

# Unlocking the conversation



Provision of an independent strategic review  
of Sheffield City Council's Statutory  
Assessment and Review Service  
(SENDSARS)  
And the Broader landscape for SEND  
in Sheffield

The broader landscape for SEND – Key  
Messages  
September 2023

---



---

## Executive Summary

In May 2023 Sheffield City Council commissioned an independent Strategic Review of the local authority's SEND Statutory Assessment & Review Service (SENDSARS). Through early discussions with the local authority, it was agreed that as SENDSARS operate within the broader SEND landscape in Sheffield, a review of this nature would undoubtedly begin to capture observations and findings regarding the broader context for SEND within the city. To conduct a review of a statutory SEND service without consideration of the broader context for SEND in Sheffield would be less valuable and therefore the scope of the review was extended to include not only a strategic review of SENDSARS, but reporting on the emerging findings regarding the broader landscape in which they operate. This will help to inform further and more detailed future development and improvement work.

There are some key interdependencies in relation to the improvement work that needs to take place within SENDSARS, and the broader context within which they operate. Some of the recommendations related to improvement in SENDSARS will be reliant on further developing and sustaining a more effective local SEND system in Sheffield. This report outlines the key findings in relation to the broader landscape for SEND. A separate report has been provided to the local authority in relation to the strategic review of SENDSARS.

The primary aim of the review was to help shape and inform future development and improvement work. Whilst the review found that some good progress has and continues to be made, as evidenced in the Joint Area SEND revisit findings and the work that has been undertaken through the Accelerated Progress Plan, the authority is not complacent and is committed to continuous improvement for the benefit of children, young people, and families. It was acknowledged throughout the review that despite the clear progress that has been made and which should, quite rightly, be acknowledged and celebrated, there are areas of existing challenge, and areas where there is room for further development and improvement. The review, therefore, forms an important element of the improvement journey for developing and sustaining a more effective local SEND system in Sheffield.

Fundamentally the review found we need to develop a shared language around SEND in Sheffield that reflects and connects the vision, value base and behaviours. By doing this we will see more of a step change. A culturally different outlook and focus for SEND is required that moves the partnership towards a more collaborative and collectively agreed approach. This will be important in the success of any future improvement and development work, as will be:

- A collectively owned vision for children and young people with SEND that embeds the importance of belonging and mattering. This needs to be driven by leaders at a strategic level and delivered confidently by practitioners on the ground.
- The development of a collectively owned improvement framework that allows the SEND partnership in Sheffield to better understand distance travelled.
- Clearer expectations around what should be ordinarily available for children and young people with SEND in Sheffield.
- A more holistic view of children and young people's needs.

- 
- The strategic development of an inclusive offer that builds the confidence of parents and carers and that, importantly, moves the partnership towards a more integrated education, health and care graduated approach at a locality level.
  - The fair and equitable use of high needs funding and a recognition that targeted funding and support is required to build capacity and resilience within the system.

An interesting aspect of the review and one which is fundamental in terms of driving forward future improvement and development work is that whilst much is known in terms of the numbers (the *how many*), what the review began to unlock was a more focused conversation around *why*. Why are we seeing significantly increased suspension and exclusion rates for children and young people with SEND in Sheffield, why are we seeing increasing levels of parental dissatisfaction, why are we focusing on the dominant diagnosis of a child or young person's needs as opposed to their more holistic needs, why are some children and young people travelling outside of their local community to access education and why despite much of the hard work and activity that is clearly taking place, are we not always joining the dots in terms of a more integrated education, health and care system?

Having a more detailed and collective understanding of *why* helps the partnership to unlock the conversation around, *so what are we going to do systemically about it?* What are we going to do strategically and differently? Continuing to unlock this conversation will undoubtedly build stronger responses in relation to how we begin to tackle some of the challenges and issues and unlock the targeted funding, resources and support needed to build a stronger and more resilient system for the benefit of children, young people and families in Sheffield.

The review explored many of the challenges and issues identified by stakeholders and examined what the data and intelligence is telling us. It has put forward a number of suggestions for areas of potential future improvement and development on the back of those findings, but unlocking the conversation must continue to be a key focus for the partnership.

## Key Messages

Although stakeholders recognised throughout the review process that SEND sits within an increasingly challenging landscape and against the backdrop of a tightening funding envelope, some were keen to offer the reflection that at times we are in danger of hiding behind the rhetoric that "SEND is a national issue over which there is little control". Many acknowledged that despite the clear pressures and challenges, the core aim of the partnership is to work together to improve experiences and outcomes for some of the city's most vulnerable children and young people, whilst using resources effectively. There was a strong sense that there was considerable local freedom and autonomy to act to shape the system strategically and differently if partners work collaboratively together.

We should remain ambitious for children and young people with SEND in Sheffield was a recurring theme throughout the review.

Similarly, whilst it was acknowledged that meaningful progress will only be made if partners work strategically across organisational and system level boundaries and there was an

---

understanding that SEND sits within a complex system over which no one partner has ultimate influence and control. What was less clear was the strategic vision across the partnership for achieving a whole system approach, alongside a clear strategy for how the partnership would make the shift from what is still largely a reactive to a more proactive, planned and strategic approach. Some partners talked about an at times confused landscape for SEND and one which required significant recalibration and overhaul if real and measurable improvements were to be made.

