

Solihull Local Area – SEND Peer Challenge Report

Held: 17th & 18th January 2023

Context

Solihull is one of the least deprived local authority areas in the region (ranked 32 out of 152 English upper tier Local Authorities [LAs]). Data shows that:

- 24% of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM)
- 22% of pupils live out of borough
- 5,327 are at SEN (Special Educational Needs) Support
- 2,176 children have an EHCP (Education, Health and Care Plan)
- 43% children and young people (CYP) with an EHCP attend special schools
- 33% CYP with an EHCP attend mainstream schools

Solihull commissioned this SEND and Inclusion Peer Challenge in order to test and corroborate their own understanding of their strengths and areas for development, based on analysis of the data and evidence of progress, outcomes and the lived experiences of children and young people experiencing SEND/additional needs.

Solihull has agreed to work with the DfE to tackle escalating costs in SEND, within the Delivering Better Value (DBV) national programme, to which 54 other LAs have been invited to join. A further 10 LAs are part of the Safety Valve LAs, which have still greater deficits or costs. Solihull is aware of the potential for escalating costs to rise significantly without appropriate action, and shares information with partners regarding this risk and the mitigations to reduce such.

Methodology:

Over two days, a team of four SEND leaders from within the West Midlands challenged the area, with three Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs) focused on:

“Right time, right place, right outcome”

KLOE 1 Graduated Response to meeting additional needs

KLOE 2 Impact of SEND arrangements on children & young people & Waiting Lists in Health

KLOE 3 Transition arrangements for young people moving into adulthood

Over 125 people were interviewed from a range of backgrounds- parent/carers; young people; practitioners and leaders from the Solihull Integrated Care Board (ICB); health providers/health commissioners/school leaders including SENCOs/leaders and practitioners from children’s and adult social care/leaders and practitioners from the SEND and Inclusion services within the Local Authority (LA)/leaders and practitioners from employment services/Voluntary & Community Sector (VCS) providers.

Peer reviewers met with focus groups of practitioners, leaders and parent/carers and young people over the two-day challenge period. In advance of the meeting, key documentation and information was sent to establish the evidence base for the key lines of enquiry,

Findings

Initial presentation

Solihull made a succinct and evidence-based presentation at the commencement of the two-day challenge process, which set out a clear and coherent vision for the next steps in Solihull’s Inclusion delivery programme for SEND arrangements, based upon evaluation of evidence. This clearly indicated that the area use a wide range of data and narrative (lived experiences) to set out their strategy and develop a collegiate partnership approach to implementation of a variety of actions and activities to support the embedding of a local partnership approach to inclusion.

The presentation and supporting documentation for implementation of the Inclusion strategy¹ indicated a clear understanding of both the current strengths and areas of development, which the Solihull partnership is committed to delivering in the borough, alongside current data and experiences of families and young people experiencing SEND. The Local Authority appear to be the main driver of these initiatives, though recognise that partnership, codesign and coproduction, are the pillars upon which the strategy will be embedded across the system. The ICB was put into place in July 2022, though many aspects of commissioning and provider arrangements remain similar to the CCG era. The style of leadership within the LA inculcates a distributive leadership across the borough, enabling key partners such as schools, to take their place in leading within their sector.

SECTION 1

Key Line of Enquiry- KLOE 1 Graduated Response to meeting additional needs

Strengths

1.1 Head Teacher leaders from the school Collaboratives lead the developments in inclusive practice within the borough, alongside key LA SEND leaders. Head Teachers told us that the LA had worked hard to coproduce SEND solutions with schools. One

¹ Solihull’s Strategy for Inclusive Education 2022-2025
Solihull’s Additional Needs Strategy 2022-2025
Solihull SEND SEF January 2023

Head Teacher remarked that we are all now *'on the same page,'* regarding solutions focus.

