training for staff working in SEND on Neurodiversity –** Children and young people who are neuro-diverse are often subject to an assessment which is then closed, and families are signposted to other services or information. This is causing distress to the families who are seeking support to meet the needs of their children. Increasing the understanding and awareness of neurodiversity across the workforce would ensure that needs were accurately identified and support provided at the earliest opportunity.
- **Carry out an audit of children and young people where neurodiversity is a possibility to identify if services are being wrapped around the child and family in a timely way or whether support needs to be provided differently –** Some families are being bounced between services or signposted elsewhere when seeking support. Ensure there is strong multi-agency working to co-ordinate support around those where neurodiversity is a possibility. Early support could prevent longer term, intensive support and reduce distress in families.
- **Strengthen the early help offer for children with disabilities and clarify where short breaks sit within the whole Children With Disabilities (CWD) service –** The early help/ SEN support offer is not consistently recognised by

parents as an intervention offer. Whilst there are a number of activities that families can access as a short break, it isn't clear how this support forms part of a package of care for a family.

- **Consider the level of seniority of the chair of the Resource Allocation Panel** -The panel is currently chaired by a Team Manager. A chair from the service at a more senior level would ensure that all partners are held to account appropriately, so that decisions are taken at the right level.
- **Consider moving the SENDIASS service outside the SEND/CWD service to ensure impartiality and compliance with standard 1.5 of the Minimum Standards for SEND Information, Advice and Support Services** – There is a view from some parents that as SENDIASS is managed by the SEND Service it is not able to be completely impartial.
- **Consider training and support for staff, councillors and other partners to strengthen resilience across the workforce** – Staff, elected members and partners need to be emotionally equipped to carry out their work as they are often subject to experiences that will cause distress in their roles.
- **Incorporate learning from complaints as part of the quality assurance system to drive improvement work** – A formal mechanism to look at complaints around SEND will enable the Council to look at themes and issues which can be analysed to inform future improvements.
- **Develop a trauma informed approach for those families who are angry and distressed about their experience** – A number of families in Southend have, historically, had difficult experiences trying to access support for their children and young people. This has left some experiencing anger and distress about their lived experience and these families need to be supported to work through the trauma.

3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

The fundamental aim of a peer challenge is to help councils and their partners reflect on the provision in the local area for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities, in consideration of the Children's and Families Act 2014, the Equality Act 2010 and the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Regulations 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice 0-25 2015. This was a very focussed peer challenge on the Council's specific key lines of enquiry.

It is important to remember that a peer challenge is not an inspection; it provides a critical friend approach to challenge the Council in assessing its strengths and identifying its own areas for improvement. The approach involved reviewing the, documentation and data; sampling education, health and care needs assessment requests, children's social care cases; interviewing elected members, senior leaders across the partnership, parent/carer groups, parents, children and young people and staff from a range of SEND services and schools. It is important to recognise that the findings are based on this range of activity. Southend-on-Sea Council is encouraged to reflect on what the findings mean in relation to the area as a whole and how partners can be involved in the improvement work relating to this peer challenge.

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced officer and elected member peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the Council's requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and their participation was agreed with the Council.

The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Southend-on-Sea Borough Council were:

- Lead peer – Sarah Newman, Executive Director Bi-Borough Children's Services, City of Westminster and Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
- Member Peer – Councillor Grace Williams, Leader, London Borough of Waltham Forest
- Parent/Carer Peer – Pete Ruse, Chair of Family Voice Calderdale
- SEND & Health Peer – Sam Barron, SEND Strategic Lead, Northumberland County Council & Designated Clinical Officer, Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)
- Education Peer – George Gilmore, LGA Associate and former Special School Headteacher
- Children's Social Care & SEND Peer – Amanda Checkley, LGA Associate with Children's Social Care and SEND expertise
- Challenge Manager – Jill Scarr , LGA

