



## **Parents' views on the future of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Brighton & Hove**

### **Executive summary**

**July 2010**

#### **Introduction**

In the current political climate there has never been such a turbulent time for special educational needs with far reaching changes predicted, both nationally and locally. Nationally, the government commissioned Lamb Report has suggested innovative changes to practice whilst locally the Complex Needs Project is changing the educational climate both in mainstream and special schools. The forthcoming Green Paper will outline further changes to special educational needs (SEN) shortly.

Education is an incredibly emotive and important issue for parents who have a child with SEN. The Parent Carers' Council (PaCC) was set up in 2008 to promote parent participation in how services are delivered to their children across the city of Brighton and Hove. In May 2010 the PaCC ran a postal survey and held an open event to elicit the views of over 100 parent carers about their experiences of SEN provision in their children's school. These children had a range of disabilities and attended both the primary and secondary sectors of mainstream and special schools.

At the open event, parents were given the opportunity to voice their experiences in person to invited members of the Local Authority (LA). Parents talked about positive experiences and also negative incidents that made their children's lives at school difficult.

Parents are often effective at working in partnership with schools to overcome challenges. With this in mind the Parent Carers' Council asked parents to suggest changes to current practice that might help improve educational outcomes for their children.

## **Summary of findings**

Parents have provided evidence of good support for children with SEN across the city in many schools and some parents have noticed the time and effort that many members of the staff have dedicated to help their children reach their potential. Brighton and Hove has a number of outstanding schools for children with special needs (acknowledged by Ofsted) and there are many examples of exemplary provision. The city also has excellent support for parents through Amaze and, it should be noted, has nationally been at the fore front of ensuring independent support for its resident parent carers.

When schools communicate with families and keep them up to date with their child's progress there is a greater level of satisfaction and confidence displayed by parents. Parents also believe that this leads to higher standards of provision and greater achievement for their children. Strategies have been implemented in some schools to help prepare children for changes and staff have been trained by experts from both outside agencies and other school's outreach teams to be more understanding of individual children's needs.

However, there are still ongoing concerns about the perceived lack of transparency of information and clarity with regard to the complex needs project and its impact on education, particularly the special school sector. For example:

- Some parents of children at The Cedar Centre, Downs Park and Patcham House have expressed concern that their children have been left in classes for prolonged periods of time without trained teacher cover.
- Lack of information about the level of funding that has been, and will be, diverted from these schools to help fund outreach to mainstream schools leaves parents feeling uncertain about the future for their children.
- There is also confusion about which mainstream schools are able to access the outreach service and which children fit the criteria for this additional support.

Communication is absolutely key to parental confidence and successful partnerships with schools. Parents feel that they have not always been informed about changes to school curriculums or staffing and feel aggrieved when they are the last to find out about significant developments that affect their children's education. Changes to staffing can be particularly disruptive to pupils when ongoing relationships are broken. The introduction of provision mapping (replacing Individual Educational Plans) in some schools leaves them feeling unclear about expectations and outcomes for their children that are not specific and tailored to individual needs.

Despite the excellent level of training that some schools have there is not always consistency across the city and many teachers are inadequately trained to meet the needs of children with complex difficulties. This is evident in the lack of understanding that a few teachers have demonstrated when disciplining children with SEN in an inappropriate and insensitive way.

The statementing process was another area that raised concerns. In some cases statements are not specific or detailed enough to provide the necessary support in school. Many parents fail to secure a statement for their child, unless their child has severe disabilities. There is confusion about who qualifies for a statement and who doesn't and what the statement actually means for the child's overall education provision. We recognise the statement is a tool for graduating and clearly defining support to children who need it most but there remain questions over eligibility criteria at the lower end of need. There is also confusion over the power of a statement to secure funding.

Throughout the report we have outlined recommendations made by parents, at both the event and in the questionnaire. The following are key themes which summarise priorities as identified by parents.

### **Key Recommendations**

- **The Complex Needs Project** needs major clarification for both parents and teaching staff. There needs to be open, accessible and transparent communication with all parents of children with SEN about the project. This needs to set out the implications for children with SEN, in both the mainstream and special sectors, across the city.
- **Training** is a key area of concern. There needs to be an independent review of SEN practice in all schools which looks specifically at the nature and effectiveness of training that teachers receive and makes recommendations to change the disparity in different schools across the city.
- **Communication** is fundamental, across all age groups, to strengthen parental confidence about their child's education. Schools need to revise the way they communicate with parents about their child's progress by providing a home/school book for all children with SEN which is updated every day and includes a record of visits from outside agencies. This book should also contain a list of contact numbers of other professional involved in their child's care.
- **On a more strategic level it would be helpful if there was a review of the statutory process** and eligibility for statements needs to be made clear to parents in an open and transparent way. Statements need to be more specific in setting out the requirements for each child's provision, especially for children with more complex needs in mainstream schools. The amount of outreach required by these children should also be made explicit in their statement.
- **Independent monitoring** is essential to ensure that schools are accountable to the LA, parents and children. There needs to be an independent system in place ensuring that children are receiving the level of support set out in the statement and that the school is providing a supportive and nurturing environment for children with SEN.
- **A resourced systematic involvement of parent carers in the strategic delivery of SEN** across the city by being included in the strategy groups alongside SENCOs, educational psychologists and staff from the LA.

# **Parents views on the future of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Brighton & Hove**

**July 2010**

**Full Report**

## **Forward**

Education for our children is a hugely important subject for all parents, and one that becomes even more important if you are the parent carer of a child with special educational needs (SEN). Optimising the very best opportunities for our children and getting the appropriate provision can be very fraught and demanding. It can be one of the most challenging parts of the journey we set upon as parents of a child with special needs.

2010 is a critical era for special educational provision. Nationally, there is a government spotlight on SEN with the Lamb Review and an increased focus by Ofsted on SEN provision. Initiatives such as 'Progression Guidance and Achievement for All' put the focus on the progress our children are making and how this is communicated to parents. Schools are under pressure to show that they are optimising *every* child's potential.

Meanwhile, locally Brighton and Hove is undergoing an SEN review which will see a greater focus on the inclusion of children with more complex needs in mainstream schools and a reduction in special school places. This awaits a steer from the newly formed government. A new complex needs outreach project aims to support mainstream schools in the successful inclusion of children with SEN. Many parents are unsure of the implications this may have for their child and what choices they now have regarding their child's education.

One key finding to come out of government research is the importance of communication with parents (a key finding of the Lamb Review) and of parental involvement in achieving quality education for SEN pupils. Parents do have a vital voice which needs to be recognised at all levels across the broader education spectrum.