This has included developing an Inclusion Strategy, and Inclusion Audit tool, which is being piloted before wider roll out in February. In addition, a new Solihull Standard for school inclusive practice will also be developed to embed implementation.. This has been a response within the borough to two factors- concerns raised by SPCV about the failure of some schools to truly welcome and place children with SEND (both at SEND Support and with Education, Health and Care Plans [EHCPs]) and from the Statutory SEND Assessment team, a large number of annual refusals to place following placement 'consults'. This approach is galvanizing the inclusive practice and commitment in the borough, and as a sector-led strategy, has the enormous benefit of school leaders promoting and inclusive practice, benefitting children with SEND and other vulnerable groups

- 1.2 The SPCV has worked hard to develop their knowledge base and understanding of SEND and inclusion practices, both within the borough, and through taking a leading role in the regional Parent Carer Forum (PCF) developments, linking to the National Network of Parent and Carer Forums (NNPCF). This commitment to understanding not only their own child/ren's additional needs, but also the strategic and operational factors affecting larger groups or cohorts of children and young people, is now having a significant impact upon their ability to act as a key strategic partner and a leader of the transformation approaches within the borough
- 1.3 Young people in specialist and further education (FE) provisions are optimistic about their current provision and their preparation for adulthood experiences. Most of the young people that we met had taken up membership of Our Voices Heard, which now has over 130 members, and has worked within 12 schools in the last year. Members of Our Voices Heard that we met were proud of their roles as Ambassadors for young people within the borough, and this had a huge positive impact upon their self-confidence and motivation
- 1.4 The AP provision had produced strong GCSE, vocational and next steps outcomes for learners.
- 1.5 The Solihull Additional Needs Strategy was written with and for children and young people in the borough. The group developed a series of "I" statements- such as "I can see that everyone is working together to help me make my life better..." which are included within the SEND SEF as part of the measurement of progress across the area, and which enable leaders and practitioners to focus upon the current lived experiences of children and young people experiencing SEND
- 1.6 Toolkits and web resources which underpin the effective implementation of the Inclusion strategy are being put in place to support practitioners in early years settings, schools and colleges, to develop their graduated response, alongside the school

Collaboratives this has the potential to develop a community of practice across the borough

- 1.7 A refreshed Early Years strategy, harnessing the Area SENCO early years expertise within the borough, is focusing resources and de-escalation of need in the right arena, with the potential of the Family Hub offer for Solihull also addressing the concerns regarding assessment and identification of need in order to offer the right support in a timely way for families of young children, which can alleviate need and enable good progress. A small number of nurseries and private EY providers are offering an inclusive early years provision, which could be modelled across the sector
- 1.8 Professional development and the development of workforce skills within the SEND/Inclusion arena is making some impact not least through the work of the SISS team within the borough, though not all schools sign up to access training and development
- 1.9 The new developments in Short Breaks with a refresh of the leisure activities available to families is being worked on with the SPCV
- 1.10 The EHC Assessment team has made huge strides in timeliness of assessment for new plans, developing new templates to support advice givers, and tackling the backlog of Annual Reviews- the challenge now is to continue to improve the quality of all EHC and coordination between agencies to ensure timeliness of appropriate advice for plans within the borough. SEND Sufficiency is a strength, with 19% more places and a graduated approach with Additional Resourced Provisions (ARPs), increased special school places and a new free school – Alternative Provision (AP) has developed across all phases and outcomes are increasingly positive; a new Quality Assurance (QA) process is in place for ARPs. The borough is aware of the larger proportion of EHCPs within the special estate and the focus upon Inclusive schools and an Inclusive Solihull Standard is one aspect of the longer-term strategy to develop mainstream capacity in order that fewer children require special school or ARP provision, if needs can then be met within mainstream schools

Areas for development

- 1.11 A small but significant group of school leaders are committed to inclusion and inclusive practice, but we heard from parents and carers about some schools which do not welcome and include children with SEND, with children with SEND representing at least half of the children permanently excluded from school in the autumn term of 2022. The Heads leading the Inclusion Audit and Solihull Standard work, hope that their efforts will result in more and more schools becoming more inclusive and developing their graduated approach