The process

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 3.5 days onsite at Southend-on Sea Borough Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 110 people including a range of Council staff together with councillors and partners, children and young people. The peer challenge team saw parents and carers in a number of different groups including the Southend SEND Independent Forum, Little Heroes, SEND The Right Message and parents supported by SENDIASS. Where parents and families are mentioned in the report, this relates to the views shared by those we spoke to, approximately 30 parents. Wider work would need to be undertaken by the council to ascertain whether the views and experiences of families the peer challenge team spoke to are representative of the majority of families accessing different services.
- Gathered information and views from more than 27 meetings, additional research, reviewing a small number of cases and reading documents provided by the Council.
- Collectively spent more than 300 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 8 weeks in Southend-on-Sea.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (23rd – 26th November 2021). By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Scope and Focus

The peer challenge focused on five key areas, four of which were key lines of enquiry provided by the Council. It is important to state that this peer challenge focused on the Council and not the wider local partnership although there are some cross-cutting themes which related to schools and health. The report includes the good practice we heard about and areas which the Council might want to consider further.

Themes:

- Leadership and governance of SEND.
- The progress made to address joint commissioning, the remaining area of weakness from the original Written Statement of Action. This will take into account specific points that Ofsted/CQC determined that the area had either made insufficient progress, or that the pace of progress was too slow.
- The work of the Children with Disabilities Service, including when initial requests for assessment had been refused; whether thresholds and criteria are appropriate; consideration of the outcomes of any tribunals over the past 36 months and a view of the Council's policy and practice in this area.
- Scrutiny of the process around, and the relative performance of EHCP needs assessments, and the implications of these decisions. In particular in the build up to, and in the first 6 weeks if approved. This includes the number of initial requests for assessment refused; whether thresholds are appropriate; consideration of the outcomes of any tribunals over the past 36 months and a view of the Council's policy and practice in this area.
- How the area has engaged with all families of children with SEND to ensure that their voice is both heard and informs the area partnership work more generally.

5. Main Findings

5.1. Leadership and governance of SEND

There is a commitment across political parties to improve SEND services in Southend-on-Sea. This gives the Council an opportunity to maximise the experience of elected members, both professionally and personally, through cross-party scrutiny. This will ensure that all elected members can see improvements to the service and challenge areas where improvement is needed and drive the necessary changes. The expectations of councillors' roles in relation to scrutiny and challenge needs to be strengthened to enable this. In addition, training for ward members would help them work with residents who have issues regarding SEND services, as part of their casework role and help clarify expectations about how casework will be responded to.

It is clear that the Council (and its partners) have made improvements to SEND services since the Ofsted/CQC inspection in 2018. At the reinspection in May 2021, three out of the four areas in the Written Statement of Action had been addressed.

The Portfolio Holder for Children and Learning is developing an ambitious new agenda for children after being appointed in May 2021. Regular sight of cases relating to SEND as part of the quality assurance process will provide insight into the lived experiences of families and enable him to challenge and support the service.

Leaders across the partnership of education, health and social care are motivated to create a joined-up, outward looking offer of support for children and young people with SEND and their families. The pandemic has helped to develop relationships across the partnership. The approach of the new Executive Director of Children's Services is welcomed and considered positive by partners. Similarly, the Director of Education's approach to SEND and commitment to the wider partnership, is seen as positive.

A strong, simple vision with a common language shared by all partners would enable everyone to understand what the SEND strategy and provision of services will look like in Southend. There is a need to get the basics right and promote a culture which supports children, young people and their families based on what can be offered to meet need. This must include school leaders as important partners in developing and delivering this vision.

There are some secondary schools with resource provision and others working with the local authority to develop enhanced provision but there is still work to be done to improve inclusion in schools, particularly at secondary level. The peer challenge team were told 'it is a very difficult borough to be a child with additional needs'.

Across leaders, partners and services, ambitions for children and young people are not clearly and consistently articulated, and there is a question around whether wanting to provide a good SEND service is enough for Southend's children and young people.

The Children's Improvement Board, chaired by the Leader of the Council, now incorporates scrutiny of SEND. The work of the board and oversight of the newly developed SEND dashboard will enable all partners, including elected members, to provide challenge by monitoring progress and the impact of service improvement.