Ultimately every one of our children is so unique and so complex how do we begin to ensure that 'every child matters' when it comes to education? Whether a child is in mainstream school, a unit attached to a mainstream school, special school, independent school or is home educated, we have tried to garner as many different experiences as possible by asking parents directly what they think works well and what doesn't work so well when it comes to their child's education. We have also asked parents for possible solutions to problems and they have suggested changes to current practice.

## **Introduction**

The Parent Carers' Council (PaCC) was formed in 2008 to give parents of children with special needs across all disabilities, opportunities to help change the way services for our children were delivered. The council now has 140 members and in 2010 identified education as the main area of concern to parents.

In order to reach as many parents as possible the PaCC distributed a questionnaire that was sent to 758 parents, who had a child of school age and were registered on the Amaze Compass database. Amaze, a charity that supports parents and families who have children with special needs, is the umbrella organisation of the PaCC. The questionnaire was also printed in the Amaze newsletter that is circulated to over a thousand families. 70 parents responded to this survey and this is entirely within expected rates from families who have children registered on the Amaze database.

Parents were asked to comment on three specific areas in the questionnaire. These included:

- **Communication-** Was the information that they received about their child accessible, clear and useful? Did they receive information on a regular basis or did they have to ask to be updated and did the schools use IEPs (Individual Education Plans) or provision mapping to monitor the child's progress?
- **Training-** Did parents feel that the staff looking after their child were adequately trained and understood their child's needs?
- **Accountability-** Local authority staff have the responsibility to assess children who are statemented and then to oversee the provision. Who is responsible for monitoring this and who does the Local authority and schools have to be accountable to? What are the strategies in place to build up trust? The parents on the PaCC steering group suggested that one solution to this would be to appoint an independent monitor who was not employed by the LA to monitor SEN provision in schools. Parents were asked if they thought this would be a good idea and to comment on this proposal.

In each case parents were asked to give their overall level of satisfaction and then give examples where there was evidence of good and bad practice. For each area of concern parents suggested possible solutions to the problems they encountered.

In addition to the postal questionnaire the PaCC invited all the registered members to an open event along with six members of the local education authority who were invited specifically to listen to the parent's comments. The event was facilitated by ten members of the PaCC steering group who were supported by five staff from Amaze. 42 parents attended this event to share their experiences, both good and bad, with the invited guests.

At the event parent carers were divided into five groups. The main themes from the questionnaire were revisited with the addition of two new ones. The groups were as follows:

1. **Statutory assessment processes and panels** - how was the assessment process and did your child get a statement at the end or were they turned down?
2. **Communication with the school** - experiences with IEPs, record keeping, home school communication and meetings with SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-

ordinator) and other members of the school's SMT (senior management team). How are parents informed of how their child is progressing at school?

3. **Information** - is this easily available and is it open, honest and easy to read? Do you know who to contact at the LA (Local Authority) if you have a query? How was your query dealt with? What is your understanding of how are the budget cuts going to affect schools?
4. **Staff training** - Do you believe that the staff, looking after your child, are adequately trained to do so and do they understand your child's needs?
5. **Accountability** - To whom does the school have to report that they are meeting their SEN requirements? Is there someone you can go to if you are concerned about the level of education your child is receiving and are your concerns acted upon?

During the first session parents were asked to give examples of good and bad practice and in order to feedback their findings to the whole group they were asked to identify three main good points and three main bad points. This session was held before the invited guests had arrived so that parents were given the opportunity to be honest without feeling inhibited by the listeners, who may have been personally involved in their child's education.

After a break the groups reconvened with the addition of the invited guest (one per group). In order for parents to feel that they could say what they wanted the guests had been given instructions not to contribute to the discussion but were just to listen to what the parents were saying. We were keen for feedback to be proactive and positive and during this session the parents were asked to suggest some solutions to the problems identified in the previous group work. Again, they had to identify three solutions that the whole group agreed with.

All the comments made by parents have been collated and common themes identified. For purposes of confidentiality schools and services have been named in the report but individual teaching staff have not been identified.

## **Part One**

### **Key findings from the open event**

#### **1. Statutory processes and gaining a statement of special educational needs**

##### **A. Parent carers' findings**

Parents in the group felt that it is possible to get a good statement for children who have special educational needs but that often the process relied on parents who were confident and persistent to get a statement with clearly defined targets. Parents were appreciative of the support offered by Amaze's IPS (Independent Parent Support) service during the assessment process. Parents felt that, overall, statements lacked detail resulting in vague recommendations for provision. It was felt that professionals from outside agencies had their 'hands tied' having to make party line recommendations even if they did not feel that

they were the most appropriate for the child. Parents were invited to put their views forward during the process but felt their contribution was seen as 'tokenistic' in many cases.

Some parents felt they had no 'true' choice when naming the school they wanted for their child on the statement. One particular parent had wanted her child to go to a mainstream school but on the statement a special school had been identified. In order to get provision changed the parent had to appeal to the LA which took a lot of time and energy. In another incident a parent had wanted her child to go to special school but was refused because the statement had stated that he should go to a mainstream school. Changing the school on the statement might be difficult and could be met with reluctance by the LA. When the school identified was a special school parents also felt they did not have a choice over which special school their child would attend. There was a distinct east/west divide in the city and children were sent to the school nearest to their home regardless of parent choice.

For children who were more severely disabled, and had a clear diagnosis, the process tended to be more straightforward. However, for children who did not have a clear diagnosis and had less severe disabilities the process was more fraught and they often 'fell through the gap' of provision required. Children without statements often got little support at school. Some only attended school part time and were informally excluded or sent home at lunchtime because the school could not cope with their behaviour.

The statutory process was bound by strict time schedules and these were adhered to with paperwork being produced at the required time. However, the system did break down when key members of staff were off sick and in one particular case this occurred for one child when the SENCO in one school was off sick and was not replaced resulting in a halting of the statutory process.

In some cases there was a lack of transparency about the statutory process and there was evidence that schools had started the process without informing the parents. Parents felt that their correspondence was often ignored and that when they did speak to their case work officer they were unsupportive and lacked understanding of their frustrations.

For parents who wanted to appeal against decisions made in the statement there was an appeals process to follow facilitated by Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SEND). However, most parents were not aware of the appeals process and the help that was available to them. Parents were unaware of the whole statutory process procedures and guidelines that needed to be followed.

