Summary of consultations with parents / carers regarding how to present information about the Local Offer in Cambridgeshire

1.   Introduction

The Children and Families Bill will bring wide ranging changes to the SEN landscape, proposals are:

- a new single plan to replace the statement of special educational needs that will include Education, Health and Social Care
- school action and school action plus to be replaced by a new school based category, 'Additional SEN support'
- a local offer for parents
- a new SEN Code of Practice
- personal budgets for those with a single plan
- mediation for all parents going to Tribunal
- Individual Education Plans (IEPs) will cease

Local authorities, working with health, will be required to set out their 'local offer'. The local offer will enable parents, carers and young people to see more clearly what services are available in their area and how to access them. The offer will include provision from birth to 25, across education, health and social care. Information on what is available in the local offer will enable parents and young people to see more easily what services and support they can expect to access.

In order to help develop our local offer in consultation with parents initial events were planned at the beginning of 2013 which focused on what information parents / carers wanted and how this should be made available.

2.   Consultation methodology

In February, three face to face consultation events, one of which was in the evening, took place in Cambridge, Wisbech and Huntingdon. These were designed in consultation with parent representatives.
An online survey ran from March to June. This was publicised via the Parent Partnership Service, pinpoint, on the County Council website and sent to schools and settings. Specific groups such as traveller families were reached via support workers. 290 responses were received.

2.1   Consultation events – analysis

The three consultation events looked at the following questions:

- What information do you want to see on a SEND website?
- What information do schools and settings currently share with you? What information would you like schools and settings to share with you? How is it best for schools and settings to share this information with you?
- In your experience, what information do parents need when they first have concerns about their child?
- In what ways do you find information on services and support for your child?

The responses can be divided into the following broad themes:

Information
There should be clear information online (one stop shop) about support and services for children with special educational needs and disabilities. The information should be presented clearly and include eligibility, referrals, roles and responsibilities of professionals and contact information if more help is needed. Professionals and parents should have access to the same information to ensure transparency about services and support available. Awareness of the online information needs to be increased, not only with parents but also for practitioners working with children and families.

Parents / carers expressed a need for better information on support services; what is available, who is it for and how to access it. They would like information to be available in a wide range of places, schools, colleges, GPs surgeries which may help identifying who to contact when there are early concerns. Schools are a source of information for parents/carers and one of the first places help is sought. However the provision and availability of information is variable and needs to be more consistent across all schools. Printed information is important for those who have no internet access, and was seen as a valuable resource.

Parents / carers would like schools and settings to provide more information about their SEND provision, the roles and responsibilities of staff within the school, the training, experience and qualifications of staff working with their child and information about funding and how decisions are made. They would like more information on the support their child receives, their progress, how they can be supported when they move to the next stage of their education.

Communication
Parents / carers felt that there could be better communication from schools; through the home to school journal, meetings and regular information sharing sessions, both formal and informal. Parents would like more regular information about progress, earlier warning when there are concerns and a greater focus on positive rather than negative comments.

Better communication with professionals working with their child would also be welcome and ensure that information is shared rather than repeated many times. This should be through annual reviews in schools, clearly written reports from all professionals and follow up meetings when required.

Support
Information is needed on support and services available across all age ranges. There was a general feeling that information and support for those 0 – 5 was good but that there is less information for young people aged 14 – 25, particularly in relation to future options.

Parents / carers expect the people working with them to help them to understand what support and help they could access. They felt that schools, health, other professionals should signposting to relevant services and support outside their immediate area of expertise.

2.2. Online survey results – analysis

There were 290 respondents to the online survey. Almost 50% of respondents who answered question had a child (ren) aged 11 – 15.

Access to information

Majority of respondents – 89.7% would like to access information on the local offer online. 51.7% would like to access information from a leaflet with basic information and links to where to find out more. 50.7% would like to ask in school, college or other educational setting and 33.4% would like to access information from a public access centre.

Searching for information online

Respondents would like to search online mainly by need (75.2%), e.g. autism, ADHD. Searching by support or service needed (39.3%) was also important.

How information is presented online

This question asked respondents to rank in order of preference how they would prefer information to be presented online. The two most popular options (those ranked as first or second preference by the majority of respondents) are information contained within the webpage (43.1%) or summary information with downloadable documents for more detail (36.9%). In this question, the option that was least popular in comparison to the others was having the information provided on a web page and linked to FAQs (6.9%). This contradicts the feedback from the face to face consultations and may need to be explored further.

Information provided as a leaflet / hard copy

60.8% of respondents didn't feel that information should be printed as a leaflet. However of those 39.2% who did feel information should be produced as a printed leaflet, the main threads were;

- that there needs to be information available for those who have no or limited internet access
- information to cover key points – statutory assessment process, support from social care, transition between schools
- where to go for help, information on services and contacts, signposting to relevant sources of help

62.4% felt that it would be sufficient if information could easily be printed from a website

Access to information

Printed information should be available in a range of settings. Almost all respondents (96.6%) felt that it should be available in schools or other educational settings, health centres / GPs, Children's Centres and libraries.