- 1.12 Whilst 'Re-culturing' has commenced it is not consistently established across all partners within the partnership- we met many supporters of a more inclusive culture in Solihull but others are yet to be won over by the refreshed approach- which will take time to build in an environment with an unclear national SEND and Inclusion strategy, as we await next steps following the SEND Green Paper of 2022
- 1.13 An analysis of the impact of less inclusive schools has been scrutinized by the Delivering Better Value (DBV) programme with the Department for Education (DfE), a voluntary programme which the LA signed up to
- 1.14 We were grateful that schools provided examples of the SEN Support plans for children at that stage, as required by the SEND Code of Practice 2015. This approach advises an Assess/Plan/Do/review approach within SEN planning. Whilst much thought and planning had gone into documents which we saw, it was clear that holistic approach to assessment and accurate identification of need was neither standardised, nor consistent across providers, along with less clarity regarding the review or evaluation stage of assessing the impact of previous assessments and primary interventions. Some settings had employed numerous cycles of APDR being used without evaluation. This aligned with concerns that we had of the accuracy of mainstream school assessments of the primary needs of children and young people, where the MLD (Moderate Learning Difficulty) category was still in use, though diminishing; and where a large proportion of children at SEN Support were seen to have SEMH- Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs (22% primary need reported in SEND 2 data 2021-22 academic year vis a vis 16.6% English average). The proportion of children identified with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) was 6.3% lower than the English average. There is a significant disparity between identified SLCN in the primary school phase (28.4%) and secondary phase (7.9%). Various speculative reasons for this disparity were suggested to us but would need deeper investigation for a more definitive response.
- 1.15 We had a sense of SEND Support APDR as a stepping-stone to Statutory Assessment rather than a stage in its own right (CoP)
- 1.16 Solihull was inspected in October-November 2022 for children's services (ILACS) and judged inadequate. A new Improvement plan and new leadership team is now in place, and it is therefore timely to consider the interaction between early help and SEND- parents, carers and schools that we met identified a weakness in the contribution of social care to the graduated pathway and within statutory assessment, which the new team are clearly committed to improving
- 1.17 Whilst Short Breaks are being refreshed, they are not yet evident within the graduated response for families or schools/settings

- 1.18 Families and providers told us that health service responses are delayed and waiting times so lengthy, that they either see an escalation of need for the child or families commission independent assessment and support
- 1.19 Communication with parents/carers is inconsistent- whilst strategic engagement with SPCV is a real strength, partnership with individual parent/carers could be strengthened within support planning pathway

Recommendations

- 1.20 Consider person centred workshop/s for school SENCOs to improve the consistency of practice in hearing voice as the starting point of a strengths-based approach to assessment and planning (in Assess, Plan, Do, Review cycle), building upon the successful relaunch of the SENCO networks, alongside considering a possible model of Collaborative Lead SENCOs, possibly accessing some of the DBV resource, to strengthen the community of practice and skills of SENCOs across the Borough. A similar model exists in Nottinghamshire, where they would be happy to share their approach. Contact isimon.ray@nottsc.gov.uk Pat Bullen, the WM SEND LA Network Coordinator could also offer person-centred training free of charge to Solihull schools or cascade training to LA teams pat.bullen@sdsa.net
- 1.21 Consider developing a template for children, young people and their parents/carers to make on-going contributions to the Annual Review cycle and within the SEN Support planning process- this could build upon the successful developments within the EHC Assessment Service focusing upon pupil voice
- 1.22 Consider using the refreshed Local offer, when it is available, to show short film clips of the good practice that we heard about in some schools, and parental views of the most recent and more effective SEN Support and EHC plans
- 1.23 Consider how best to approach individual schools which may not attend HT collaboratives nor SENCO networks- for example, Derbyshire uses a SEND Data Dashboard (available from the regional team or contact alex.howlett@derbyshire.gov.uk) to hold a school improvement conversation – this would also address the rising number of school permanent exclusions within the borough this academic year, and could include workforce development and support to the school directly or from within the Collaborative

- 1.24 Work with providers (schools and VCS) to identify the contribution of early help within the graduated approach, alongside SPCV, setting out information within the Local Offer. Offer the nasen Level 3 training to EY providers in the borough

SECTION 2

KLOE 2- Impact of SEND arrangements on children & young people and waiting lists in Health