## **B. Parent Carers' Recommendations**

- The correlation between how confident and persistent a parent is and how good their child's statement and education is needs to end. All parents should be assured of the best provision for their children. Currently parents need to be extremely committed to get their child's needs met if those needs are slightly out of the ordinary and this should not be the case.
- Parents' opinions need to be valued, not as an afterthought. Parents should not ever feel that they are an irritation when they call for help or try to make changes.

- Statements need to be very specific with clearly defined targets, particularly for children in mainstream schools, to enable inclusion to be more successful. Outreach should be included in the statement.
- Children with complex needs in mainstream schools should be given more options about dual placements during the statutory process in recognition that some children will benefit from the facilities and expertise available in special schools.
- Schools need a 'parental information' person to act as an additional contact who is able to offer advice (SENCOs are overburdened and often only work part time).
- Calls and e-mails should be responded to within a definite time limit, as a courtesy, even if there is no definite answer.
- The role and the responsibilities of the case work officer within the statutory process should be explained carefully to parents.
- Parents must have ongoing access to impartial advice and information provided by Amaze via the IPS service, website, newsletters and helpline.

## **2. Communication with schools**

### **A. Parent carers' findings**

There were some really positive examples of effective communication between schools and parents. When written properly and well targeted IEPs (Independent Education Plans) worked well. Home/school books worked as a really effective means of two way communication between school and parents, who could also write comments in the book.

It was noted that some individual teachers and TAs (teaching assistants) were very good at communicating with parents both verbally and in writing. In some cases the TAs were employed to work with specific children.

Also face to face meetings often gave feedback that was positive and balanced. Parents found that an open approach worked well. If a child's needs were shared with the class and staff there was more understanding and transparency eradicating a feeling of secrecy.

Where communication was not so good, schools failed to provide feedback to parents about problems and did not present evidence to back up reputed incidents. When problems did arise some schools made no effort to meet parents at times other than parents' evenings to discuss the issues. Some parents found it difficult to contact the school, arrange regular meetings with the SENCO and when the meetings did happen no objectives were put in place.

There were also problems with communication about target setting and progress. IEPs, used to monitor the children's progress, were changed without consulting parents and, in some cases, were not being effectively monitored. Some schools use provision mapping instead of IEPs to monitor progress but this is not thought to be specific enough for children who have unique difficulties. A provision map is an 'at a glance' way of showing the range of provision a school makes for children with special and other additional needs through additional staffing or peer support.



Communication was not only perceived to be poor between the parents and school but there was evidence that communication between teachers in the same school and outside agencies could be patchy. For example, some schools often relied on parents to give them their children's medical results, rather than the relevant professional involved in their care.

### **B. Parent Carers' Recommendations**

- All teaching staff, including cover teachers and TAs, dealing with a child should have detailed information about their needs and medical conditions to ensure continuity of provision. This should include improved communication with medical staff involved in the child's care.
- IEPs need to be reviewed and updated each term in full consultation with the parents and child. The targets need to be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timed (SMART) and there needs to be written outcomes with agreed timetables for implementation.
- Where possible each child needs a dedicated TA who is involved in planning meetings with the parents and is the main home-school liaison person.
- Schools need to be more proactive about providing information, anticipating crises before they occur rather than informing parents when problems have reached crisis point. Parents report that there is a tendency to 'fire fight' especially around behaviour issues. There should be support for both parents and the school from outside agencies.
- It should be acknowledged that parents know their children the best and feedback from parents should be encouraged rather than discouraged.
- Schools should have an independent key worker who they can approach when problems occur.
- Children with special needs should have a home/school book that is updated daily and contains a list of professionals, involved in the child's care, with their contact details. Any visits they make to the school should be included in the home/school book along with any actions taken.
- Parents of children with SEN should be given a curriculum map so that they know what their children are studying This could be suitable for all children and not just those with SEN.

## **3. Information**

### **A. Parent carers' findings**

Schools that were good at sharing information were supportive and approachable. This supportive and approachable culture was more apparent in special schools and primary schools than secondary schools. Some schools were very well prepared for the arrival of a child with SEN. In one case the SENCO had arranged for the whole school staff team to be trained by the parent and an educational psychologist.

Some schools used e-mail to communicate with parents and share information and this worked well. Generally, e-mail resulted in measurable responses and actions taken as a result. The home school book was also used as a good information source for parents.

Outside agencies, such as Amaze, were a good and reliable source of information for parents. The Autistic Spectrum Condition Support Service (ASCSS) was seen as effective, providing specific information about the autistic spectrum. They also ran training for schools on inset days on autism. However, some parents voiced concerns that they did not provide as much support as they used to. (This may be due to the level of support that children are requiring in the mainstream sector as this population becomes more complex.) There were good online support services with lots of information about different services and it was felt that Brighton and Hove, in partnership with Amaze, did provide a lot of information compared to other areas in the country.

However, SEN provision in schools was found to be inconsistent with varying approaches across the mainstream sector and between junior and secondary schools. Policies were woolly and non-specific and there was no clear definition of inclusion and what it meant. There was no consistency between schools about sharing information about specific children and their individual needs. Schools relied too heavily on parents for information about their child's needs which worked if the parent was proactive and well supported but there was concern that children who had parents that were not as engaged would be more at risk of information not being passed on.

Parents reported considerable confusion and a marked lack of clarity about the complex needs project. They had heard rumours about closure of schools and changes to schools budgets. The parent perception was that there was a lack of transparency about the project and no information available to dispel parents' fears about changing provision especially for children in Downs Park, The Cedar Centre and Patcham House.

Information was often poor about individual support for children. Parents were not told when individual TAs were hired to look after their children until after they had been appointed and then were not told when that TA was moved. Parents felt that there was too great a reliance on good relationships and an individual's commitment and this had a direct effect on how well your child did at school.

The PRESENS service was thought to be good but was not suitable for every child. For those children who did not have a diagnosis, did not fit the autistic spectrum or were adopted it was harder to get an initial assessment by the service.

Some parents reported that there were poor links between parents with children with SEN and poor information and support once the child had started school.

## **B. Parent Carers' Recommendations**

- Information should be consistent and there should be a clear set of policies and guidelines for schools, teachers and parents which include a set of minimum standards about provision available that parents are clear about.
- There should be an open, honest and transparent explanation to parents about funding and how support works for children with statements or those on school action plus.

