

## SEN – A Strategy Going Forward

Dudley has a school population of just under 45,000 of whom around 1,400 (2.9%) are children and young people (CYP) who have an Educational, Health and Care plan and are thus seen as having Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Just under half of these pupils currently attend a mainstream school which is slightly below the national average. CYP with the most complex special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) deserve the best provision and every opportunity to achieve to their maximum potential as do those CYP who do not fall into this category.

Other specialist providers are to be found outside of the borough, with some establishments charging the Local Authority quite literally hundreds of thousands of pounds per year to accommodate those pupils that Dudley cannot/doesn't provide for in-borough for a number of reasons.

Specialist provision for SEND have for many years been provided for in Dudley by seven special schools, spread as they are around the borough, which cater mainly for CYP from within the borough but not exclusively so.

These seven schools are able to cater for a wide range of pupil needs and currently do very well in their tasks as all are currently rated 'Good' or "Outstanding" by Ofsted. Specialist provision within mainstream settings for those CYP are also highly regarded. However, as I am sure you will agree, there is always more that can be done to improve outcomes and none of the special schools, with which I am involved, would wish to rest on their laurels – indeed it is fair to say that we endeavour to push the boundaries for our pupils (within the constraints of budget and premises) far more than, say, 5 years ago. This is why our special schools are so highly regarded.

The type and support that those with SEND require may vary widely, as it is most important to remember that each child is an individual. The old system of School Action, School Action Plus and Statement was replaced by SEN Support and Education and Health and Care Plans (EHCP).

The former is supposed to be available to those children needing their pre-school, school or college. In schools it replaces the 'School Action' and "School Action plus" - this might include extra help from a teacher or TA communicating or support with physical and personal care difficulties.

The EHCP for CYP up to the age of 25 is available through SEN support. The aim is to provide more substantial help, with a unified approach to problems encountered by the individual child, through a unified approach that reaches across education, health care and social care needs. (See article in this newsletter on EHCPs for an in-depth analysis of the system as it stands today).

About the same time this was being brought into schools the government also announced that it was their intention to establish an inspection regime of local arrangements for SEN by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) whose aims would be to evaluate how effectively the local area

- identifies disabled children and young people and those with SEN
- meets the needs and improves the outcomes of disabled children and young people and those with SEN.

Dudley LA had, for the greater time of me being involved in education within a specialist setting, adopted a 'reactive' rather than 'proactive' response to the various issues that raised their heads on a fairly regular basis. The fact that all the special schools were good or outstanding, ironically, did them no favours, as it was deemed by those holding the purse strings within the LA that everything was hunky dory and “why were they complaining about lack of this and that?”. The” this and that” more often than not was not simply about funding but getting other agencies on board , to present a unified approach to improving the outcomes for every child in education within the borough.

The LA quite rightly acknowledges that 'it took its eye off things' around SEN and subsequently has in recent times been fairly criticized for this and required a major rethink and understanding of the problems in which it found itself.

Thus a strategy was developed during the current year which was in effect a vision statement of intent. No-one reading the document produced would argue with the content, about collaborative working, integration of services, which works closely with the young people involved, their parents, carers and where individual needs could be met without unnecessary bureaucracy or delay. It also mentioned a strong commitment to early intervention and prevention, so that CYP needs do not increase because early help is provided in a timely way.

The aim is to improve the range and quality of provision and to ensure that the principles of inclusion and equality of access are firmly established as an integral part of the work of all settings, organizations delivering education in the widest context and that these establishments will view inclusive learning as an entitlement and fundamental to raising the aspirations, standards and well-being of all vulnerable groups of CYP.

This inclusive approach would;

- demand high levels of achievement for all
- develop inclusive schools which meet diverse SEN – to meet pupil needs increasingly within their own local communities

- secure a range of provision to meet individual pupil needs, to put resources into mainstream provisions and to re-examine existing provisions to ensure that an appropriate range of facilities is available
- ensure there is a range of specialist educational services to provide support, advice and training within educational settings
- curriculum access – all schools will have a clear statement on curriculum access and inclusion in their policies and outlined on their local offer (LO)
- schools and colleges working together for inclusion – the LA will encourage an increase in the number of outreach and collaborative projects between all schools including special schools to support inclusion
- high levels of satisfaction and participation of pupils, parents and carers – to develop parental and pupil involvement in education.

