

## **Family Voice, Family Chat Sessions, November 2017**

### **Subject: SEN Support and EHC Plans**

Family Voice Norfolk works in co-production with Norfolk County Council (NCC), Norfolk Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and Commissioning Support Units, education providers, Voluntary Community Services, and other partners to influence the planning, design and commissioning of local services so that they better meet the needs of families of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Part of Family Voice's contribution to this comes from its team of parent carer representatives, who represent the views of families. In order that the experiences of as wide a group of parent carers as possible can be shared and acted upon, annual participation events are one of several ways that their views are sought and captured. The aims of such events are:

- To explore and evidence the experiences of families of children with SEND in Norfolk across the full breadth of services provided or commissioned by the local authority, commissioned health services, early years, schools and further education providers;
- To give the steering group of Family Voice some clear priorities to inform its work plan;
- To use this evidence to continue representational work with local partners to improve services for children and young people with SEND in Norfolk;
- To increase the membership of Family Voice and encourage more parent carers to participate.

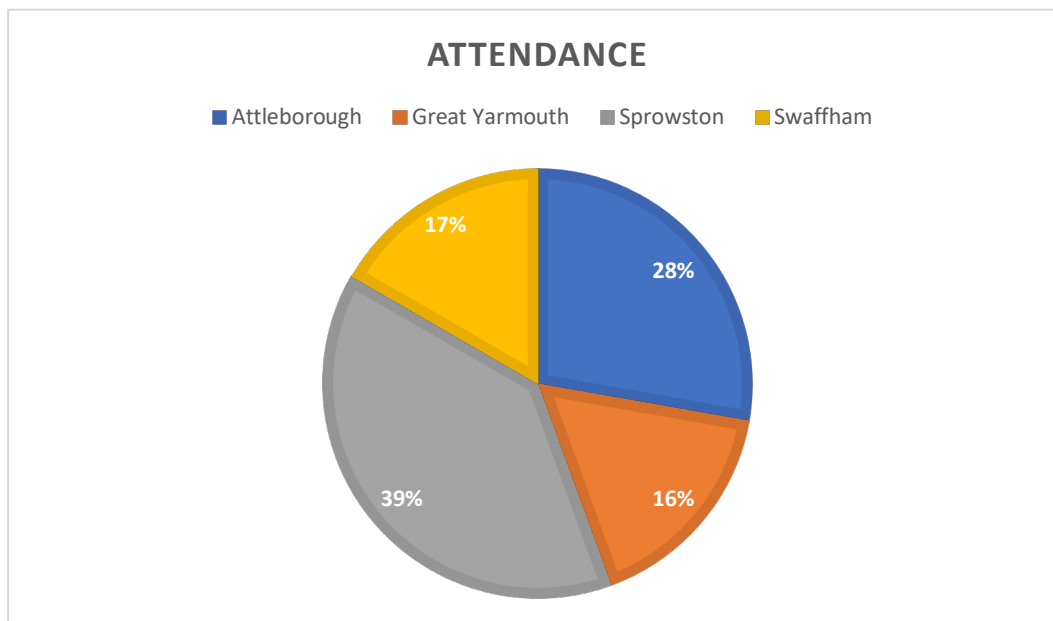
During the summer of 2017, Family Voice Norfolk decided on a fresh approach to its parent carer participation events for areas deemed harder to reach within Norfolk. Parent carers had expressed a need to gain knowledge and information from our events and to then share their lived experiences with us. Out of this, the new Family Voice, Family Chat events were born. These involve Family Voice working in partnership with other services and organisations to inform and support parent carers within the sessions and to gather and report on the views and experiences of these same families.

Family Voice surveyed its membership during June and July 2017 to find out more about what families want from our events, best locations, most suitable times and most importantly, which subjects were of most interest. The results of the survey determined four locations and revealed the most pressing subject for parent carers was that of SEN Support and EHC Plan processes. Norfolk SENDIASS were invited to work with Family Voice to be able to give parent carers the format they needed and we are grateful to them for their enthusiasm and willingness to co-produce the sessions.

Working in conjunction with Norfolk SENDIASS, the following events were organised:

- 7/11/2017 – Sprowston, Norwich
- 9/11/2017 – Swaffham
- 14/11/2017 – Attleborough
- 23/11/2017 – Great Yarmouth

54 parent carers attended these events, representing children in mainstream settings, special schools/complex needs schools and children who are being educated at home.



