

Consultation Results Sensory Impairment Service

Consultation Process

During November and December 2016 a review of the Sensory Impairment Service was carried out and the subsequent extended Staff Consultation closed 24th March 2017. Public Consultation on proposals closed on 12th May 2017, which was extended from the original closing date.

The consultation included the following events.

- Four Public Consultation meetings attended by parents, and other local stakeholders
- Meeting with children and young people
- Two meetings with a range of schools
- Group and individual meetings with staff
- Presentations to trade union colleagues and elected members
- Discussions with voluntary groups including formal responses from National Deaf Children's Society, Northamptonshire Association for the Blind, Royal National Institute for the Blind
- An online survey

Online consultation

We received 80 responses to the online consultation. Almost half of those were from parents, 14% were from employees of the service, 12.5% were from schools, 10% were from voluntary organisations and 2.5% were from a child or a young person using the service.

Comments were received from respondents based across the county. Almost half were based in Northampton, with the next highest number of responses from Wellingborough and Kettering.

Summary of Feedback on Key Proposals

The following recommendations were outlined and discussed at all events and feedback from these together with the online survey is included in this report.

1. Schools to be responsible for recruitment, employment and management of specialist support workers (ACSWs) with designated funding from high needs block

This recommendation was not supported by the majority of parents, staff and voluntary groups. Feedback during the consultation highlighted the following concerns.

- That over time the skills of the ACSW workforce (currently centrally employed) may be lost.
- That schools do not have the capacity to take on this level of support.
- A lack of parental confidence in schools to manage the support for their children
- A concern about a lack of staff cover when the member of school staff was unavailable.
- The specialism and training required to undertake this specialist support role may not be seen as a priority for some schools.

- A lack of understanding of sensory impairment in schools as this is a low incidence disability.
- Lack of LA control if the staff are employed by the school and concerns raised in regard to the capabilities of staff members.
- The robustness of the quality assurance framework
- Dependency being created if the student remains with the same support worker over time, and concerns were raised if the student and support worker were incompatible.

Feedback supporting the proposal highlighted

- The need for more staff in a school to have a greater understanding of sensory impairment and the support children require.
- The need for specialist services and schools to engage fully to ensure a whole school focus on sensory impairment rather than just the individual from the specialist service.
- Concerns about the challenge of having staff in a school day to day who are not directly managed by the school.
- Staff can feel isolated when not part of the school staff team and this can then impact on the service the student receives.
- Some concerns about the centrally employed ACSW not having the skill level required in relation to British Sign Language when the student is at secondary school.
- The need for a robust framework to be in place for the quality assurance of a centrally managed service.

2. The question as to whether the Service should

- Remain centrally managed by the Local Authority and based on NCC premises or**
- Be managed through an NCC maintained special school through a Service Level Agreement**

Under either option the Service would remain a specialist teaching, training and advisory service.

- Based on comments received it was evident that this proposal was not well understood and could have been better explained as this may have alleviated some of the concerns raised. The following illustrates the main misconceptions that arose
 - That the service would be dispersed and managed through a large number of schools rather than still be a central service managed through one or maybe two designated schools through a Service Level Agreement.
 - *This would not be the case – regardless of how it was to be managed it would remain as a central specialist teaching service.*
 - That children would be placed on roll of the school or schools that the service would be managed by.
 - *This would not be the case and children would remain on the roll of the mainstream school that they attend.*
 - That specialist HI or VI Teachers may be diverted from their specialist role to provide emergency cover in the hosting school or that there may be a bias towards children on roll in that school.
 - *Specialist Teachers would continue to focus and support children with a sensory impairment across mainstream schools in the county in the same way as they currently do, without any bias to particular schools.*

- Some respondents felt that it would be a positive move for the service to be managed by a school, because teachers and educational staff would be based in a learning environment, and could gain access to information, training and professional development, which may not be as available in a local authority. Staff would be kept up to date with the latest developments in teaching practice and methods.
- A number of respondents indicated that the important factor was that the service remained as a central specialist team offering consistency and maintaining quality and were less concerned about where the service was located and managed.
- There were also a number of comments about the need to maintain SEN units for those who require this alongside the comments about all schools needing to be inclusive.