However, there is a challenge for Elected Members and senior leaders across the partnership to increase trust and confidence with parents and families. This should be through clear communications and focus on how the Council and its partners can support families in a better way. Developing an approach to regular meetings between elected members and parents as part of a wider approach to working with children and families will help to build trust.

5.2. Joint Commissioning

There is a recognition by all partners of the amount of work still to do to successfully use joint commissioning for SEND services. There is a balance between wanting to make rapid progress and ensuring that it is done properly, particularly around co-production.

The joint commissioning group have a vision to build the trust and respect of the whole SEND community, to look at families as a whole, not just individuals within families, and

to provide support to prevent escalation. This should provide the guiding principles for future joint commissioning.

Southend SEND Independent Forum (SSIF) are equal partners in developing joint commissioning and are holding the Council and its partners to account.

Working relationships between partners are now well established and are offering support but most importantly constructive challenge. There is more professional curiosity about how things can be done differently.

The voice of the child will be at the centre of six projects going forward as part of the joint commissioning SEND Roadmap. However, clear timescales and measurable outcomes for all parts of the Roadmap are needed to demonstrate progress and impact. The current plan is not specific enough and needs to be tightened up.

In November 2020, the on-line Southend-on Sea SEND profile and data tool was launched. It provides a base to inform joint commissioning priorities. It provides a range of evidence including school census, attainment and social care data. This will ensure that information is kept live and continually reviewed so commissioning decisions are always made on the most up to date information.

The Neuro-developmental pathway which is due to be launched in early 2022 has been developed through co-production with parents and carers. This co-production has been at all levels, strategically and operationally, including the writing of guidance for parents about the pathway and the development of referral forms for schools, health and parents.

There is a need to better articulate and strengthen the offer of help at the earliest point across education, health and social care, particularly at SEN Support level. Everyone needs to understand what the offer is and what their role is in ensuring that needs are met. Parents and carers should understand what the offer is, and how it will work for their children. Partners, including schools should know what they are expected to do to meet individual needs, and how this should be communicated to parents and carers.

Working with all partners, including parents and carers, the local authority should develop an agreed definition of co-production and how it will work in practice. There are different levels of participation, including giving information, consultation and co-production and it is important to define what each method of participation is so everyone is clear from the beginning. This should also include ways of communicating, use of a common language and shared ownership of the strategy.

5.3. Reflections on the Draft SEND Strategy

The SEND Summit was held in May 2021 to develop the SEND strategy and there were contributions from partners, families through SSIF and the voluntary sector. The draft SEND Strategy has been developed but it needs to be more explicit around how the needs of children, young people and their families are to be met. The SEND Strategy should put children, young people and their families at the heart of everything, and parents and carers must be valued as equal partners at all levels of the strategy.

A way forward will be to co-produce a single strategy that clearly communicates families' lived experience and references a strengths-based approach to work with children and families. It should outline what can be provided rather than what can't and lessen the use of signposting or referring on. It should be written in a language that

everyone understands. It may be helpful to use the Council's communication experts to assist with this.

All partners should understand their contribution to the successful delivery of the strategy using a common language. Currently different services use different ways of saying things and this can cause confusion for families. There is no need to have separate versions of the strategy for different groups.

Once the SEND Strategy is agreed, the Delivery Plan to turn strategy into action should be published on the Local Offer so everyone can see it, track progress and hold the Council and its partners to account.

5.4. Work of the Children with Disabilities Service

When families are able to receive support from the Children with Disabilities Team following assessment, they are positive. Staff in the team are child-centred, and clearly care about the children and families with whom they are working. The capacity in the team has been increased and the team has the right level of training and experience to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. The current co-location of the team with Health at The Lighthouse is seen by the team as positive and should enable sharing of good practice and joint working.