Based around the information-giving presentations from Norfolk SENDIASS and discussion with the parent carer participants, Family Voice compiled a number of questions to better understand the issues faced by families on the subjects of SEN Support and EHC Plans. These questions:

### **SEN Support**

- **How were needs assessed for children under SEN Support?**
- **Does anyone know what support their child/young person (CYP) gets?**
- **What would give you more confidence in schools?**

### **EHC Plans**

- **Were your own views and your CYP's views asked for during the EHC Plan process?**
- **How were your views and your CYP's views asked for?**
- **What are your experiences of requesting advice from professionals (e.g. SaLT, health professionals)?**
- **Were you told about Personal Budgets?**
- **How long did it take to receive the EHC Plan?**
- **How useful is the EHC Plan? Is it being followed?**

## The findings

### **SEN Support.**

There was a feeling amongst the majority of parent carers that schools still fail to communicate effectively. Some parents were not aware if their child has been assessed for SEN Support, while others were aware that a plan was in place but had not been involved in assessment and were unsure of what the plan actually meant for their CYP.

**Communication is vital!**

Some parents were frustrated that there was little or no feedback or communication from schools. Home-school books/daily emails were not routinely used in some settings and many parents claimed that they were not given an extra allocation of time at meetings such as Parents' Evenings for adequate discussion of their CYP and their needs. A minority of parent carers, had, however, good experiences to report on school-home communication:

Fantastic primary school. Formal half hour meetings are planned four times a year with the SENCo who is also the class teacher. School has taken on all his needs, done training. He is not the odd one out. They have done the same for another 11 or 12 children

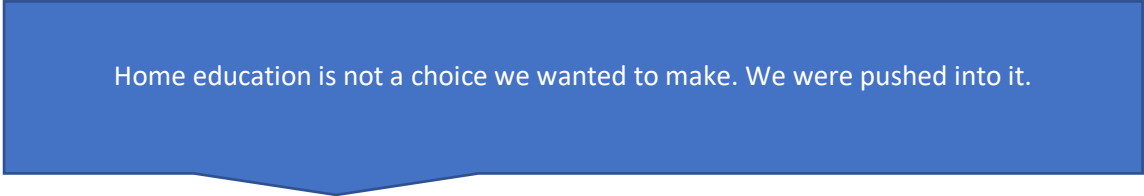
I felt like I wasn't being involved.

My child has SEN Support sheets and we have a termly meeting lasting an hour.

Best thing I did was to become a governor, I now seem to get more support. It's only been 8 months but I have found out lots more. School is concerned that if OFSTED come in, they may speak to me!

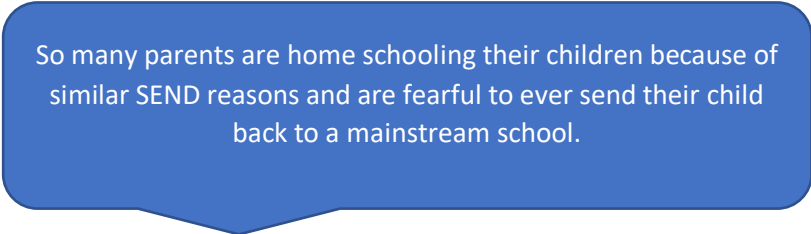
I was unaware I could have separate meetings – we have only 10 minutes with both the class teacher and SENCo combined.

For those parent carers whose children are in a mainstream setting, there was a general consensus that mainstream schools really must 'step up' to listen to parents and families and to acknowledge additional need. Some parents attending the sessions reported that they had felt so 'failed' by mainstream education that they had withdrawn their child for schooling at home:



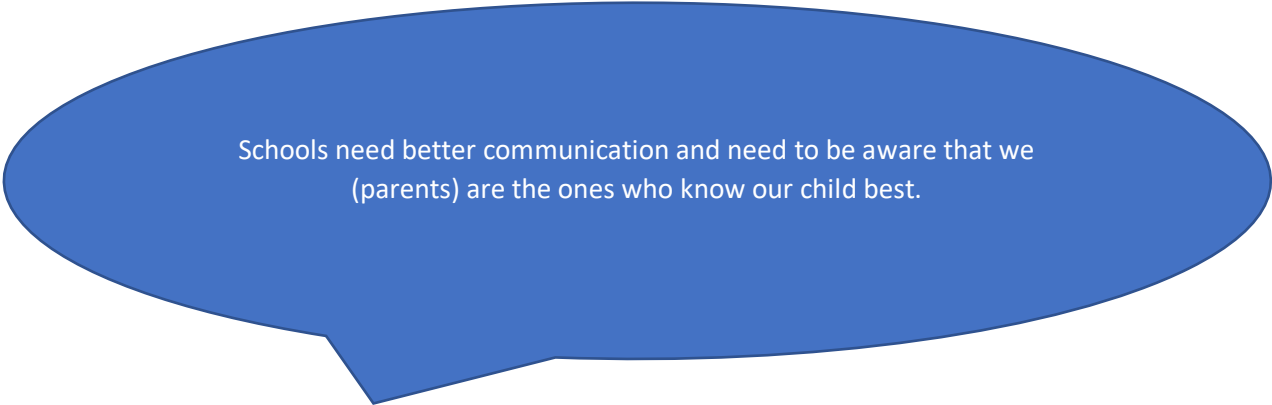
Home education is not a choice we wanted to make. We were pushed into it.