- Parents should be involved in the SEN strategy group and help to plan strategic services for children with SEN across the city.
- The Amaze helpline should be expanded. It is an excellent support for parents to help them navigate the complexities of the education system and can often help escalation of difficulties arising. However, due to the current allocation of hours it is often difficult for parents to get through to speak to someone.
- Parents should routinely be given information about sources of support for them and who they can approach if they have concerns about the school.
- Best practice should be shared among schools including training and networking SENCO teachers across the city. This should eventually be expanded to local and national SENCO forums. Closer working with parents could raise this good practice.
- There needs to be a clear explanation about the Complex Needs Project. There is confusion among teachers and parents about what it entails and what is happening in specific schools to outreach services and budgets.
- There also needs to be a clear explanation about the impact of schools gaining academy status on children with SEN and how it affects their support.
- All parents should have an e-mail contact point and a home/school book.
- Parents should always be consulted about IEPs and behaviour programmes implemented in the class as part of a proactive plan for their child.
- Information about a child should be shared with all the professionals working with that child. This could be supported by the child's key worker, if there is one.
- Good practice and relationships established during the early years need to continue once the child has started school.
- All parents, as a matter of course, should be copied into all correspondence about their child.

#### **4. Training**

##### **A. Parent carers' findings**

Many children with SEN benefited from having effective one to one support from a teaching assistant who worked with them on a continuous basis. Training worked well when teaching staff worked closely with professionals visiting children in school and specific skills were passed on to TAs.

There were some exemplary examples of good practice. The local sensory needs outreach service was a good example of excellent practice with great parental partnership. They helped to pass on information to the whole staff team and other children in the class. Carden School Speech and Language Unit was a good example of a 'whole' school approach sharing information and knowledge with staff and pupils. Also, support from outside agencies helped some schools to meet the children's needs in a more effective way.

It was felt that some teachers had gained good practical experience, having worked for many years with children who have SEN. There were SENCOs who worked effectively, ensuring that they passed on information and good practice.

Parents were, however, not aware of what training was available to teachers, how it was delivered and how training needs were monitored. Parents reported some schools seemed reluctant to ask for outside help. Some SENCOs seemed resistant to parents' suggestions and did not acknowledge them as experts of their child's needs. Levels of support that the SENCO could offer depended on their practical experience of children with SEN. It was felt that there was a general imbalance of power between professional and parents and that there needed to be more partnership working and a greater respect for parents' role and expertise.

Also, it was felt that there were problems with isolated training. If training was only targeted at a specific child and not the whole school there was a danger that skills learnt would not be transferred to other staff.

It was felt that some schools were struggling to access outreach services provided and were confused about who was eligible to access them. With more special school teachers doing outreach among mainstream school there were lots of reported incidents where classes in special schools were being led by teaching assistants and no teacher in charge for long periods of time. For some parents of children in mainstream schools, the offer of outreach felt like an incentive not to go to tribunal to argue for a dual placement. It was felt that outreach would only work if it was ongoing and proven to be effective.

## **B. Parent Carers' Recommendations**

- There needs to be a training programme for SENCOs, teachers, TAs and governing bodies in how to work effectively in partnership with parents, including a set of good practice guidelines.
- There needs to be a code of practice to check that schools are working within these guidelines (recommended by the Lamb Report)
- A more comprehensive training in SEN needs to be developed across all basic teacher training courses, which includes disability awareness training. Staff should then be sent on regular refresher courses to update them with changes in practice.
- Experience and training that teachers have received should be included in the school prospectus, website and annual report so that training records are more transparent to parents.
- General training packages for teachers should include curriculum differentiation, manual handling, person centred planning and managing challenging behaviour. More specific packages should include training on administering medication, and specific behaviour traits experienced by children who have certain conditions.
- There should be peer mentoring for all TAs and training for staff that cover break times and lunchtimes when children are left unsupervised by trained staff.
- TAs working with children with special needs should have training in special schools.
- Specialist teachers need to be based in schools and to impart their knowledge across staff teams.
- There needs to be a top down approach to training from the head teachers. This should include an understanding of inclusion and what it means for the school.

- There should be a full time SENCOs in each school who would be a co-ordinator of special needs and there should be more of a multi agency approach to supporting the child.
- Schools need to anticipate the needs of children prior to the child starting and give staff appropriate training before the child arrives

## **5. Accountability**

### **A. Parent carers' findings**

When professionals from the schools, parents and staff from Amaze's IPS scheme work together, the provision achieved for individual children with SEN in schools was fantastic.

Specialist units attached to mainstream schools were also felt to work well. The teachers expertly communicated with the parents to keep them up to date. One parent stated that when professionals worked together the provision in a local speech and language unit within a mainstream school was excellent. Another parent was impressed with regular half term meetings with a therapist who knew her child well. She felt that these helped to co-ordinate the provision.

However, there was a concern over the lack of monitoring and clarity of SEN provision in schools. Parents were unsure who funded the SEN budgets. It was felt that in many cases the parents had to chase the school in order to get the provision their child required. One parent was told that their child could not come to a school unless he had thirty hours of support written into his statement. There was confusion over some individual school's admission criteria and no explanation was given to parents as to why their child was not accepted.

There was concern that many teachers were not adequately trained to teach children with SEN and confusion over to whom the school needed to be accountable to maintain an adequate level of training amongst it's staff team. Schools needed to be places of safety where parents could be assured that their children were being taught in a culture and ethos that acknowledged their needs. It was felt that some schools were not concerned about providing well for children with SEN.

Another concern was that some schools frequently used informal exclusions to deal with unacceptable behaviour instead of behaviour management techniques. The schools were not able to adequately explain the reason for the exclusion to the parents. As a result some pupils were being educated on a part time basis that was not meeting their needs. There was no clear structure for parents to complain about this (or indeed any other complaint that they may have with the school).