A recurring theme throughout the review was the concern that despite the Inclusion Strategy being known, this was not sufficiently owned or embedded across the partnership. Having a collectively owned vision for children and young people with SEND which is driven by leaders at a strategic level and delivered confidently by practitioners on the ground was seen as critical in driving improved outcomes and experiences for children and young people. The lack of collectively owned vision was reported by some stakeholders, particularly parents and carers, as impacting on the ability of partners to work strategically together to the extent that was needed, culminating in some fracture lines appearing over a period of years and a fragmented and at times confusing and competing system of support and intervention, which too many children, young people and families were now struggling to navigate.

*“The language needs to change. Other areas say, ‘our children’ and ‘our families’. We don’t do that in Sheffield.”*

The children and young people with SEND engaged throughout the review process were ambitious for their future. Like all children, they want to attend a school or setting where they are respected, valued and well cared for and where they have a strong sense of belonging and mattering and they want to achieve good outcomes that effectively prepare them for adulthood. Many talked passionately about the careers and job roles they wanted to pursue, their hopes for living independently (or semi-independently), the importance of sense of place within their school or college community, the importance of friendships and their hopes and dreams for their future.

*“I’m really ambitious for my future. Even though young people have SEND, we have talents and can do good stuff. We need the same opportunities as other young people. Not labels. I’m going to college and am going to get a good job.”*

Through the review many young people did, however, reflect that the voice, influence and participation of children and young people with SEND did not always sit front and centre. The review explored the potential introduction of a Young Ambassadors Programme in Sheffield, and this was welcomed by those young people engaged. It is positive that work has now begun to explore what such a model in Sheffield might look like.

*“As a young person I feel frustrated that nothing ever seems to be done, no matter what we say”.*

*“I had a very bad time at school. I don’t think we are an inclusive city. Everyone talks about making things better. But nothing ever happens. It’s very frustrating”*

---

Although many children and young people with SEND in Sheffield undoubtedly benefit from positive experiences and outcomes, the review found there are some real and visible challenges for a growing number of Sheffield's children and young people with SEND. This was reflected in many of the stakeholder engagement sessions with parents, carers, children, young people and settings and the data and intelligence gathered as part of the strategic review process.

Some parents and carers talked about an at times adversarial system and the need to 'fight' to get what they believed their child needed; some talked about not being involved in decision making about their child and not being recognised as experts on their child's needs and the contribution they can make towards planning their child's education and care, and some talked about their concerns regarding poor communication or the length of time it was taking for their child to access appropriate provision and support.

*"It feels like my children don't belong to me, but to the local authority. They don't listen to us as parents. We are constantly talked down to and ignored."*

A number of parents talked about the lack of an inclusive mainstream offer for their child and reflected that they could see no other option than to request a special school place. At the point of the review there were 219 Tribunals notified to the First Tier Tribunal which is a 115% increase since 2019/20, evidencing a shift towards an increasingly challenging landscape for some parents and carers. It is important to recognise that a significant majority of these Tribunals relate to parents who are challenging a mainstream placement and who want their child to be placed within a special school.

*"Parents feel like they have to fight to get what their child needs right from the outset. This is a cultural issue in Sheffield."*

The review engaged a number of parents who are currently challenging the local authority and found the presumption that the majority of children with SEND should be educated within a mainstream school within their local community was largely accepted. What many of these parents lacked was confidence in that system. Breaking this cycle and building parental trust and confidence is multi-faceted but will be largely reliant upon building the inclusive capacity of mainstream schools to meet the needs of a growing number of children and young people with SEND, including children and young people with more complex needs. But, to do this we need to unlock the conversation around what the barriers and issues are and work together to build the solutions. This includes unlocking targeted funding and support.

The review identified a lack of collectively agreed vision for belonging and mattering and what this means for children and young people with SEND in Sheffield. Defining a common language will be instrumental in taking forward the conversation regarding inclusion.

The conversations regarding inclusion, belonging and mattering triangulate with the significant year-on-year increases in the number of children and young people with SEND who are excluded, suspended, or absent from school. Some children, young people and families

---

throughout the review talked about the trauma a lack of sense of place, belonging and mattering can cause. Clearly this is not a place where we want to be in Sheffield.

*“I felt very left out. Couldn’t go into school unless it was to sit my exams. It wasn’t fair. I didn’t feel welcome at all and I was very excluded.”*

The review identified that whilst many stakeholders and practitioners could identify some of the challenges related to exclusion and suspension and whilst there was discussion related to building the overall balance and mix of alternative provision, of most importance is unlocking the conversation regarding why children and young people with SEND are excluded in the first instance, how we build the capacity of schools to meet the needs of these children and the importance of re-integrating children and young people back into school.

Whilst the review identified that there was some positive work happening with this, future improvement work may wish to consider further critical reflection on exclusion specifically through the lens of children and young people with SEND. Using a Team Around SEND model or similar may support this. Within this work a critical reflection of reintegration and how we can further bridge partnership working across AP and mainstream settings, including parents and carers would also be beneficial.