Feeling that two mainstream schools had failed to respond to and meet the needs of her child, both health needs and educational needs, another parent said:



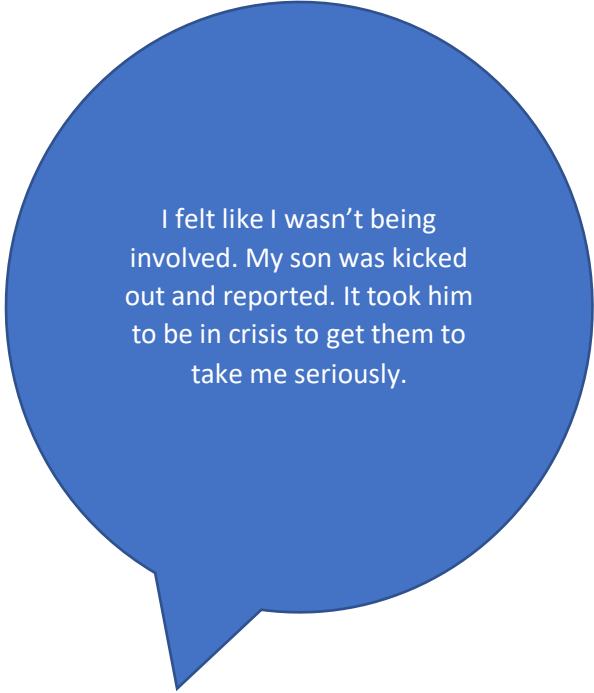
So many parents are home schooling their children because of similar SEND reasons and are fearful to ever send their child back to a mainstream school.

"Schools should take seriously any views from a parent".



Schools need better communication and need to be aware that we (parents) are the ones who know our child best.

Although there were some (albeit few) examples of mainstream schools 'getting it right' for children and young people with SEND, confidence in schools to do just that was not high. Many parents reported that their own views were not listened to and, in some cases, there was a reluctance to even accept what a professional was saying and advising. Parents felt that crisis point needed to be reached before they were 'heard'.



I felt like I wasn't being involved. My son was kicked out and reported. It took him to be in crisis to get them to take me seriously.

Many felt that more training needed to be provided across the school, including for all teaching assistants, class teachers, headteachers and indeed the SENCos. Although it was emphasised that SENCos should have specific qualifications in that role, some parents shared that they had little or no confidence in the school SENCo. There was reportedly inconsistency between teachers and between classes within schools. As a result, 'good support' provided in one class can change as the child progresses through year groups within the school, thus emphasising parental opinion that whole school training and consistency is vital. As one parent commented, "TA's have more ASD training than teachers and teachers are out of touch with what is going on with them [our children]. How can you recognise the barriers to learning if you have not been trained?"

Some parent carers shared with us that schools are still using 'lack of funding' as an excuse to not provide more specialist, child-centred support. One was told that their child with complex needs had 'taken funding away from another child with SEN'. Another parent said they had been spoken to about the school's budget and now felt the 'weight on their own shoulders' because their child needs more help than others and is therefore 'taking more money up' from the school budget. Not all parents had been aware of the 'cluster funding' model but those that did know felt there was a reluctance for money to be 'released' for SEND.

## **Education, Health and Care Plans**

Parent carers shared a mixture of experiences and opinions on EHC Plans and the process involved. There were a number of parents participating in the discussion for whom EHC Plans did not apply as their child was undergoing cycles of SEN Support. Amongst the parent carers for whom the EHC Plan process was current, there was representation from those whose child already had an EHC Plan, some were still on statements prior to transition to EHC Plan, some had had requests for assessment declined and others were awaiting outcomes.