### **B. Parent Carers' Recommendations**

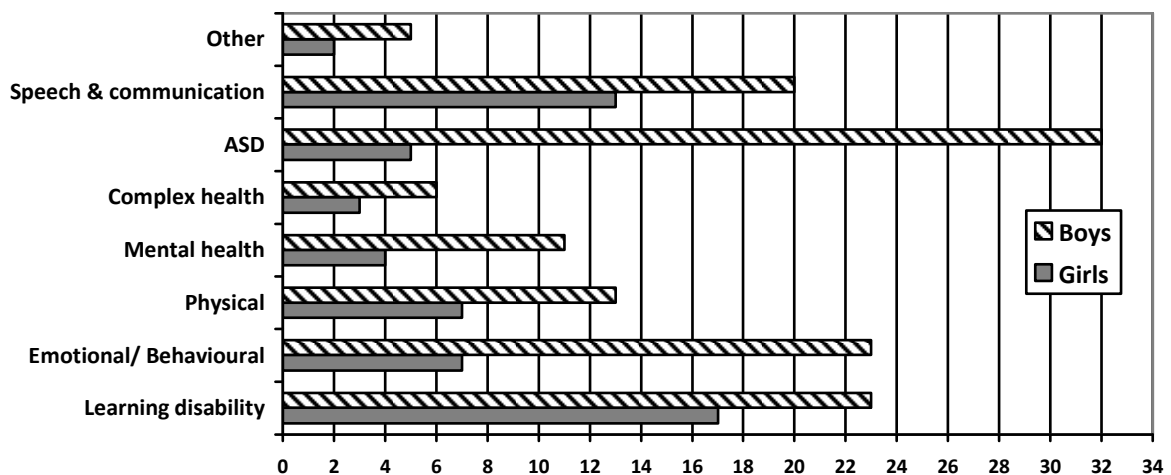
- There needs to be better accountability for exclusions. Schools need to have a good reason for excluding a child and mechanisms in place to manage behaviour in a more constructive way.

- There needs to be a more transparent admissions policy and schools need to give parent’s explanations for not accepting a child with specific needs.
- Parents need to have a clear structure for communication with the school before complaints occur. A complaints policy that is clear and easy to follow will help to change the culture with in schools.
- There needs to be more transparency and accountability about the provision of SEN children are getting. Schools need to be more open about what criteria is used to assess their children with SEN.
- There should be an inclusion officer who could work with schools to help deliver SEN for children with complex needs in mainstream schools.

**Part Two**

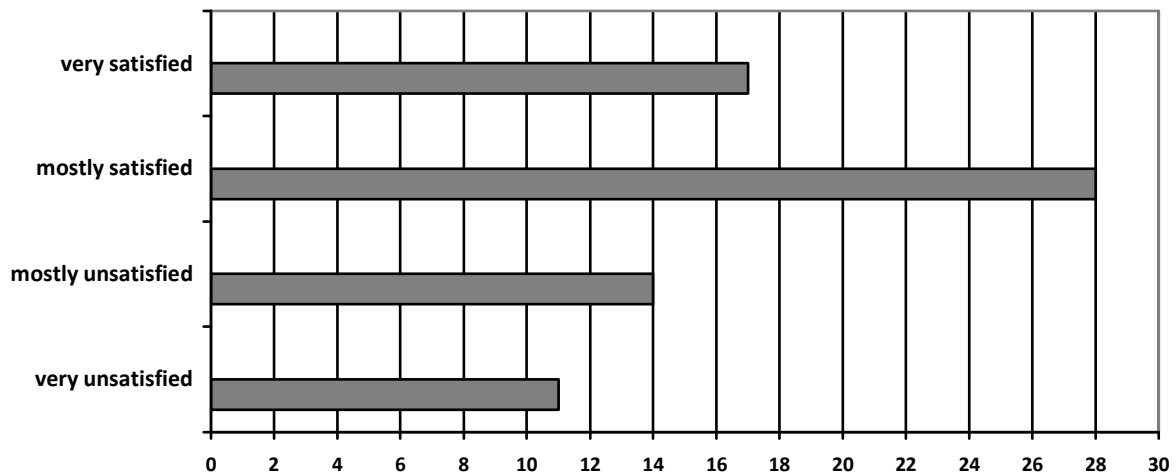
**Key findings from the questionnaires**

The questionnaire as completed by 68 parents representing 76 children, 55 of who were boys and 21 of whom were girls. The following graph shows the main problems the children had as identified by their parents. These may have been more than one problem which accounts for the high number of cases identified in each category. The children who had other conditions not listed had either chromosome abnormalities or sensory impairments i.e. deafness and blindness.



12 of the girls went to primary schools and 9 went to secondary schools. 29 of the boys went to primary schools and 26 went to secondary schools demonstrating an almost even split between the key stages.

## Communication



The graph above shows the levels of satisfaction that parents felt when communicating with schools

We can see from the graph that on the whole most parents were satisfied with the way that schools communicated with them. However, where parents were dissatisfied it had a higher impact on the child and family.

### Positive aspects of communication

- One parent was given regular updates from her child's speech and language therapist (SALT) and encouraged to attend therapy sessions with her child so that she could replicate the exercises at home.
- Home/school diaries were well written and consistent. They recorded both good and bad episodes and were filled in daily so that parents could see the child's progress and how the child had responded in certain situations. Visits from outside agencies were also recorded in some of the home schools books.
- One school had implemented a behaviour chart for a child with an autistic spectrum condition (ASC), which was sent home to parents at the end of the day so that they could see how he had behaved in each lesson and identify potential triggers for disruptive behaviour.
- Many schools held weekly scheduled meetings with parents to keep them up to date. Other schools had an open door policy so that parents could pop in for an informal chat when they needed to.
- Some schools used face to face meetings to communicate with parents whilst others used telephone calls, e-mails, letters and text messages.
- Parents appreciated detailed explanations about IEP targets and how they would help their child to progress. Targets needed to be achievable.
- Annual reviews were comprehensive in some schools and feedback given at them was well received.
- Parents did appreciate being told about problems before they occurred. One parent said that the school would ring her and update her if there were any problems. They also appreciated calls to help prepare their children for any changes in the classroom.

- Very specific examples included one parent who was given practical advice about how to support her child to read.

### **Negative aspects of communication**

- There were lapses in communication between parents and the school SENCO, teachers and other professionals. One parent reported that she was not told that her non verbal daughter was not getting any speech and language therapy. And another parent did not discover that her son was mute at school despite being able to talk at home. Communication was poor between different specialities in the same profession. A SALT who specialised in swallowing and feeding was not communicating sufficiently with a communication SALT leading to a breakdown in the child's progress.
- Some staff were not giving information to parents about the sensory aspect of their child's learning.
- Some teachers were not using IEPs to set targets for the children with SEN. Continuity between consecutive IEPs was lost because the targets were not checked in detail to see if they had been achieved. If a child was not progressing and meeting the targets parents were not informed. Some IEPs lacked detail and were not updated. Some schools had chosen to use provision mapping instead of IEPs which were not popular with parents due to a lack of specific targets.
- There were several parents who felt that the school did not listen to advice they gave about their children and did not recognise their expertise. Also, parents wanted to be able to choose how they received information about their children.
- There was poor communication between teachers in the school. This was particularly apparent when children changed classes and information was not passed on from teacher to teacher.
- In one particular case the school did not prepare a child sufficiently when her one to one TA was off school for a long period of time. The child worked well with this member of staff and did not cope well with the change. Other parents were not informed when individual one to one sessions were cancelled or extra ones added into the timetable. This demonstrated a failure on the school's part to recognise that children needed to follow routine and their difficulty coping with change.
- In one school the head teacher decided to change educational practice which directly affected the child of one parent, without consulting with the parents first.
- In larger schools it was more apparent that many of the teachers did not have enough knowledge about individual children's needs. In one particular case one pupil lost the tip of her finger in a fire door because the teacher did not hold the door open for her and told her to walk properly. She would have found this hard to do as she suffered with 'club feet'.
- Exams were a time when parents were more stressed about their children and when communication breakdown was particularly apparent. One parent was not told the results of a literacy and numeracy test her child had been asked to sit and the results were not then circulated to all members of staff. One parent was not aware that her child had been given help in his year 8 tests and another parent was not informed that her child would not be sitting some of his exams. In one example, the school failed to tell a parent that her son had not turned up for his exams. He had very



