

Summary of the SEND Enquiry Day held on 15 January

On 15 January 2019, four councillors who chair Dorset County Council's scrutiny committees held an enquiry day to specifically look at services for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Scrutiny committees look at issues affecting local people and can make recommendations to the council based on its findings. The purpose of the day was to speak with small groups of school staff, parents/carers and professionals working with children and families to look at:

- the impact of changes to funding and the way SEND services are delivered
- if the council has made progress with its improvement plan following its last inspection in 2017
- if there are any issues the council's Cabinet might wish to raise with the Shadow Executive of the new Dorset Council

The parent group included parents whose children have an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP). They represented the complete age range (0-25) and had experience of different provision, including:

- special school
- mainstream education
- home education
- out-of-county provision

Here's a summary of the key points raised and proposed actions that councillors would like to be considered.

Getting the right support

- Parents felt that there aren't clear sources of support and guidance to help them understand the EHCP process and how they can get the right support for their child.
- All agencies need to be aware of their role in drawing up a plan, and parents need to have a clear understanding of what they can expect from each agency.
- Members of the group felt that diagnoses, particularly those requiring an input from health, often take too long to get started or completed. This needs exploring with the Clinical Commissioning Group and questions were raised around whether parents can receive any support while waiting for a final diagnosis.
- Parents asked that staff (both from the council and in health services) should use the same guidance notes and that everyone's role in the process – both professionals and parents – should be clearly outlined.
- Dorset County Council needs to build trust with parents who have felt let down by the system

Managing the EHCP process

- Parents said they want to be more involved as the EHCP is being put together so they fully understand what's happening and can make points earlier (rather than at an appeal)
- The language of the EHCP should be simpler and clearly state expectations both for and of the parents

- More needs to be done to help parents understand the banding system – including how it's paid for and what it delivers
- How the outcomes in the EHCP are identified and progress measured should be clearer to parents and students. If there are changes to be made, these should be shared immediately with parents and students
- The review process could be improved by involving parents and other agencies more

Travel arrangements

- Communications between all parties involved with travel arrangements needs to improve – especially how changes and absences are dealt with.
- Parents asked if there's any help that can be provided for children to enable them to participate in everyday after school activities?
- Some parents wondered if that, if their children share transport, could there be an opportunity to meet with the parents of the other children if they would like to?
- The length of journeys for vulnerable children should be limited wherever possible

Financial concerns

All groups had concerns about the total funding available to deliver SEND services, particularly in the High Needs Block, and the staffing needed to manage the growth of EHCPs effectively.

Work in progress

Officers from SEND, IT services and the communications team are working together with the local parent carer forum (known as Dorset Parent Carer Council) to improve the way families receive information and engage with the service. Here's some of the work that's already underway:

- The SEND team have been pulling together an email contact list for parents to allow the council to communicate quickly and more frequently with parents
- A new e-newsletter for families who have children with special educational needs and disabilities has been introduced. The first edition went out on 4 Feb. [Parents can sign-up here.](#)
- Young people have been involved in a range of developments - including a SEND young people's forum.
- Access to the [Local Offer](#) is now on a new platform, rebranded with the help of parents and young people. This will continue to be improved using feedback from parents [- here's where parents can give feedback.](#)
- The SEND team are reviewing their paperwork to ensure it is in plain English and that forms are easier to complete, asking only for relevant information.
- Officers are working with various groups of parents and young people to inform a re-design of the EHCP
- EHCP review processes are being tackled jointly

Next steps

The councillors who led the enquiry day are committed to taking this forward. They've shared their findings with Sarah Parker, Executive Director of People - Children, for the new Dorset Council, as well as officers in both the SEND teams and Dorset Healthcare.

They have also shared their findings with councillors who sit on the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board. The group has pulled together a list of recommendations that they feel should be considered by members of Dorset County Council's Cabinet and the Shadow Executive of the new Dorset Council.

They are recommending that:

- the baseline children's services budget should be raised to meet the needs of the SEND students and families.
- the new Dorset Council includes an induction programme for councillors around SEND to make sure new councillors have a greater understanding of the issues faced by parents, schools and the services involved. It could also consider setting up a councillor-led group that regularly monitors SEND services, including meeting regularly with users of the service.
- the new council, working in partnership with the NHS, should consider what capital investment could lead to considerable savings by providing more suitable learning and living accommodation locally.
- IT services should look at how databases held on SEND students across agencies – including the council's SEND team, social care, school transport and NHS, can work better with each other.
- An in-depth review of SEND transport is carried out - including how families are identified as being eligible for personalised travel budgets
- The SEND team works with the communication team to produce a plan to help deal with issues raised at the inquiry day and that progress against that plan is reviewed by the new council after six months

Dorset County Council's Cabinet and the Shadow Executive will receive the findings from the enquiry day and the recommendations at their meetings in March. They will be asked to discuss these.