A number of stakeholders engaged through the review reflected that the increasing narrative in relation to mainstream versus special school provision is unhelpful in shifting the conversation towards what we need to do to build the inclusive capacity of mainstream schools. Within this, having a more clearly defined enhanced mainstream offer in Sheffield was largely perceived as a means by which we could begin to rebuild the confidence of those parents and carers who are not confident that the existing offer can meet their child’s needs. Some stakeholders were, however, concerned that whilst much is communicated around building capacity, there is a lack of a collectively agreed strategy on what the enhanced mainstream offer in Sheffield should look like and how this can be funded, supported, and strategically built in the medium to longer term.

The strategic planning and commissioning for SEND is fundamentally important. The review found that the enhanced mainstream offer is not sufficiently developed; we need a clearer view of how this fits within the overall balance and mix of provision and the sufficiency strategy in relation to building the inclusive capacity of mainstream schools would benefit from further strategic development. The development of an enhanced mainstream offer, alongside building the inclusive capacity of all schools is fundamentally important within the context of the pressure on special school placements that has challenged the system for a number of years and increasingly so over the last two years. The review found that the Sufficiency Strategy will not address the pressures on special school places that will start the cycle again in the autumn term when phase transfer begins. Given the volume of pupils coming forward for specialist placement, alongside the burgeoning culture where special school placements are perceived as the only option open to an increasing number of parents and carers who are challenging the local authority on placement decisions, it is important that the partnership comes strategically together to address these challenges and to build parental trust and confidence in the system.

---

If the expectation is that SEND hubs and IRs are to be further expanded, we need a clear commissioning framework around this and a collective understanding across the partnership of the children and young people who should be supported through this enhanced targeted provision, a consistent and collectively agreed curriculum offer and clear expectations around how children and young people will be taught.

Of particular importance is the increasing use of hub provision across Sheffield. The review found that these hubs are evolving at a rapid rate with over 70 hubs now in operation across the city without any clear strategy around them, no clearly agreed expectations in relation to what children and young people should expect to receive when placed within such provision and how such provision is monitored and evaluated to ensure they are providing improved experiences and outcomes for children and young people. If the hub model is to be further expanded, then future improvement work may wish to consider the value of commissioning a specialist provider to oversee the strategic development of this provision. This should include as a preliminary first step an independent evaluation to understand the impact existing hub provision is having on improved outcomes for children and young people.

Underpinning the development of any new models must be a very clear understanding of the provision already in place at a local level. Sheffield has a broad ecology of provision. However, the review found that the Local offer is not sufficiently detailed to provide parents and carers with clear information in relation to what is available within local areas and the 'choosing a school for your child with SEND' element of the Local Offer is underdeveloped.

Within the context of future improvement work, it may be useful for the local authority to complete and publish a detailed overview of all provision (early years, school, post 16) available for children and young people at a locality level. This should not be regarded as an audit or review of the provision but what is available for children and young people with SEND at the current time. This information could be shared with schools, practitioners (across education health and care) and parents and carers. Settings should contribute to this audit by describing the provision they currently provide for children and young people with SEN (drawing on their SEN information reports), and, importantly, local health and care services should also be included.

This activity would not only support parents and carers to have a more detailed understanding of what is available locally but would support any future mapping and gapping work in support of sufficiency planning, any future analysis of travel to learn patterns and the significant pressures travel to learn patterns may be having on transport costs.

Whilst looking at educational responses and building the inclusive capacity of mainstream schools is clearly a key priority as schools and settings are fundamental and will continue to be fundamental in ensuring young people's SEN needs are identified and supported, developing the graduated approach to incorporate a more integrated education, health and care response will provide the most significant step change in Sheffield. Building hubs and IR's and other educational responses whilst important, will not do it alone. Nor should they. The review found that whilst there was clear thought being given to how community and primary healthcare services could be incorporated within localities, how we could drive the improved inclusive capacity of mainstream schools within localities and how we could work in a more

---

aligned way with the social care workforce and early help offer for children and families, there was no one overarching model for doing this. Throughout the review many stakeholders referenced the requirement to look not just at bringing services closer to children, young people, and families but how we do this in a more integrated way.

Future improvement work may wish to explore the value in developing integrated support hubs within each locality. These hubs could provide the platform for wraparound support closer to schools and settings and within the child or young person's local community. They could support the delivery of the schools graduated approach by co-ordinating outreach and other support from special schools, AP and other providers including local authority specialist support services, alongside (importantly) community and primary healthcare services and early help support. They could also potentially incorporate SENDSARS locality teams to ensure that the team are more visible at a locality level and support the co-ordination of locality SENDCO and other activities, including the potential introduction of a SEND advice line within each locality. A number of areas are now moving to advice lines to provide information, advice guidance and support to SENDCO's and other professionals as part of the graduated approach. Having a locality-based SEND advice line (supported by education, health, and care practitioners) would provide more local context and knowledge should such a service be introduced in Sheffield.