poor memory problems and despite being reminded that he had three exams he only stayed for one of them because he had forgotten that he had another two exams that day. A lack of communication between the parent and the school about the exam timetable meant that in one case a child failed all three of his science papers because the parents had not supported their child to revise.

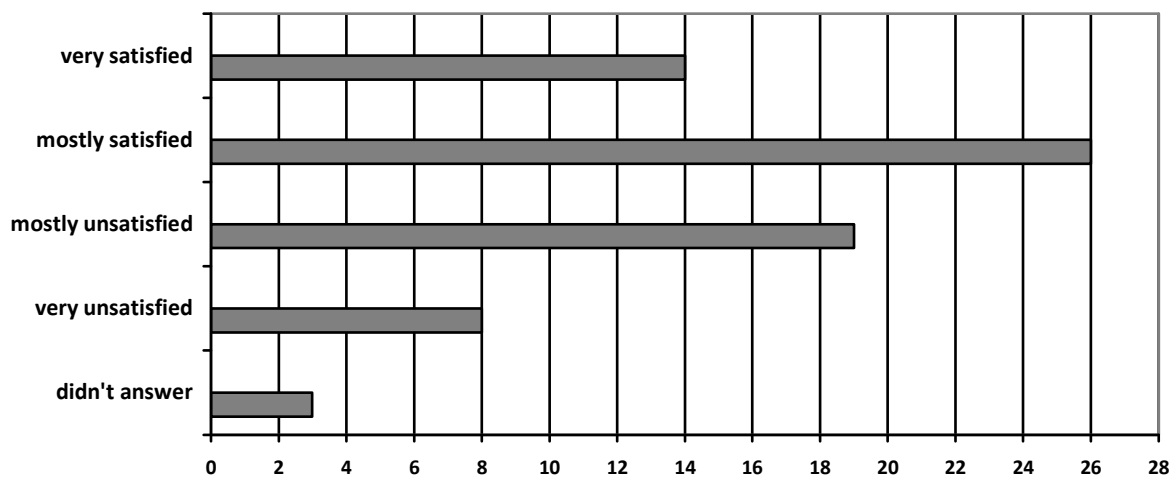
- One child had been given an informal exclusion on a Monday morning with no warning given to the family. This sent the child into a meltdown. Some schools held closed discussions about disruptive behaviour without informing parents.
- One parent reported that her child's behaviour at home was affected by something that had happened at school. The teacher had not thought that the incident was important enough to inform the parent about.
- Overall home/school books were praised but there was some concern about how often they were filled in at some schools. One parent reported incidents when their child's home school book was only filled in at the end of the week at the Cedar Centre. Also, the home/school book for a child who had a dual placement was only filled in by one of the schools he attended. Another parent reported that, although their support was very valuable, when the ASCSS had been into the school they did not forward a copy of the report onto the parents and did not always inform parents when they were going to visit.
- Reports in one annual review did not tally with what the parents had been told by the school. In one particular case the parent was totally unaware that the reports submitted for the annual review were negative about their child until the day of the review.
- There was no co-ordination over homework in different subjects at secondary schools so children became overloaded on certain days with too much homework.

### **Parent carers' Recommendations**

- The whole school team need to be aware of a child's needs before they arrive at the school and the SENCO should have an initial meeting with the parents so that expectations can be established on both sides.
- The SENCOs role in the child's education could be made clear to parents so that they know the level of support their child will receive.
- All children with communication difficulties would benefit from a home/school book that is updated on a daily basis by staff who are trained how to update them. This book should record details about visits from outside agencies and contain the contact details of people who are involved in the child's care.
- Parents need notice so that they can attend meetings and sometimes meetings should be convened at short notice when problems occur.
- All children should have an IEP that is reviewed each term with the parents present, on dates which have been prearranged at the previous meeting. Targets set need to be achievable and monitored to see if they are being reached or not. Old and new IEPs need to be sent to the parents before the meeting so that they can prepare beforehand.
- The school should update the parents of any untoward incidents that have occurred at school by a prearranged method of communication e.g. e-mail or phone calls.

- At a parent's request schools should give parents opportunities to go into the school to work alongside their children so that they can replicate methods of teaching at home. Worksheets should be available for parents to do homework with children to support their learning.
- Children who need it should be allowed time out of the classroom and be given sufficient pastoral support so that they can reach their full potential at school.
- Schools should provide drop in SENCO visits and opportunities for parents of children with special needs to meet to discuss common issues e.g. support with challenging behaviour and information about the statutory process.
- A handbook should be available for parents and teachers to share examples of good practice

### Training



The graph above shows the levels of satisfaction that parents felt about the skills and training that staff teaching their children had.

Again, we can see from the graph that on the whole most parents were satisfied with the skills of the staff that looked after their children. However as before, where parents were dissatisfied it had a higher impact on the child and family.

### Positive aspects of training and skills

- Some of the support staff in schools were trained as teachers and offered good levels of support. Teaching assistants worked with other professionals and passed the knowledge gained onto other staff and parents. Some staff were highly skilled and delivered speech therapy throughout the day, which was very effective.
- Teachers were thought of highly by parents if they knew how to sign in Makaton and use other augmentative communication aids.
- It was noticed when teachers have been trained to handle the child's needs sensitively and appropriately. One teacher, who used positive praise, noticed an improvement in the child's behaviour. Another teacher who understood issues

around self esteem got pupils to do their homework in pairs which worked well for one child.