The government defined inclusion as “a process by which schools, local authorities and others develop their cultures, policies and practices to include pupils and 'actively seek to remove barriers to learning and participation'”

Core values that should underpin these aims are;

- valuing all learners
- valuing diversity and equality
- safeguarding children
- raising aspirations and achievement
- building strong local learning communities
- promoting independence

Dudley, via Children's Services, had already consulted with disabled and non-disabled young people and parents of children with SEND, gaining their views on what 'inclusion' meant to them. Out of this arose a Dudley Inclusion Charter which is;

- underpinned by their Principles of Inclusion
- sets out their vision for an inclusive community

Inclusion means

- no-one is left out
- Inclusion is about Life and Aspirations
- Inclusion starts early
- Inclusion is everyone's responsibility
- Inclusion is built in
- Inclusion benefits everyone
- Inclusion works

Dudley has recognized that fundamentally it would need to improve upon a range of provision to bring about the benefits envisaged by

- increased specialist provision for CYP with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs (SEMH), particularly in Early Years and primary schools and for those on the Autistic Spectrum
- increase specialist early years provision for those children with complex SEN and disabilities
- make available support for Speech, Language and Communication Needs in mainstream schools
- improve support and provision for CYP with significant emotional and mental health needs
- ensure all specialist school provision is fit for purpose and enables the school to meet a wide range of pupil needs
- ensure that schools and other educational settings are able to access timely advice and expertise to support them in making appropriate provision for CYA with SEN and disabilities
- develop the quality and capacity of early years providers, schools and colleges, in order to meet needs
- improve progress rates and outcomes for all CYA with SEN and those who are disabled so that we close the achievement gap between them and their peers
- develop and improve services for CYA and their families with their active participation and make available personal budgets where it will improve independence and choice

Dudley will also endeavour to

- develop greater local integration and coordination of EHCPs, ensuring that this is extended to young people aged up to 25 and promote positive and seamless transitions at all stages between the ages of 0-25
- develop new outcome focussed approaches to joint commissioning and integrated working that promote early intervention and prevention whilst also ensuring that health services meet their statutory duties linked to the provision of services with the EHCP
- develop innovative approaches to addressing gaps in services through joint commissioning and using evidence-based practice to improve quality and availability of provision 0-25 with good transition to adult services
- develop and agree working protocols between health, social care and education to ensure appropriate provision is made and funded in a timely manner
- improve the effective and efficient use of resources to meet the increasing demand and remove perverse incentives so that costs do not escalate
- work with partners in health to ensure more effective commissioning and adequate provision for speech and language therapy, child and adolescent

mental health services

- build parents confidence in support provided and improve the engagement of parents by providing them with timely information, advice and support
- reduce delays in medical, social care and educational assessments so that CYA receive the help they need more quickly
- improve the availability of provision for speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy in schools and Further Education Colleges.

All this reads as very laudable and much, if not all of it, relates to what parents, carers, schools and establishments have been saying was wrong with the system/s in the past. The difference now is that the LA are actually talking about it, making concerted efforts to bring these plans and strategies into fruition and deliver – what it says in the strategy we will deliver.

The fly in the ointment of all this is, however, pupil numbers. Dudley special schools (as most parents will have found to their cost if they have a child who needs a place), are currently full and over subscribed. This is despite many of the special schools having taken in more children than it was ever planned for them to take during 2018-19, with the result that they are now literally full to bursting., so much so that some 40+ pupils whom should have been afforded a special school place in September 2019 are to be educated in mainstream schools with support. This comes with a financial inducement for the school to provide suitable provision, in most cases with TA support or such like.

Because we are getting better at recognizing problems in early years and nursery settings, more children are finding themselves with an EHCP which must be acted upon. Dudley has always said that its special school population is higher than the national average, and whilst this is true when the figures are examined , does this mean that all our good work mentioned in highlighting these children at an early age is fundamentally flawed or not fit for purpose. Of course not. Dudley simply, rightly or wrongly, whether its due to the air we breathe or something in the water, seems to have a higher SEND population than is the norm. This is not something we should be trying to massage the figures to bring into line with the national average but embracing the fact and getting onto the job of supporting parents and carers, doing whatever we are able to do for the children and enabling schools in Dudley to do the very best that they can do for them .

So, at the end of the day I welcome the plan, strategy, vision or whatever you wish to label Dudley's words of wisdom to address the issues our schools face, with a growing number of CYA who at the end of the day will only get one chance for the very best that we can provide for them - as a well known female cook was heard to shout at her local football ground – 'come on - let's be having you'.

Paul Leyshon

Rosewood and Pens Meadow

*{Thank you Paul for this clear analysis of the Special Educational Needs situation in Dudley. I am unsure as to whether Paul's "well known female cook" might just happen to be a Director of Norwich City Football Club or not but the message is very clear}*