

EFF Response to the SEND Update to People & Families Scrutiny Committee – 14th March 2024

We are giving a brief summary of our views on the SEND update provided by the SEND Strategy and Innovation Team.

We feel that the presentation gives a fair reflection of the historical context and current position both in Essex and Nationally.

The facts are indisputable:

- OFSTED/CQC Inspectors did find that the local area had made sufficient progress against the Areas of Weakness identified in the 2019 SEND inspection.
- The health system has undergone a period of transformation and restructure and each of the Integrated Care Boards in Essex either has or is likely to have a “triple lock” on any spending.
- COVID19 Pandemic
- There has been a significant increase in requests for EHCP Needs Assessments
- There has been a significant increase in the number of EHCPs issued since 2016.
- The number of children in special schools has increased since 2015.
- The shortage of Educational Psychologists is affecting the ability to conduct Needs Assessments for Educational Health and Care Plans within statutory timescales.

Our views on these facts are:

- Essex Family Forum was not entirely in agreement with the conclusion of Inspectors at the time of the revisit. Whilst it was acknowledged the measures that the local area had introduced were rightly aiming for better outcomes for children and young people, the lack of impact for families was disappointing.
- The restructure in the health system has delayed making significant progress to date despite the commitment of those working with these systems. We fear that future progress could be further hampered by the ‘Triple Lock’.
- COVID19 Pandemic has had a long-lasting impact on children and young people and on the services (health in particular) that support them.
- To quote the update presentation:
“schools are facing: real term reductions in education funding, recruitment challenges, staffing shortages, and rising pressure on school staff.”
“Parents have shared a lack of confidence in the offer from some mainstream schools”
These factors may be contributing to the increase in needs assessments requests.
- Some of the increase in the number of EHCPs can be explained by the fact that EHCPs are designed to be in place for the entirety of a young person's education, up to the age of 25. Before the 2014 SEND reforms, Statements of Education only lasted until the end of compulsory school age at 16. There does seem also to be a general consensus across all partners that the needs of children and young people are more complex, and this is reflected nationally not just limited to Essex.
- Since 2015, the majority of special schools have developed a Post 16 provision which we believe will account for some of the increased numbers in those schools, along with the new schools that have been opened and the significant rebuilds/expansion of existing schools.
- The delays in allocating an Educational Psychologist to conduct a Needs Assessments are of considerable concern currently. The impact these delays have on children/young people and their families can be significant.

Ongoing work and strategies (including Co-ordination and Oversight Groups)

There is clearly a large amount of ongoing work. Representatives from Essex Family Forum are involved in many the Co-ordination and Oversight Groups. To date, a lot of the work has been focussed on improving internal procedures, with the aim that this will ensure smoother and quicker processes for EHCPs, improve the quality of EHC Plans (by looking at all the advice and information that contribute to a plan and improving the training offer for all staff involved in the process). With the Inclusion Framework and Ordinarily Available, there is a focus on improving the support available in mainstream schools and the training offer to schools.

What Difference is this making to children and young people and their families

The update quite rightly highlights that, even with all the ongoing work, positive impact for families has been limited. We might go further and say that for a significant number of families, their experiences are worse than they would have been at the time of the original local area SEND Inspection of 2019 and at the revisit in 2022.

We welcome the investment in additional staffing and hope that this is sufficient to meet the increased demand within the EHCP process. We are aware that, in addition to the delays in statutory timescales due to the shortage of Educational Psychologists, there are significant delays in completing the Annual Review process within statutory timeframes.

The impact these delays are having on children/young people and their families can be significant. We were pleased that this was a focus of the recent 'Courageous Conversation'. Part of our contribution included conducting a short survey with a small number of parent/carers who were awaiting a Needs Assessment for their child/young person. The full report of the findings can be found on our [website](#). A brief summary of the impact these delays are having is outlined below:

- Frustration at the delays
- (Lack of) Communication with SEND Operations team during the waiting period – parents who were contacted did feel more supported and less frustrated
- Impact in the Education Setting – unsustainable level of support being provided or inability to provide the right level of support, needs unmet so some pupils unable to attend full-time
- Impact on the family and home life – affecting relationships within the family, stress and anxiety, needing to reduce working hours or giving up work (& the wider financial impact that causes)

What else are families telling us

Support within education settings is only one aspect of the support that children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, and their families need. Families are reporting increasing difficulty in accessing support from a wide range of services, as resources (both in personnel and financial) become more stretched across the public sector. This includes access to therapies, assessments for neurodiverse and other health conditions, social care and mental health support. They are often signposted to charities, who are struggling to maintain previously available levels of support due to financial pressures as they, in turn, are unable to access ever-reducing funding streams.

Responding to the previous People & Families Scrutiny Committee – February 2024

We have given a full response to the SEND Sufficiency Plan that has recently been out for consultation

We have written to the Chair of the Committee and offered a meeting for the councillors so we can explain more about the role of Essex Family Forum and the work that we do.

We are planning a parent/carer event in summer term so we can hear the concerns of parent/carers who who may not have previously attended our events or want to know more about us.