Other suggestions include;

- other health settings, Child Development Centre, Pharmacists
- community centres
- professionals / practitioners
- voluntary / charitable groups

Many respondents commented that information should be provided more proactively; for example, given to parents at time of diagnosis, regular updates via email / letter.

Helpfulness of sources

When parents first had concerns about their child, the three most popular places they sought help were:

- professionals / practitioners
- educational settings
- online.

However, the most helpful were: other parents, family and friends and voluntary / charitable agencies. The least helpful places were; Children's Centres and schools and other educational settings. The fact that parents and carers found their first ports of call the least affective is a problem that will need careful consideration.

People accessed a range of support from personal contacts, family and other parents. However the comments highlight the need for practitioners / professionals to be able to signpost to other services support that might be outside their immediate professional scope.

Ease of finding appropriate information

62.2% of respondents identified that it had been hard to find information on support available for their child.

Difficulties were noted around:

- statutory assessment process, statementing, understanding support entitlement, provision in schools
- activities and groups across all ages
- finding information generally – too many sources, places, muddled picture
- information on support / help that may be available and how to access
- professionals / practitioners not being 'joined up' and not signposting
- information on conditions and support available

Information provided by schools and other educational establishments

There are high expectations of schools in terms of providing information in a timely and accurate manner.

Common threads were:

- improved communication about child's needs, difficulties, progress and how home can support.
- clear information about the statement process, how statements are monitored and support provided.
- diagnosis of SEN, what it means.
- support from other professional, voluntary groups, parent groups.
- entitlements, funding, benefits.
- communication between professionals and family.

Transitions

The information needed at times of transition fell into the following areas:

- details about the process at all times of transition
- timescales – making sure the process is started early enough
- roles and responsibilities – who will be at meetings, what is their role, number of meetings that might take place
- Support for those who have special educational needs but no statement

Information about transition should be presented clearly and simply with information about processes and support available. Flowcharts with timescales were mentioned as a way of presenting information clearly.

Improving child's experience of transition
There were wide ranging comments, some of which overlapped with those above. However the main themes were:
- better communication with child/ young person and parent explaining process of transition
- putting support in place early – for example a buddy, Teaching Assistant who can get to know child
- provide information in child's / young person's language to make it more accessible
- make sure everyone is aware of the process and the roles / responsibilities of those involved is clear
- work with parents and ensure they are included
- be clear about timescales and start the process early enough

Use of websites and usefulness
From the options provided, the Cambridgeshire County Council SEND web pages (61.7%) followed by Gov.uk (58.5%) were the most visited websites. Those ranked most useful were Gov.uk (61.8%), NHS Choices (58%) and our SEND (52.3%) pages. There appeared to be a lack of knowledge about our SEND pages as well as all the other sources of information in general.

Information on local services
The information ranked as most important:
- how to access a service (95.4%)
- eligibility criteria for services (95.4%)
- description (92.6%)
- costs (85.7%)
- location (84.3%)
- roles and responsibilities (74.2%)
- policies / guidance (60.8%)

Other information that would be helpful:

- timescales – when will things take place, an idea of what is realistic in terms of timescales
- links to similar services – what else might be useful or could be accessed
- information on when content was last updated
- interventions and measures of success – detail on what actually happens and how success is measured

Parents were asked about how we could help them find out what they don't know. There were a wide range of responses; some priorities to improve parents' knowledge of services and support were;

- pack of information at diagnosis/ beginning of concern with information on sources of support and links to more information
- better communication, linked with proactive communication
- helpline/someone to contact who knows the system

- keyworker/lead professional for every child
- ages/stages and what to expect when
- case studies
- who to contact/talk to if you have concerns

3. Thematic review of online survey
There were three overarching themes:
Awareness **-** What services are available to parents?
Accessibility - What are parents entitled to access?
Availability - How can these services be accessed?

These three key areas break down into multiple questions, usually in the form of 'who', 'when' and 'how' questions. Parents would like specific information about exactly what is available, who to contact to find out more, and when.

The responses indicate that parents want a great deal of clarity in terms of processes and support available. They also want transparency about services available, their provisions, and the timescales for this support.

The need to have a joined up approach between all professionals is very strongly expressed. Parents identified a discrepancy between things that they were 'given' as opposed to things they had to find themselves.

Specific changes:
Many parents specified a desire for a flow chart which can take them through the whole process of identifying SEND and providing support. This should include links within it, leading to basic information about a particular need, process or service.

The flowchart will need to have links in every section. Parents want to have short summaries of the key information for each area (e.g. a description of what a particular service can offer or how a particular condition is identified) followed by comprehensive lists of places to get more information. These lists should include services inside and outside the authority.

Parents are particularly keen to have an exhaustive 'who's who' of available services. The idea of a Frequently Asked Questions page is popular.

Many parents identified that they wanted to be able to access things in media other than online, and particularly that they wanted to be available to interact with a person (either verbally or by email) when they had a question. They want such a service available if they can't find what they are looking for.