A family offer could also potentially be incorporated into the support hubs that builds upon the existing family hub model. The hubs could provide locality-based services and targeted support for families supporting children leaving care, provide support for particularly disadvantaged groups for example the Roma community, and provide information, advice, guidance and support for parents and carers who are struggling to access the support that their child needs. The hubs could also support the delivery of activities from the Parent Carer Forum and other agencies.

It is recognised that the development of integrated support hubs within each locality would be a significant programme of work to take forward, requiring investment and a strong tri-partite commitment from education, health, and care services. However, having a carefully constructed and collectively delivered one-stop-shop for practitioners, settings and families within each locality could potentially provide a platform for a significantly more integrated and graduated community-based approach in Sheffield.

Whilst stakeholders were clearly able to identify many of the pressures and challenges facing the SEND Partnership in Sheffield, many struggled to identify the key priorities for improvement at a system level. The review found that whilst there were multiple data sets, strategies, plans, and activities in play across the different agencies, these do not sufficiently triangulate improvement activity, nor are they always clearly aligned to the SEF.

The requirement for the partnership to come together to collectively identify and collectively own a shared set of improvement priorities that cut across this plethora of strategies and plans is important to ensure that improvement work does not take place in vacuums and is clearly targeted and aligned. Of equal importance is the need for system leaders to have strong strategic oversight of this work. A number of stakeholders engaged from the Improvement Inclusion Board reflected that we simply weren't clear enough in Sheffield in relation to how the

---

SEND partnership was using collective intelligence and analysis of activity to identify if we are achieving improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND and that the governance of this could be improved. The review found that many of the strategies and plans made overarching statements around improvement, but lacked the metrics, specificity and oversight needed to identify if improvements are being made and distance travelled. They also require a more detailed articulation, measurement and oversight of risk.

Whilst the review found a need for a collectively owned improvement framework for SEND with associated impact statements it also found that it will be fundamentally important that all partners work collaboratively together to agree not only on the key areas for collective improvement but on how activity will be measured. This should be a co-produced framework for improvement that is developed across the partnership and that triangulates the work that all partners are doing.

Within this work consideration should be given to the strategic use of data and intelligence. Data is currently collected for multiple purposes and despite improvements, the review found that not all SEND data across the partnership triangulates. Some datasets are unnecessarily complicated and are not always helpful in generating a system level view. The partnership needs to ask – what is this data in service of/why is it needed? Are we using the data intelligently to help us to improve? How are we keeping the data accurate and up to date? Some stakeholders referenced the culture of firefighting in SEND with a number of priorities being tackled at the same time, often as part of an immediate ‘fix’, and an absence of time to pause and reflect on whether those activities were having an impact.

Identifying the key priority areas for strategic focus and improvement at a partnership level and incorporating them into a single and collectively owned improvement framework may provide a useful step forward in terms of moving towards a more collectively agreed approach.

Priority areas of improvement could include:

- 1) Developing the graduated approach to incorporate integrated education, health, and care at a locality level.
- 2) Improving access to health services with a particular focus on neuro-disability pathways, access to CAMHS and access to speech and language therapy.
- 3) Improving the inclusive capacity of mainstream settings including an improved PfA and post 16 offer.
- 4) Improving the resilience, capability and capacity of the SEND workforce and developing common language and common purpose.

Whilst the partnership may, of course, identify different areas of priority the primary focus should be on developing a clear, collectively agreed and collectively owned framework for improvement.

The Public Sector Scorecard (PSS) may support the Partnership in terms of mapping, improvement, and measurement. It incorporates a systems approach which is ideal for use across organisational boundaries and is based on a culture of improvement, innovation, and

---

learning, and not a blame culture. The PSS focuses on outcomes, service user, strategic, financial and sustainability – the processes that lead to those outcomes, and the capability, behaviour, and organisational factors that are needed to support staff and processes.

*“It is soul destroying to just keep talking about the data. The conversation should be strategically what are we going to do about it”. (senior leader, Inclusion Improvement Board)*  
*“The Inclusion Improvement Board is ineffective. It isn’t strategic. We just get reports, but nothing is done on the back of them to improve things. I think SEND is in crisis and there’s not the bravery to pull it back.” (senior leader, Inclusion Improvement Board)*

Many school leaders also reflected that there was a lack of communication across the school network in relation to the improvement work taking place with a number reporting that it would be useful to have more frequent communication on key areas of priority focus for improvement and the key developments that are taking place. The Inclusion Improvement Board could potentially look to provide a termly update for schools and settings on key areas of activity to improve communications across the broader partnership.

Conversely, where schools and Trusts are themselves undertaking improvement work this could equally be fed back. Having some form of portal or platform for sharing information could provide a process for two-way communication on improvement and development activities. The review found some excellent examples of improvements that were being led by Trusts across the city, but this information is not routinely shared across the broader partnership which limits the ability to share that good practice more systemically.

The partnership may also wish to consider the systems and processes for sharing information and intelligence across the SEND Partnership at the level of individual children and young people. Many local areas have introduced SEND portals that support more intelligent information sharing, particularly related to those children with an EHCP. Officers and stakeholders reported throughout the review process the significant time and difficulties encountered in working across multiple systems and the difficulty in sharing information across different organisational level boundaries. Many felt that a systems review could be helpful in identifying if the partnership could work in a more agile way and use technology more effectively.