However, the service pathways are set up with safeguarding children at the centre, with access through the Early Help Front Door, Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and the Assessment and Intervention Team. Keeping children safe from harm is essential, but using this pathway for children with additional needs or disabilities is creating mistrust, fear and frustration for families who require support. Some parents felt judged and blamed by some services, that they are seen as poor parents and had to be in crisis to get help. The peer challenge team saw that documents were written from a legal perspective and that Liquid Logic, the local authority's social care case management system, has been set up from a safeguarding angle. Southend is not unique in using this pathway and a recent report published by Cerebra¹ - 'Institutionalising Parent Carer Blame' reflects many of the experiences the team heard from parents. Cerebra found this is a theme across a number of local authorities and Southend is in a good position to lead the way to a better, more inclusive system.

The language of assessment to determine support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, which is about supporting children in need, should avoid reference to safeguarding. The threshold of need document should be reviewed, particularly at Tier 3 'in need of support' which encompasses early help and statutory support under the Children Act 1989

The views of parents, and the sample of case records viewed, supported the need for the pathway to access support for children and families to be rewritten and looked at from the child and family's perspective. Some families to whom the peer challenge team spoke had not received support, often over a long period of time, and in some cases, this was generational. Some children with violent and challenging behaviour do not currently meet the criteria for the Children with Disabilities Team and there is a perception that this means that their needs, and those of their family, may not be met. Similarly, older children and young people with mental health needs are not always able

¹ [Institutionalising Parent Carer Blame](#)

to access effective support, and there is a cycle of referrals back and forth between the Children with Disabilities Team and the Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service (EWMHS). There needs to be a greater understanding and agreement across schools, the Council and health services of the pathways to emotional wellbeing and health service in order that needs do not remain unmet.

Children with ASD and ADHD often have to wait a long time for a diagnosis, historically, in some cases this has been years. The waiting times for assessments have recently improved but timescales for initial appointments are still high. There is a perception and, in some cases a reality, that support can or will only be provided when a diagnosis is obtained. Families to whom the team spoke are often struggling to manage the home and school situation with what they feel is little or no support. As a result, a number of parents had commissioned diagnostic assessments privately. Professionals should have neurodiversity training to gain a better understanding of what this means for children, young people and their families, with or without a diagnosis. The training will help professionals ensure that the right support is being provided and that the families do not reach crisis point.

Some families need life-long support, not because there are safeguarding issues, but because they have a child or children with high additional needs. The practice of opening assessments, signposting, closing and re-referral is unhelpful and frustrating for families.

Eligibility for services should enable families to receive the right support at the right time and assessments should provide gateways to the appropriate support rather than be seen as gatekeeping.

Parents have been positive about the Short Breaks available and have said it is easy to access the annual £500 grant, although consideration needs to be given about the level of this grant. Benchmarking with other councils will highlight the levels of grant elsewhere. By increasing the grant as part of the early help offer there is an opportunity to 'invest to save'. This means if there is greater investment in short breaks this could prevent higher costs in other services if, for example there is a family crisis or breakdown in the provision of care in the home.

The Children with Disabilities Service could include both early help and statutory pathways and, where possible, parents should be given the choice. Short Breaks could be managed as part of the service so parents receiving services will feel that they are getting the right support from the team and it is a more holistic approach.

The language and tone of policies and procedures should reflect what is or can be offered, rather than a framework of signposting which is perceived as unhelpful. In some documents it feels like people are being pushed away. One example being The Children with Disabilities Eligibility Criteria.

There is a question around whether the Resources Allocation Panel is chaired at the right seniority level. Currently it is chaired by a Team Manager. Chairing of the panel at a more senior level will assist the development of challenge and accountability for support services.

5.5. Education, Health and Care Plan Needs Assessments (EHCNA)

There is a strong, multi-agency EHCNA panel, with clear terms of reference and decisions are made following well-structured discussions. The panel is additionally

supporting learning and development across partners by sharing expertise and knowledge, and encouraging thoughtful discussion.