- Teachers who had been trained in autistic spectrum disorders passed on knowledge to teaching assistants and midday supervisors. ASC support had been given to many schools to work more effectively with children. Examples of this included visual aids given to one child to help him in lessons and teaching him who to go to when he needed help. Preparation for events that were not routine involved one teacher taking the time to introduce the child to the experience before his peers by inviting him into the class first.
- Some teachers recognised that they lacked the knowledge and experience to look after children with SEN and were open and honest about this, which was appreciated by parents.
- One school had appointed a learning mentor to pass on information and skills needed to educate individual children.
- Some teachers worked hard to provide the support needed for some children and used financial resources to provide equipment so that children could achieve their academic potential.
- There was a good example of an excellent transition from primary to secondary education when the ASCSS supported the staff and trained 52 members of staff in the new school in understanding ASC.
- The staff at Patcham House were praised for their skills in managing challenging behaviour.
- When the school nurse arranged specific training in medical procedures this was well received by parents.
- Blatchington Mill School was also singled out for running their social skills group for pupils.

### **Negative aspects of training and skills**

- TAs did not always have the specific skills required to look after some children and no means of support to acquire those skills.
- One class teacher did not have any specialist training and did not know how to sign despite having non verbal children in her class. Even some TAs in a special school did not know how to use Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and there was confusion over the differences between PECS and a visual timetable.
- In some schools there was a lack of transfer of knowledge from one staff member to another. In one school a teaching assistant was trained in Makaton and had not transferred those skills onto others before she left. The skills she learnt were lost to the school.
- Skills on managing difficult situations in children with ASC were not passed on. A technique to deal with a behaviour trait may have worked with one child and could be used to help another but there was little evidence of this happening.
- There was evidence that several members of staff had very little knowledge of ASC and did not know how it affected sensitivity to external stimuli and behaviour traits. This included a head teacher who had an ASC unit attached to their school. When dealing with children on the ASC it was noted several times that teachers showed lack of understanding by the way they behaved. Instructions were not

explained carefully enough, children were shouted at in the corridors and some children had severe and unsuitable punishments inflicted on them. One child was made to retrieve rubbish from a roof that he had thrown there.

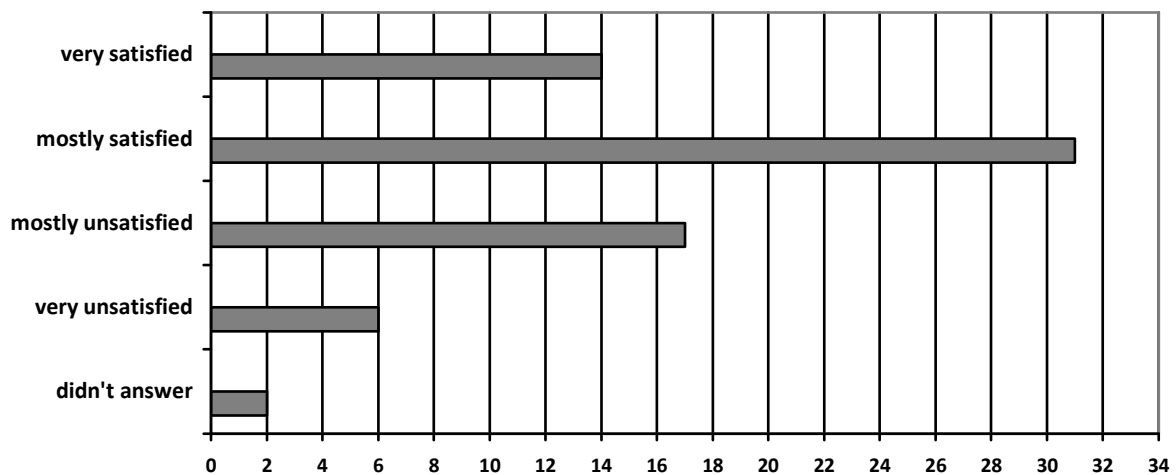
- Some schools were reluctant to use outside agencies to help manage difficult behaviour and used broad methods that did not work with some children.
- Some teachers were not familiar with IEPs and did not recognise the importance of the targets set even if the targets were not particularly academic. One child was not allowed to stay in at break time on a cold day when she asked to, even though one of her targets was to take responsibility for her own health.
- Children with SEN were often excluded from attending school trips because the teachers showed little understanding of their conditions and felt they could not cope with them outside the school environment.
- One of the effects of the complex needs project in MLD schools was that more and more classes were relying on TAs to lead the lessons.
- Some teachers were experts in one area of special needs but not cope well when it came to looking after children who did not fit their area of expertise.
- When children needed to use specialist equipment some teachers did not have the knowledge to use it properly.

#### **Parent carers' Recommendations**

- All teacher training courses should include at least one week's focus on special educational needs and for teachers that have not received this there should be provision made for training in their induction programme to a school.
- Training packages need to include Disability Discrimination Awareness and help teachers to include children with SEN rather than exclude them from the class room setting.
- Teachers and assistants who work with children with SEN should have annual updates that are compulsory. This training should also include temporary staff who should be briefed about children with SEN in their classes.
- Teachers need a training package to help them understand ASC which includes strategies to deal with challenging behaviour and the emotional difficulties experienced by children when faced with change.
- Schools should have a contact list of people that have expertise in some of the more challenging aspects of SEN so that they can seek advice at any time.
- Staff meetings should include updates on all children with SEN and memos passed to all teachers when significant problems arise.
- Teachers should have time to reflect together on their practice and discuss strategies that worked and those that didn't work.
- Centres of excellence should be used as School Improvement Partners (SIPS) and funded to do outreach and share good practice. This expertise could be shared in the form of a video bank of teachers who are trained to share their expert knowledge with others. Some of the TAs, who are highly trained in SEN, could be used in a pool to share their expertise with other schools.
- However, the over use of TAs leading classes should be reviewed and specialist teachers should be used to teach the most needy children.

- Parents could help in the classes to pass on their knowledge and expertise about their children.
- Parents could be given training in P levels and what they mean for their child's education. This has happened at Hillside and Downs View.
- There should be a deaf unit in a mainstream school in the city.

### **Strategies to build trust and independent monitoring of SEN in school**



The graph above shows the levels of satisfaction that parents felt about the SEN decisions made in their children's school and in the local authority.

Again, we can see from the graph that on the whole most parents were satisfied with the strategies developed by schools to build trust. However as before, where parents were dissatisfied it had a higher impact on the child and family.