Whilst growth in SEND is indicative of the national trend, the review found that the number of pupils with an EHC Plan in Sheffield is increasing at a notable rate, having increased by 43.6% since 2020. Between 2022 and 2023 the rate of increase was 3% higher than the national average, having increased by 12%, when compared to the national average of 9% so we are seeing accelerated growth in the number of EHCP’s maintained by the local authority in Sheffield.

In line with the significant increase in the number of pupils with EHCP’s, the review found that Sheffield is experiencing significant increases in the number of requests for statutory assessment, the number of assessments being completed, and the number of new plans issued, all of which is putting significantly increased pressure not only on local authority statutory services but advice givers across education, health, and care. Since 2019/20 there

---

has been a 158% increase in the number of initial requests for statutory assessment, a 108% increase in the number of assessments being completed and a 148% increase in the number of new EHC Plans issued each year.

The review found there have, however, been some pendula swings over recent years in relation to the local authority's stance on whether to proceed with a statutory assessment and this is causing confusion across the partnership. Since 2020 Sheffield has progressed a significantly higher percentage of requests for statutory assessment when compared with the national average. In 2023 the national rate for the percentage of initial requests for assessment of an EHCP that were refused stood at 21.9% in comparison to a 5.4% refusal rate in Sheffield. It was also interesting to note through the review that over 50% of initial requests for assessment for an EHCP in 2022/23 were received from parents, which is again higher than the national trend.

The review found there are insufficient checks and balances in place to fully understand if the graduated approach has been used within some settings prior to a statutory assessment taking place. Whilst considerable information is provided as part of the assessment process, the review found this is not always fully and robustly considered and more scrutiny is required so we are confident that all reasonable steps have already been taken prior to progressing an assessment.

The review also identified significant variations in terms of what some settings provide by way of ordinarily available provision using the graduated approach and quality first teaching and whilst the Sheffield Support grid provides a common language and framework for decision making, it can sometimes be used as 'a race to the top of the triangle.'

Future improvement work may wish to consider the value in The SEND partnership agreeing a clear set of expectations around ordinarily available provision in Sheffield. This could be supported by the co-production of a clear statement around expectations and a collectively agreed charter that all settings can then sign up. This will begin to provide a consistency of expectations across the city and the opportunity to consider more strategically what additional support and challenge may be required to build mainstream capacity to support needs.

Any potential future focus around ordinarily available provision should, however, take into consideration the aspiration in the SEND and AP Improvement Plan around the intention to introduce new evidence based National Standards which will seek to establish what should be ordinarily available in mainstream settings. Potential national developments may therefore also seek to define expectations around ordinarily available so this must be considered within the context of any thinking around potential developments at a local level.

The review also identified that the Sheffield Support Grid may also benefit from review. Some stakeholders, including SENCO's reflected that some of the language used within it is now outdated. It may be timely to review the Sheffield Support Grid in line with any potential future development work related to defining clearer expectations around the provision that children and young people with SEND should ordinarily expect to receive.

---

When we consider the primary needs of all pupils with EHCP's in Sheffield, these follow the national trends with the highest levels of primary need being Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Speech Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) and Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH). We would expect to see this pattern in the majority of local areas. However, in all three areas of primary need, the review found that Sheffield has a higher than national average percentage of children within each of the three categories of primary need. In the period since 2017 there has been a 466% increase in the number of children with SLCN as their primary need, a 420% increase in the number with ASD and 323% increase in SEMH as their primary need. The review also found some interesting and sizeable shifts between SLCN and SEMH when children move from the primary into the secondary and post 16 phase. This is of particular importance to any future improvement and development work.

We know that many children and young people with SEMH have unidentified or unmet speech, language, and communication needs. The failure to identify and meet those needs can have a significant impact on those children and young people and can result in young people experiencing not just poorer educational, but social outcomes. For some children and young people this can be linked to higher exclusion and suspension rates and for some children and young people this can be linked with an increased likelihood of them coming into contact with youth justice services or the criminal justice system.

The review found that for children and young people with SEMH discussions regarding a young person's social, emotional and mental health were often focused predominantly upon their behavioural presentation and behavioural needs. Throughout the review process many settings identified behaviour as a barrier to learning but within some settings there was a lack of reflection on whether the young person may have underlying speech, language and communication needs indicating, at least in part, a lack of awareness or acknowledgement of behaviour as a form of communication and the importance of meeting the holistic needs of children and young people, including those children who may have more difficulty with emotional regulation or social interaction or who may be experiencing sensory processing or other difficulties.

Where speech, language and communication needs were referenced alongside the child or young person's SEMH needs, this was often caveated with the reflection that many children in Sheffield are struggling to access timely speech and language therapy services and that access to a speech and language assessment and therapist can be difficult. A number of settings indicated that they are independently commissioning their own speech and language therapy, at their own cost and without any additional funding in support of this but reflected that this is not sustainable in the longer term. Some settings also referenced that the speech and language therapy provision outlined within some EHCP's was simply not being delivered at all.