The vast majority of parent carers present reported that their views, and the views of their child, had been sought. Forms were mostly sent home for completion and one parent had had help from the EHC Plan Co-ordinator at home and at school. There was concern that the section for the child's views perhaps didn't always reflect the true child, particularly if the sections had been completed by a Teaching Assistant (for the child) or, as some parents described it, if the child had been asked in 'interview' style. The style of questions aimed to capture the child's view raised concern amongst some parent carers:

The questions on the form are so difficult and obscure (for our children)

The questions on the form for the child to complete are beyond the comprehension of many of our SEND children

It was felt by many that the process of applying for assessment and EHCP would be easier for families if it were presented in a realistic, but positive way. Many of the parents felt that the schools themselves viewed the whole process negatively and were given discouraging comments by school and SENCO:

School says we won't get an EHCP

The SENCo said my child would only get an EHCP if they were to go to a Special School

Our son was just getting by at school and school told us we wouldn't get one (an EHCP)...but we self-referred....and got one!

EHCP... impossible to get

Parents had resorted to seeking help and information online, from other parents, from SEND specific support groups and did suggest that a guide for filling in such forms or a model template could be made available. Although some had been made aware of Independent Support, the majority had been oblivious of this at the time of commencing the process. For those who had accessed Independent Support, professional support was praised but some parents still felt emotionally unsupported through a process described as 'difficult':

(Independent Support) was great professional support but there is no emotional support (for parents)

Parents felt that, particularly when schools viewed the EHC Plan as 'unobtainable' for many, they had to be the 'drivers' for the process and that in itself was a huge task. One parent had found it difficult to request reports because the school would not acknowledge the problems their child was having.

It's a lot to put on us as parents....it would be good if the LA could pull reports together instead of parents having to arrange, find and send out all the reports

On the whole, however, once reports had been obtained, many of the parents were happy with their content and did consider them to be a good identification of need and a good reflection of their child.

A positive experience.  
The reports do reflect my child

Reports are key. I wouldn't have got the EHCP without these reports. I was happy that the reports reflected my child

One parent stressed that the report written by the Educational Psychologist for her child had been acted on by the school and her child's needs were now being met.

A really thorough EP report...really helped...such a relief!

Key reports delaying the EHC Plan process were those needed from Health and from the Speech and Language Therapy service, with one family stating they had had to wait 18 months to be seen by the service. It was also felt that health professionals and education professionals 'do not come together at meetings and talk to each other'.

When asked if they were aware that reports could be 'challenged' by parents for quality and content, all parents stated that they had not realised this was possible.

Some parents expressed concerns about EHC Plan Co-ordinator availability and presence. One parent said they did not know who their Co-ordinator was, a second claimed to have had 4-5 Co-ordinators during the course of their child's SEND education and that emails and phone calls are 'never returned' and a third parent stated that their child's Co-ordinator has changed again and again and does not attend reviews.

Parents were asked if they had been spoken to about Personal Budgets. Only one parent participant reported that a Personal Budget was in place for their child to access SaLT. A small number had been told of Personal Budgets prior to their meeting but for most, the subject of Personal Budgets was not discussed.

Where an EHC Plan was already in place, the question was asked as to how long the process had taken. One parent stated that they did receive their EHC Plan within the correct timescale. Other answers ranged from 5 months at best to more than 24 months. For some families, the process was an ongoing one.

To conclude the discussions, parents were asked, where an EHC Plan had been issued, how useful was the plan and was it being followed. Responses were varied and included

The provision in the plan is good and my child is doing a lot better in school

It feels like it is up to parents to ensure the plan is followed

Plans are signed just to get them out of the way

The targets are unachievable and unrealistic



## Summary and key points

The information in this report has been presented as it was given, without interpretation. However, some themes were clear over the four sessions that can be summarised as follows:

- The Family Voice, Family Chat format enabled parent carers to gain knowledge and understanding of the SEN Support and EHC Plan processes, giving them a clear basis from which to articulate what was working or not working for their child or young person;
- By becoming better informed, parent carers are not only empowered to see how things can be improved, but are also able to appreciate good practice and service when they find it;
- Many parent carers reported a lack of good communication between educational settings and families;
- Many parent carers had received misleading information from settings, suggesting that knowledge within settings themselves is patchy;
- Some parent carers had been made to feel responsible in some way for difficulties that the setting experienced in making provision for their child, which was neither helpful nor fair;
- Where SEN Support and/or an EHC Plan was working well, parent carers felt much more confidence in the educational setting;
- Most parent carers found the EHC Plan process stressful and felt the need of support to complete it.

Family Voice Norfolk would like to thank each and every parent who gave up their time to share their experiences and thoughts in such an open and honest manner. This document seeks only to give them a voice, for their views to be heard. We would like to thank Norfolk SENDIASS for collaborating with Family Voice in the presentation of the events, for providing advice to parents and for their clarity on the subjects discussed. Family Voice welcomes the opportunity to work with services to improve outcomes for our families.

Rachel Clarke

Ambassadors Lead

Family Voice Norfolk

May 2018