### **Positive aspects of support and provision received**

- The LA were enthusiastic and supportive towards inclusion.
- In some school parents were involved in the recruitment of a TA for their child.
- In some cases there was a good recognition of support needed and proactive assessments put in place to get that support.
- The statutory process was smooth for some parents although there was sometimes a fight to get the process started.
- There were some casework officers who attended annual reviews which meant that they could hear evidence in person.
- Some schools had given information to parents about P levels.
- For one particular child the school decided to reallocate their SEN resources so that the child could have 1:1 support. Some schools did listen when children needed more support and acted on it. One parent praised the TA who helped her child achieve his full potential.
- Many of the SENCOs were very supportive and child focused when reacting to children's needs. One parent was impressed by the SENCO at her child's school

when she supported her in the statutory process and helped to complete the paperwork.

- Schools did involve other agencies, such as SALTs, occupational therapists (OT) and physiotherapists, in helping the child. One child was getting weekly SALT and another was given music therapy in school time.
- Parents reported that some of the schools did recognise that some children struggle when changing schools and put in place extra support when needed.
- One particular child was well supported to transfer from a mainstream school to special school because the mainstream school recognised that they were not meeting his needs.
- Special peer groups set up in some of the schools helped children to overcome some of their social fears and problems finding friends. One school had set up a group specifically for children with ASC. Special provision was made for one child with Aspergers to travel to an exam location with support.
- In one particular case a child at risk from a permanent exclusion was given 1:1 support by a teaching assistant although this did mean that he was isolated from his peers and not taught by a trained teacher.
- A deaf child was provided with a radio aid to help him hear in the class setting.
- Children with severe ASC were given 1:1 support in small classes in special schools.
- In one particular case the LA did agree to fund a residential placement in the best interest of the child.

#### **Negative aspects of support and provision provided**

- Many children were being turned down for statutory assessments and there was little transparency about the criteria required for a statement to be given.
- Some children who did have a statement were not getting the help they needed because there was a delay in appointing their support assistant.
- When there was no funding attached to a statement the school was under no obligation to provide the support the child needed and no-one was identified to check whether or not the school was supporting the child according to the criteria set out in the statement. It was difficult to get the support on a statement increased when, in some cases, the statement has been a struggle to get in the first place. One parent struggled to get extra hours for her son when he moved from primary to secondary. In another case the statement's annual review was out of date.
- Transition from primary to secondary school was difficult for some children and the need to co-ordinate so many teachers was often a struggle for parents.
- Mysteries also surrounded funding over School Action Plus. In one case the LA said that the school should support the child and the school said they would not do this unless a statement was issued. It was difficult to access support if a child did not have a statement.
- Funding over transport was an issue for some parents and one parent stated that the transport her child received to special school was cancelled without consultation.
- In one particular case a school did not recognise that the state system of education was not suiting a child and did not move him until they were forced to.

- For academically able children with ASC in Patcham House on a dual placement with Patcham High School there was felt to be insufficient support for those children to get used to two sets of school routines and staff expectations. This was difficult for children to manage.
- There was a misconception that just two SALT sessions a week were in the best interests of a child with a significant communication disorder. For this child and others a SALT unit in a mainstream school would have been a better placement for consistent specialist practice instead of individual sessions.
- Involvement of other agencies in the child's education was sometimes done without the parent's knowledge and was not a positive experience.
- When recommendations were made by outside agencies there was no system in place to check that these were being carried out.
- There was no support for some children when they had to sit external tests such as SATS. Results were not passed on to parents when children had sat exams.
- Where early intervention did not happen problems were not identified and had escalated by the time they were recognised. Circumstances could reach crisis point in some situations. One parent had to pull her child out of school for fourteen weeks until support was put in place. His reception class teacher had refused to have him in her class. One other child was only educated for two hours a day. His parent stated that the school would not admit defeat in his education which had slipped back two years. Another child was not supported in school because the school did not really want him there. The parent did not find this out until after he had left. In one school a child was excluded for nineteen days on top of a part time timetable. In one particular case the child had moved through the school system from mainstream to a MLD school and then was just about to start in a school for children with SLD because the support he needed was not given.
- Children with SEN who were quiet and not disruptive or whose needs were not thought to be severe seemed to be overlooked. These children were not given the help they needed to reach their potential.
- In many schools the SENCO was part time and not always available for parents to talk to.
- Lack of equipment was an issue for some parents who stated that it was not available when needed.
- Some parents were concerned that they had differing opinions to the school about what was important for their child. One parent was concerned about her child's handwriting and was not supported by the school.

### **Parent Carers' Recommendations**

- Funding should be available for a resourced parent panel to monitor decisions made about SEN in the city. This body would be able to hold schools to account for decisions they make.
- An independent monitor, not employed by the LA but possibly an overview and scrutiny councillor, could be responsible for holding the schools to account for SEN delivery, whilst working within the schools. They would be responsible for overseeing decisions made about individual children's placement and

communication with parents, acting as an advocate for parents who have concerns about their child's education.

- The LA should review the SEN practice in all the schools in the city and ensure that funding is available to support the children at the appropriate time.
- Policies and procedures should be more standardised across the city. Some schools have large numbers of children with SEN because they have the strategies in place but all schools need to provide for children with SEN.
- Parents felt some schools are using informal exclusions too readily. The LA should have policies in place to step in and intervene before children are failing in their education because they are absent for so long.
- A new development group should be established to look at joined up working amongst schools and sharing of best practice.
- There needs to be better information and support for parents and children at transition points when children move schools
- There needs to be more evidence of early intervention strategies and assessments done by outside agencies before crises occur.
- There should be improved communication between parents and schools. If parents have concerns they should be able to feed these back to the school knowing that they are being taken seriously.
- More parents should be able to help in the school and feel more included.
- Recognition should be made to children who are in receipt of DLA and even if they do not fit the criteria for a statement, schools need to acknowledge their additional needs.
- Children with SEN may need to be taught in smaller class sizes.

The Parent Carers' Council would like to thank all the parents for their thoughts and contributions at the open event and via the questionnaire.

We would like to thank the Amaze staff who helped and supported us in planning the event, Dr Carrie Britton for helping to design the questionnaire and our guests who came to listen to parents' stories and experiences.

We also would like to acknowledge the CYPT (Children & Young Peoples' Trust) Aiming High Project, the PCT (Primary Care Trust) and TDC (Together for Disabled Children) who jointly fund the work of the Parent Carers' Council.

The PaCC is partnered by seven local community and voluntary organisations – Pebbles, Sweet Peas, Kaleidoscope, extratime, Barnardos Link Plus, Mascot and Children's Society (Portage and Befriending).