The difficulties some children and young people face in accessing speech and language therapy are evidenced within the high number of children who are waiting for 18 weeks or more for an initial speech and language assessment in Sheffield.

Whilst more detailed work is required to understand the shifts that are happening in Sheffield between the primary and secondary phase, it is likely that this work may find that further support is needed within some settings to increase awareness of less obvious expressions of SLCN, a

---

need to strengthen the understanding of the link between SLCN and SEMH and a need to increase awareness of the importance of focusing on the holistic needs of children and young people as opposed to the more dominant diagnosis. As is understanding behaviour as a communication of need. This also triangulates with the improvement work around exclusions and suspensions.

Importantly, for children and young people with SEMH who are receiving support from a SALT, it is important to recognise that these children and young people often require increased flexibility and time. It is concerning that the emerging model for SALT in Sheffield may not fully take account of this if cases are closed too prematurely. This should be the ongoing subject of discussion with the ICB.

Many stakeholders also reflected the significant challenges posed by a lack of access to timely CAMHS services. Again, the data related to waiting times for CAMHS further evidences this challenge for many children and families.

The discussions with stakeholders therefore drew out the recurring theme that many children and young people in Sheffield are waiting too long to access health services such as speech and language therapy, CAMHS and neuro-developmental pathways. As a result, their needs are not being met in a timely way and this is resulting in some children and families falling into crisis. However, as also identified there is a need to look at how we can strengthen the understanding of some schools and settings through more targeted training and support.

Whilst it is positive that the Integrated Care Board have identified SEND as a key priority in Sheffield many stakeholders reflected through the review that there needs to be more evidence of the ICB holding the system to account for the collective and individual risks and priorities for SEND. Many stakeholders were concerned that plans and actions have not resulted in a noticeable or sustained improvement to this situation. Further work is needed to understand and communicate better across the partnership local health commissioning intentions and the clear actions that will be taken to meet the delays in children accessing timely health services. This could focus as part of the Public Sector Scorecard as outlined above.

Despite these concerns the review did find that there were excellent working relationships between the DMO and senior local authority officers and that there had been some significant improvements made in the timeliness of health advice and other activities related to the assessment of children and young people as part of the EHCP process. This should be recognised as should be the Autism in Schools Project which was widely acknowledged as having real and measurable impact in participating schools.

Through the review, stakeholders were particularly keen to outline their concerns regarding SEND funding in Sheffield. There was a perceived lack of political awareness and proactive action related to what some stakeholders described as the crippling impact underfunding is having, particularly on mainstream schools and most importantly, the detrimental impact this is having on improved experiences and life chances for many children and young people with SEND in Sheffield. Many stakeholders reflected that the focus on the financial situation of the council and particularly the challenges related to the funding of transport and other local

---

authority services was significantly overshadowing the discussion and debate on the effective utilisation and allocation of high needs funding and the focus on improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND, too many of whom were now falling into crisis.

Considering how the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant is distributed within local areas should be a key and critical consideration in any review of the SEND landscape within local areas. Whilst a strategic review of high needs funding was outside of the scope of this review, it was found that there were very clear disparities and inequities in how funding is currently allocated through the locality funding model and that the locality funding model may be significantly masking the overall level of funding shortfall within mainstream schools.

The review found that the locality funding model in Sheffield operates very differently to the majority of local areas in that although the local authority holds a small amount of emergency targeted funding (exceptional needs funding) it does not allocate any of the additional top up funding needed over and above the notional and initial block funding provided to schools. This funding is managed within localities and locality panels take place to consider requests and allocate funding based on locally made decisions. Whilst local authority officers attend these panels, the review found that this does put the local authority significantly 'at a distance' from these children and young people and can make it difficult for the local authority to understand if young people with EHCP's are receiving sufficient funding to meet the provision outlined within their EHCPs and are achieving good outcomes in line with the funding that is being provided.

Given the different mechanisms for allocating the funding at a locality level, the different funding amounts received by children and young people with similar needs across different localities and the difficulties in measuring the impact the funding is having on improved outcomes, the review found that the locality funding model is not fit for purpose and there is a requirement for a more effective and equitable means of distributing high needs funding to be put in place, *at pace*.

The review has identified that significant work is now taking place to introduce a new method of allocating the funding via a Resource Allocation System that will be administered by the local authority. Whilst this is a positive step forward, the ability of SENDSARS to effectively manage a RAS and their capacity and capability to deliver this new system should be the focus of ongoing monitoring and review by senior leaders. The introduction of a RAS is likely to place additional pressure on SENDSARS at a time of already significant challenge. Similarly, it should of course be recognised that the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan indicates the potential to move towards a national framework of banding and price tariffs to meet the expectations set out in the National Standards and therefore further change may potentially be required over coming years should these aspirations come to fruition. The majority of stakeholders engaged throughout the review process reflected that the locality funding model is not fit for purpose and a simple banding system to allocate SEN funding in Sheffield would provide more stability and equity within the system.