Strengths

- 2.1 We found evidence of improved communications at practitioner level- EPs/locality assessment officers- Meet the Team approaches are valued by providers as they forge closer links with staff
- 2.2 We saw creative examples of providers flexibly supporting children and young people- such as SOLAR and therapies shared examples- such as flexible weekend support for SEMH needs
- 2.3 The young people met by reviewers expressed positive views about their lived experiences growing up in Solihull, the Our Voice is Heard group valued their membership
- 2.4 Independent travel gives young people a sense of achievement
- 2.5 Some young people have become ambassadors for others in their schools
- 2.6 College students told us about living healthy lives and knew how to protect and care for their health and well-being
- 2.7 There is a real appetite to develop joint pathways and standard operating procedures across the partnership which could result in both longer term embedded success and some short term 'wins' for children and young people to access the right support at the right time

Areas for development

- 2.8 Waiting times for autism/neurodiversity are lengthy- 88 weeks at the time of the peer challenge- and facilitate the deterioration of conditions and the needs of children and young people. Alongside this, such gaps then affect para-professionals and services, as they must then strive to meet unassessed autism or unmet needs. SOLAR was also cited as difficult to access and some schools and parents noted the 'gap' between ordinarily available support in schools and SOLAR, with a large gap between such services, resulting in unmet need- this could indicate the SEMH numbers which schools report are indeed more accurate than reviewers initially estimated
- 2.9 Schools and families told us about their frustration at waiting times and workforce gaps in a range of therapies, particularly speech and language therapy (SALT). Parents and carers, alongside schools, were buying in their own private assessments and therapy interventions
- 2.10 Parent/carers expressed concerns at their access to social care support- we heard this too from schools and service providers in respect of early help
- 2.11 Schools understand the current pressures upon children's social care due to national attention and inspection outcomes, but they now want to see development to strengthen the social care pathway aligned to both SEND Support and EHC assessment
- 2.12 Partners are also impatient for joint commissioning to deliver both a strategy for joint commissioning, and operational commissioning

Recommendations

- 2.13 Develop the locality data dashboard to share with areas, and consider an individual 'scorecard' for schools to facilitate a structured conversation regarding inclusion
- 2.14 Consider work with the regional Young Researchers and University of Derby to develop a more cohesive strategy for young people's coproduction, which builds upon existing pockets of good practice and weaves this together across the area- we gave the example of the collective Drop Box used by all partners in one local area, from the ICB, LA and VCS, to collect the views and suggestions of young people – in order that we do not keep asking the same questions from different services, but have a sound body of evidence about the views and aspirations of our young people and children

- 2.15 Staff turnover- some areas have a clear SEND induction online training for new staff and could share this with Solihull, as parents that we met felt that this would consolidate consistency of practice including knowing the legal duties of SEND
- 2.16 Consider the implementation of a joint commissioning strategy and joint commissioning operational plan- such as Telford's SEND JSNA and joint commissioning plan- contact natalie.bevan@telford.gov.uk or the Nottinghamshire commissioning action plan, which features coproduction and codesign within the plan- contact [Christopher.1.jones @nottsc.gov.uk](mailto:Christopher.1.jones@nottsc.gov.uk)
- 2.17 Consider using LA brokerage and consider opportunities for building additional capacity, at zero cost, to support schools 'on the ground' with the considerable challenges, that Head Teachers informed us they were facing with managing student behaviour, mental health conditions and attendance. One example of such capacity building would be to offer school-based placements for clinical students in training. There are several examples of local areas successfully brokering placements for OT, SaLT, Music, Art, Drama therapy, CYP and Mental health nursing students and student social worker placements.

KLOE 3- Transition arrangements for young people moving into adulthood

Strengths

- 3.1 A new coproduced EHC template appears to be strengthening a focus on SMART outcomes and embeds Preparing for Adulthood (PfA) within planning
- 3.2 A focus upon a refreshed Five-Day offer has the potential to reduce out-borough independent specialist college placements
- 3.3 67% of Annual Reviews for those leaving school were completed by 31st March with a majority accessing the placement of their choice- though still a way to go, this is above current national trends
- 3.4 The developed Employment & Skills offer is supporting young people into employment – including support for parents to navigate the pathways, though the basis of the European funding will end this year, which requires some creative approaches to maintaining this positive approach

3.5 There are currently 17 Supported Internships (SIs) in progress to placement in Solihull, and the borough has signed up to the national SI programme supported by NDTi (National Development for Inclusion)

3.6 121 EHC Plans were ceased in 2021- with 42 young people entering direct employment

3.7 Two new CC/CHC transition nurse posts are currently out for recruitment to promote navigation between children's and adult health services. These posts will provide support across Birmingham and Solihull.