Through triangulating data, complaints, and observation of EHC Needs Assessment panel, the sampling of panel decisions and the outcome of tribunals, there is a clear indication that too many needs assessments are being refused. Southend has significantly higher 'refusal to assess' numbers in comparison with both the national figure and the local authority's statistical neighbours. In some cases, the decision on whether to assess or not is impaired due to a lack of evidence in the paperwork, particularly when parents have requested an assessment. Very often, the Council is saying no to an assessment and that needs can be met from existing resources (ordinarily available provision), but parents perceive that this is not always happening. Work to develop a consistent understanding and implementation of the graduated approach in mainstream schools with strong communication between schools and parents could potentially reduce this number. A review of tribunal decisions shows that in 5 out of 7 cases, parents' claims were upheld where the local authority refused to assess. The team are of the opinion that the Council refuses too many assessments.

An analysis of requests for assessments, particularly from parents may highlight themes that can be used in identifying need at an early stage. This should feed into the joint commissioning of early help services in education, health and social care. Of the 10 needs assessments reviewed by the peer team, 6 out of 10 were parental requests and all were declined. Of these, 5 mentioned possible or actual ASD or ADHD. Potentially, these children and their families may still be in need of some form of support.

The restructuring of the SEN team in education and the recruitment of more experienced staff is leading to improved relationships with parents and families through clearer communication, effective support and engagement. The team is passionate in wanting to meet the needs of children and support parents. One comment was 'I know the power of a conversation with a parent... allows them to express their frustration and enables you to end up on the same page.' There is a real commitment to person centred planning within the Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) process. However, some parents feel that the process is mechanistic and lacks understanding and empathy that children and families are involved.

The graduated approach to SEN Support is not consistently understood, used and evidenced by all schools. The Council could look at ways of providing more support and challenge to schools to empower them to meet needs at SEN Support. The peer team heard that some schools do not understand their legal obligations and the need to make reasonable adjustments for children with disabilities, and in some cases children's needs are not identified early enough. Parents do not always recognise what SEN Support is, and the threshold of a 2.5 - 3 year developmental gap to evidence the need for an EHCP is not appropriate. The Council should ensure that parents are aware of the graduated approach and support schools to effectively work with parents and carers and embed the principle of co-production.

Social and emotional needs are not always addressed by schools if age-appropriate attainment levels are being reached. This highlights the need for clear sensitive communication with parents and carers about SEN processes, timelines and outcomes. The peer team received feedback from parents and other partners that the document, 'Southend Shared Expectations', which outlines what is expected of schools, is not fully understood or implemented.

There is a strong Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinators (SENCO) network with termly meetings, an annual conference, and a telephone advice line. Advisory SENCOs quality assure support plans and EHCPs and provide follow up support for a small number of schools.

In order to reinforce the Council's inclusion agenda, there is a need to develop co-produced 'ordinarily available provision' and increase the support and challenge for all schools to implement this. This would provide schools, settings, parents and carers with a clear understanding of what provision parents and carers can expect a mainstream school to provide for children with SEND from within their own resources.

The peer challenge team were told by a range of staff, both internal and external to the Council, as well as parents and carers, that the Education Health and Care (EHC) Hub was not user-friendly and accessible. The Hub was introduced to provide transparency across partners and for parents to input their views. Parents are signposted to the Local Offer for support using the Hub through a link. This is another example of where the Council could do more pro-active work with parents rather than signposting them to a link on the Local Offer.

Decision making guidance for the EHC Needs Assessment panel does not describe the actions following a decision 'not to assess', this is an omission that needs to be rectified so parents and carers are clear about what happens next. Sensitivity around the timing of advising parents of a 'not to assess' decision is needed and should avoid Fridays or before Bank Holidays where access to support in these situations may be limited.

The timescales for EHCP completion have significantly improved since the Ofsted inspection in 2018 and have been sustained over a number of years.

5.6. Engagement with all families of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

The Southend SEND Independent Forum (SSIF) is involved at a strategic level to improve services and the peer challenge team heard that this was a significant improvement. The Forum has taken a real step forward and is beginning to make a difference. The SSIF feel listened to. One parent said 'the parent carer forum has given me confidence – it enables me to take a step back'. SSIF actively engage in regional and national networks.