At a more systemic level, future improvement work may wish to consider the significant impact the existing utilisation and distribution of the High Needs Block in Sheffield is having. There

---

is strong evidence to suggest that there is a *significant* underfunding of mainstream schools in Sheffield which the existing locality funding model is largely masking because some children with EHCP's are either not receiving any funding at all over and above the notional and initial funding provided to schools or are receiving insufficient funding to meet the provision outlined within their EHCP. A review of SEND funding is fundamentally important within the context of building the inclusive capacity of mainstream schools to manage the needs of an increasing number of children and young people with SEND, including those with more complex needs.

*"I have repeatedly asked for funding to support children with EHCP's and not had anything. We're now funding them from a deficit budget".*

*"The funding given to localities is not always linked to individual children"*

Whilst not all development work requires additional funding to be attached, indeed much of this work is related to vision, behaviours, values and practice, there are some significant areas, for example how we strategically build the enhanced mainstream offer in Sheffield (IR's, hubs, outreach, peripatetic and other services) that will require a high-level strategic consideration of the additional funding required to provide a more sustainable model for the future.

Funding should therefore be considered on two levels. The funding required at the level of individual children and young people with SEND and the funding required to strategically build capacity within the system.

A continued focus on SEND funding is critical in terms of building capacity, capability and resilience within the SEND system. The effective development of inclusive capacity in mainstream settings is reliant not only on consistent expectations about the support mainstream settings should offer in Sheffield, but on a clear offer of targeted funding and support to build the capacity of mainstream settings to deliver the support effectively.

In addition to mainstream schools, a number of special schools in Sheffield engaged proactively with the review process. This was important within the context of understanding the support that can be provided by special schools to the mainstream school community but also to understand the challenges and issues Special Schools are equally facing, many of whom are now over capacity. A number of Headteachers reflected that special schools are also under significant financial pressure as a result of increasing numbers and increasing complexity of need; that many schools are over capacity and that some schools are developing hub type models, but this would benefit from an overarching strategy around this.

The review found that special school sufficiency planning would benefit from further and more detailed development. The sufficiency strategy related to special schools quite rightly indicates that free school bids provide opportunity to secure new schools through new capital funding, providing a more long-term solution to the pressure on special school places and the authority has had some recent success with this, but future improvement work may wish to further develop the thinking in relation to where these schools should be located, the needs they will cater for and, importantly, the support that any new special schools can provide to mainstream schools across the locality.

---

Special schools are keen to support mainstream schools within their local area. This is positive. There is much specialist knowledge and expertise within special schools across the city that can be shared via outreach and other activity and more broadly via communities of practice or other mechanisms for sharing good practice. It is encouraging to note that some of this work has already begun.

The review also found that special schools are supportive of looking at creative solutions to free up capacity. One example of this might be to consider how the potential development of a personalised learning pathway offer in Sheffield could free up more post-16 special school places if some learners in special schools are placed on a personalised learning pathway in their third year of post-16 provision. Such a development would also support the work around developing an enhanced post-16 offer for those young people for whom the existing diet does not meet need. Potential pathways could include pathways to employment, pathways to independence and pathways to personal progress.

The review identified that a more defined step-up step-down approach in Sheffield may also be beneficial within any future work related to Special School sufficiency planning. As with children who benefit from a step up into special schools, some children in special schools significantly benefit from integration into mainstream schools, if the right support and transition arrangements are in place. The review found that this does not currently receive sufficient focus. This should, however, always be with the agreement of the young person, parent, carer and school and can be supported with dual registration until all parties are comfortable that a successful transition has been made.

The review also engaged a number of stakeholders across the children's social care workforce who reflected that education and care services are not always as sufficiently aligned as they need to be. There is no Dedicated Social Care Officer (DSCO) in Sheffield. Having an Officer in place will help to identify gaps and develop new ways of working, particularly in relation to pathways for children and young people 'not known' to social care (which was identified within the review as an area of particular challenge), support the quality and timeliness of advice and information provided into EHCP's, support more effective early identification of social care needs, analyse workforce development needs and develop the training offer for social care professionals including the introduction of SEND champions across the workforce. The review found that whilst officers have reassured the partnership that this gap has been recognised and will be addressed, it is taking too long to put this important role into place.

The review also identified that whilst significant work has taken place to improve the early help offer in Sheffield and more families are now engaging with it, the existing offer isn't appropriate for all families with some stakeholders reflecting that we need to consider how we target hard to reach families more effectively. Bringing more targeted early help provision into schools and settings and recognising that many families don't engage well with on-line services was felt to be important within this thinking.

---

*“Many of the children with SEND live with parents who need help and support. We have made 35 referrals for early help. Only 9 families have engaged. We need a better offer for early help for some of our hard-to-reach families”.*

Many stakeholders reflected through the review that looked after children and children leaving care with SEND have additional vulnerabilities and we need to further reflect on what that offer looks like for these children and families. This is particularly important given that we know that in Sheffield over a quarter of children and young people with EHCP's are known to social care.