3.8 Colocation of children's and adult social care has strengthened communication, partnership and liaison. A Transition team now exists to focus on appropriate pathways, assessment and support

3.9 Programme for young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) and for 15+ students, ensure targeted approaches for different needs

3.10 Our Voices Heard has over 113 members and student participation groups in 12 schools, and has made a powerful impact, which we think will grow even further in the coming years

3.11 Programme for young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) and for 15+ students, ensure targeted approaches for different needs. The 15+ refers to those who are at risk of NEET.

Areas for development

3.12 Sharing data and information across LA and health systems remains challenging- whilst the Liquid Logic is now used across children and adult directorates in the LA, enabling improved access and speed of response to assessments and reports, health does not share this. Manual systems are developing, but require further development across three provider trusts

3.13 Continuing Care/ Continuing Health Care (CC/CHC) and tripartite funding agreements are more challenging and less agreement is evident across the partnership of what constitutes a complex health need

3.14 The Local Offer has limited information for PfA and post-16 pathways, not reflecting some of the positive work in the borough by partners, such as the Employment and Skills Local Offer

3.15 There is more potential to develop a wider-outcomes focus within PfA/post-14 EHCPs to enhance Careers Education. Information and Guidance (CEIAG) , particularly to prepare for independence and friendships/community inclusion , which are the areas most often cited by the young people that we heard from

Recommendations

3.16 Develop the Local offer to enable young people and parents/carers to find information regarding transition, including hearing from Our Voices Heard about what young people want and need from the site

Consider a Family Leadership approach, such as developed in Leicester City to prepare parents/carers of young people, specifically attending special provisions, to prepare for the PfA and transition pathways- modules available from the regional SEND team, working with SPCV to develop

3.17 Compare CC/CHC with regional neighbour numbers in Midlands NHSE ICSs in order to include Joint/tripartite funding arrangements and to consider gaps in length of time to assess and decide

3.18 Consider how person-centred annual reviews and practices can inculcate PfA independence and planning for friendships/community inclusion across the whole system, for example accessing www.skillsbuilder.com in settings, schools and colleges

3.19 Develop information systems to promote the encrypted sharing of data regarding children and young people between LA and health advice givers

Summary:

Solihull has used data and the lived experience narratives of families, to understand both the strengths and the areas which require further improvement and development across systems, to improve the outcomes and lives of children and young people experiencing SEND. The LA has led particularly on this, with a 'distributive leadership' approach, which understands that true improvement across the complex system of SEND and Inclusion requires many hands- or the village analogy which the Additional Needs Strategy defines.

SPCV, Our Voices Heard and school HT Collaborative leads are real ambassadors for this improvement and change programme. Changes in health systems, since the Health and Care Act 2022, may have hindered the partnership of the recently formed ICB. With the ICB and health providers playing their full part, Solihull could make huge strides against its intended vision for inclusion.

There is a 'lag' in the experiences of some families, as the area seeks to address a backlog of ARs and less well developed EHCPs from the inherited past, and families will need to maintain confidence that this is being addressed and reported, through clear and frequent communication to them.

Working with schools has begun a refresh, and schools that we met evinced confidence in the leadership of the LA to facilitate change. It is imperative to engage with all providers across the area, to ensure more individual coproduction and positive satisfaction in the outcomes and experiences of children and young people experiencing SEND.

Pat Bullen, WM SEND LA Peer Network lead and Lead Reviewer for the Solihull SEND Peer Challenge

Other team members:

- **Conrad Bourne**, Whole School SEND West Midlands Deputy Regional Director and Director for SEND, The Mercian Academies Trust
- **Sarah Thomas**, Shropshire Parents and Carers
- **Katrina McCormick**, Senior Programme Commissioner, Black Country ICB
NB a fifth reviewer who is a Designated Social Care Officer, had to pull out of the challenge the day before we came to Solihull, for personal reasons