Parents, through a number of different groups, gave their feedback about their experience of SEND services. The groups included the SSIF, Little Heroes, SEND The Right Message and parents supported by SENDIASS. A number of parents feel unsupported by services and their voices unheard. Parents want to be equal partners, individually and strategically including in the co-production of EHCPs and at SEN Support level. The parent groups the team met all provide a range of support to parents and carers of children and young people with SEND.

The SENDIASS service is well regarded by parents and carers, providing good quality information and empowering families to challenge decisions. In addition, they provide training for both parents and partners.

The line management of SENDIASS by the SEN Service is seen by some parents and carers as undermining its independence and this may be causing a level of mistrust. Consideration could be given to changing the line management arrangement to address this so that it complies with standard 1.5 of the Minimum Standards for SEND

Information, Advice and Support Services (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education)²

The work of the Educational Psychology Service is highly valued by partners and parents who have accessed the service. The peer challenge team were told that the service cares, is understanding and approachable and go over and above to help. There is an opportunity to utilise the expertise, experience and knowledge within the service to support embedding co-production strategically across the partnership.

The children and young people that the team spoke to said they enjoy living in Southend and they can access a range of activities, including performing arts and life guard roles. The peer challenge team heard of a SEN support group in one of the schools and that it was important for the young people to be with others who could support them.

It was difficult to see the involvement of children and young people in some parts of SEND Services. One comment was that 'The voice of the child is the quietest voice'. There was no evidence of a systematic process for the voice of children and young people with SEND to shape provision and influence decisions. This is an area that should be explored in terms of co-production at all levels, including schools.

Written and verbal language needs to be clear, respectful and non-judgemental – this refers to both providers and users of services. Parents feel that they are not always seen as equals around the table and that professionals know better. Examples where improvements could be made are around how parents are addressed, and asking parents and carers what they would like to be called e.g. can first names be used instead of 'Mum' or 'Dad'. The art of compassionate, verbal communication is key. There should be mutually respectful relationships between all partners, and it would be helpful for professionals and parents to co-produce the expectations of these relationships.

Parents spoken to are saying they have to battle for services – one parent gave an analogy of a minefield versus the maze at Priory Park. The maze has low hedges so you can always see your way through it but the SEND journey is often unknown and it would be less of a battle if you could see where you need to go.

Parents are asking for support to be provided at the earliest stage and this should be within the school or setting, but the systems and processes are often barriers to this support. One parent said 'when we ask for help it's the end of a long process – we've done a lot of work already – when we ask for help it's because we need help'.

There is a lack of corporate learning from complaints in relation to those raised around SEND. By analysing the complaints, common themes can be spotted and can be used to drive improvement,

Parents, carers and young people report that the Local Offer website has significantly improved since a review was undertaken after the Ofsted/CQC inspection in 2018. However, it requires further improvement in terms of navigation and up-to-date information as parents struggle to find information and the information is not always well written or parent or child friendly.

A small number of parents from different parent groups and forums expressed anger and distress about their lived experiences and the lack of support from services, in

² Minimum Standards for SEND Information, Advice and Support Services (DHSC & DfE)

some cases, historic. This is leading to numerous complaints, which are not, in some parents' views being resolved satisfactorily. This is creating a level of distress which is compromising relationships and trauma for everyone involved – parents and staff, elected members and the parent carer forum. The Council and its partners (including Ofsted, the Care and Quality Commission and the Department for Education) have tried to address these issues with parents over a number of years. This has included using external mediation. The Council and its partners are willing to find an appropriate resolution and have expressed a wish to work with parents. There is an urgent need to address this.

6. Next Steps

The Local Government Association would be happy to discuss how we could help you further through the LGA's Principal Adviser, Rachel Litherland, telephone 07795 076834 or e-mail Rachel.litherland@local.gov.uk and Andrew Bunyan, the Children's Improvement Adviser, telephone 07941 571047 or e-mail andrew@abdc.co.uk

Thank you to everyone involved for their participation. In particular, please pass on thanks from the peer challenge team to Emma Baldock and the rest of the team for help prior to the peer challenge and during the on-site phase. We would also like our thanks to be passed to all the parents, carers, children and young people who told us about their experiences which have helped us develop our findings.