*“As a parent I really struggle with Social Care understanding the depth of need within our family. We have adopted children with additional needs. We've been moved around different aspects of social care and it's silo'd working. There's no support post adoption. This is really important”*

The review also identified that the short breaks offer for disabled children and young people requires further development. Many parents and carers reflected through the review process that there are insufficient choices available for children and families and a paucity of provision. Many stakeholders did, however, recognise that the SNIPS offer in Sheffield was outstanding, although some families would benefit from more support from SNIPS.

*“Out-of-school activities and support in the holiday is very limited. These families desperately need help. SNIPS is fabulous but many of the children only get a couple of days support through SNIPS. It is important that these children and families get more support”*

The responses provided through the strategic engagement forums and the broader engagements with stakeholders have therefore highlighted that although some good progress has been made through the Accelerated Progress Plan and other partnership activity and these improvements should, quite rightly, be recognised and celebrated across the SEND partnership, stakeholders are clear (and consistently clear) that there remains room for improvement in relation to the arrangements, relationships, services, support, provision, and strategic thinking around SEND at a system level.

Given the significant importance of inclusion and SEND, future improvement work may wish to consider the value in reviewing current staffing structures to provide more capacity for strategic leadership and planning for SEND within the local authority. Whilst much work is taking place within both the SEND and Inclusion Services by hardworking officers, much of this work is, by necessity, taking place at an operational level and there are more opportunities to strategically triangulate the work.

The introduction of an experienced Assistant Director for Inclusion, SEND and Partnerships could provide additional capacity and oversight of both key service areas and support the work to continue to build an inclusive, self-improving school system and partnership in Sheffield, oversee strategic responses, build relational practice, deliver capability within the system, establish a performance management culture, and oversee any emerging improvement framework.

---

Despite the challenges, there is a real willingness and desire across the partnership to come to the table in a collaborative and focused manner and partnership working and relationships are improving. This is positive, as was the recognition shown by many stakeholders throughout the review that we need to move towards a more strengths-based approach. There is some outstanding practice in Sheffield and much to build upon.

An interesting aspect of the review and one which is fundamental in terms of driving forward future improvement and development work is that whilst much is known in terms of the numbers (the *how many*), what the review began to unlock was a more focused conversation around *why*. Why are we seeing significantly increased suspension and exclusion rates for children and young people with SEND in Sheffield, why are we seeing increasing levels of parental dissatisfaction, why are we focusing on the dominant diagnosis of a child or young person's needs as opposed to their more holistic needs, why are some children and young people travelling outside of their local community to access education and why despite much of the hard work and activity that is clearly taking place, are we not always joining the dots in terms of a more integrated education, health and care system?

Having a more detailed and collective understanding of *why* helps the partnership to unlock the conversation around, *so what are we going to do systemically about it?* What are we going to do strategically and differently? Continuing to unlock this conversation will undoubtedly build stronger responses in relation to how we begin to tackle some of the challenges and issues and unlock the targeted funding, resources and support needed to build a stronger and more resilient system for the benefit of children, young people and families in Sheffield.

The review explored many of the challenges and issues identified by stakeholders and examined what the data and intelligence is telling us. It has put forward a number of suggestions for areas of potential future improvement and development on the back of those findings, but unlocking the conversation must continue to be a key focus for the partnership.

Fundamentally the review found we need to develop a shared language around SEND in Sheffield that reflects and connects the vision, value base and behaviours. By doing this we will see more of a step change. A culturally different outlook and focus for SEND is required that moves the partnership towards a more collaborative and collectively agreed approach. This will be important in the success of any future improvement and development work, as will be:

- A collectively owned vision for children and young people with SEND that embeds the importance of belonging and mattering. This needs to be driven by leaders at a strategic level and delivered confidently by practitioners on the ground.
- The development of a collectively owned improvement framework that allows the SEND partnership in Sheffield to better understand distance travelled.
- Clearer expectations around what should be ordinarily available for children and young people with SEND in Sheffield.
- A more holistic view of children and young people's needs.

- 
- The strategic development of an inclusive offer that builds the confidence of parents and carers and that, importantly, moves the partnership towards a more integrated education, health and care graduated approach at a locality level.
  - The fair and equitable use of high needs funding and a recognition that targeted funding and support is required to build capacity and resilience within the system.

Improvement and development activity should be co-produced if it is to be collectively owned and embedded.

The majority of stakeholders engaged throughout the review process recognised that there is a need to change the narrative in Sheffield so that practitioners and partners are focused on building and delivering a better system for children and young people with SEND that focuses on the future, as opposed to focusing on the past.

Clear messaging from strategic leaders that we will work at this together, bring renewed energy and focus to improvements in SEND and drive a culture of collective ambition will help to reassure practitioners, build the confidence of parents and carers, and assist the SEND partnership in Sheffield to continue to unlock the conversation around SEND and bring forward creative solutions for systemic, as opposed to incremental change and improvement.

Ultimately accountability, support and challenge is the collective responsibility of all partners. It is important that all partners work together to address areas of weakness in the system and build a better future for children, young people and families.

---

The review was conducted by:

Michelle Allison Consultancy Limited  
[michelleallisonconsultancy@gmail.com](mailto:michelleallisonconsultancy@gmail.com)



Michelle Allison  
Consultancy Limited