4. Recommendations

4.1 In order to ensure that our local offer information is meaningful, meets statutory requirements and is appropriate for parents / carers further development work around information content needs to take place. A list of 'information stories' has been produced to consider against our current provision and identify and fill gaps.

4.2 Raising awareness

We need to be more proactive in our communications with parents / carers, rather than expecting them to find information. This is a common theme from the events and the online feedback. Examples of this include;

- a termly newsletter focussed on SEND (updates from teams, messages, information on national / local changes). PPS produce a newsletter that is popular with parents and has a large distribution network; perhaps a regular feature, 'update from the council' could be included.
- an email alert system that parents / carers can sign up to on the website
- greater use of the corporate twitter feed and promotion of this to parents/ carers

There is also a need to make sure that general information is available in a wider range of settings; making sure that schools, libraries, health settings etc have up to date information available to be taken away.

Supporting schools to provide more information is also vital. Many teams already do this; ensuring schools are equipped to answer parent queries or signpost to relevant sources. Improving awareness of SEND information to practitioners and schools is vital. Workforce development should be considered to increase knowledge of local offer and information sources. Putting a factsheet / list of sources for schools updating regularly could be considered. A similar project to provide information for GPs is being developed. Using the requirements of the local offer could ensure more consistency of communication.

Supporting practitioners to make links to information outside their immediate area of expertise through training and awareness raising of sources. The role of the lead professional is key in supporting parents to access support, advice and information.

4.3 Online content

The structure and content of the SEND web pages need to be reorganised to take into account;
- requirements of local offer in terms of providing information
- parental feedback on preferences for searching and finding information and information needed
- information development generally, for example the transitions project, Autism pathway
- search engine optimisation

The content needs to be linked together around need and the processes / interventions that people are likely to experience; understanding parents / carers customer journeys is key to this.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are a recurring theme in the feedback. This is an area that needs further investigation. We need to understand the questions that parents / carers have and ensure that these are answered in the online information. Presenting the information to ensure that these issues are covered and using navigational tools to improve access should meet needs without presenting a list of discrete FAQs.

4.4 Information development

Whilst there is agreement that the local offer will be available online, there is evidence from the consultations that printed information is also valued. Working with practitioners, it

is important that the development of printed information is considered. A particular need seems to be around diagnosis or first concerns with suggestions of a brief introductory leaflet, flowchart being popular. The associated cost implications would need to be considered.

Improving the Family Information Directory to include the range of information required and ensuring that it is maintained and developed is essential to the success of ensuring families are aware of services and support available.

4.5   Workforce development
Practitioners across the local authority, health and education as well as in the VCS support parents in a wide variety of ways. Providing training on the local offer information, sources and signposting, would offer them further support and ensure that families receive information at relevant times.

4.6   Local offer from schools and settings
The development of the education local offer and raising awareness of responsibilities of education providers is being led by Teresa Grady across maintained nurseries, primary schools, secondary schools and post-16 providers. The local offer requirement on schools and settings and the LA will ensure that parents / carers are better informed about the support available for all children and young people with SEN.

4.7   Access to support
A large theme across the consultations is the importance of contact information. The role of the lead professional is key here, however not all families will be able to access this support. The provision of a telephone helpline / common entry point to help understand information, seek further detail or referral to further support is something to explore. The existing FIS and CI helplines do not currently receive many queries around SEND. The PPS call line is popular and receives approximately 4000 calls per year.

Some suggestions around a chat / online forum facility were received. This may be better served outside a local authority context, where comments can be freely shared with other parents/carers and mutual support provided. However, the provision of an online web chat service could be explored in consultation with the contact centre. This could be additional to the phone/email service.

5.   Next steps

5.1 Information development
Our SEND web pages will be developed further to ensure that we provide information on our local offer in the ways that parents / carers have told us they prefer.

We are working with our web development team on improving the navigation and structure of the SEND webpages, taking into account parental feedback and search engine optimisation. The content will be developed in discussion with relevant teams and in liaison with families; bringing together information around need and the processes / interventions that people are likely to experience.

Whilst there is agreement that information on our local offer will be available online, there is evidence from the consultations that printed information is also valued. Working with practitioners, it is important that the development of printed information is considered. A

particular need seems to be around diagnosis or first concerns with suggestions of a brief introductory leaflet, a flowchart being popular. The cost of this would need to be considered.

We are improving the Family Information Directory to include the range of information asked for. Ensuring that it is maintained and developed is essential to give families the opportunity of finding out about services and support available.

We also need to find out more about how young people, particularly those aged 16 – 25, want to find information as they move towards independence.

5.2 Schools and settings – developing their local offer

The development of the education local offer and raising awareness of the responsibilities of education providers is underway. This work includes maintained nurseries, primary schools, secondary schools, Academies and post-16 providers. Work is progressing to develop a framework to support providers to produce their local offer and make it available to parents / carers.

5.3 Workforce development

Practitioners across the local authority, health and education as well as in the VCS support parents in a wide variety of ways. Providing training on the local offer information, sources and signposting, would offer them further support and ensure that families receive information at the right times.

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