3. Other Recommendations Put Forward

a) Focus on Early Years with emphasis on building resilience and independence

All feedback supported this recommendation and valued the importance of early identification and support. Research findings identify this as a time when children make significant progress. Any new model therefore would need to ensure robust support is in place in early years for children. There were some misunderstandings that this may mean that support for older children would not remain available at the current levels, which is not the case.

b) Consistent funding for children with Sensory Impairment alongside those with other SEND

This related to ensuring that the identified provision was funded equitably based on need, rather than who provided the service. For example there are currently inconsistencies where schools had previously decided to directly employ their own ACSWs rather than those employed by the Sensory Impairment Service. There are also differences in funding for in class support for other children with SEND.

Feedback generally focussed on concerns that funding should not be 'cut' for children with a sensory impairment, which is not the case.

c) Develop a core and traded service model available to schools

Feedback was generally supportive of this recommendation, although doubts were expressed that schools would have the finance available to purchase additional services

d) Improve and extend training and advice offer to schools in order to develop their staff

Feedback on this recommendation was mixed, the majority of respondents wanted the ACSWs to continue to be centrally employed however they also wanted schools to have a better understanding of sensory impairment and welcomed an offer to schools which supported them to be more aware of the needs of this group of pupils

e) Improve and extend the quality assurance offer to schools

This recommendation received positive feedback and respondents were generally supportive of having a clear quality assurance framework in place for schools who already currently employ their own ACSWs or may do in the future. The issue of quality assurance of the centrally managed service was also raised and the need to have independent interpreters available to quality assure the signing provision, in order to ensure signers are appropriately qualified and at the right level for the students they support.

f) The Sensory Impairment Service build links with best practice beacon schools and also work in a multi-agency manner extending partnerships with health and social care colleagues

There was positive feedback about the service working to develop beacon schools locally alongside developing relationships and sharing learning from good practice in other areas.

Multi-agency working was seen as essential in any future model and an area of good practice which needs to be constantly maintained. This was particularly key for children and young people with other SEND alongside their sensory Impairment e.g. autism

Conclusions and Further Actions

Having had an opportunity to fully analyse the feedback received the final proposals for the Sensory Impairment Service going forward are as follows.

The service will now retain more centrally employed ACSWs than originally proposed. These ACSWs will continue to be managed centrally by the service to support students identified with the highest level of need. Schools will be able to purchase this support at the current rate of £6k notional SEN and £6k High Needs Funding top up. The service offered to this group of students will be based on the teacher's assessment which will take into account the level of sensory impairment, the holistic need of the student and the need to ensure students are empowered to develop independence skills to enable them to mature and become independent young people. For some students support may need to be more intense at certain times in a pupil's life such as in early years, primary school and at times of transition or during exams. In the case of other pupils the support may need to be consistent throughout the school day.

The service will continue to assess the number of pupils who will require this intensive level of support so that the appropriate number of trained staff will be available.

Schools have always been able choose to employ their own ACSWs, and some already do. The service will be quality assured, either by the centrally employed staff or an independent provider. Funding will be agreed with the schools to ensure that staff with the right level of skills are employed, and schools receive the appropriate level of funding.

The following services will also continue to be provided by the centrally managed team

- Teacher numbers and support will remain at their current level
 - NatSIP Eligibility Framework will continue to be used for guidance, locally adjusted and taking into account teacher professional judgement
 - Direct teaching assessed as above
 - Regular assessment and monitoring as required
- Provision of specialist aids and equipment
- Quality Assurance to schools in partnership with LA and other colleagues
- Training for schools for deaf/HI/VI awareness
- Educational audiology and associated technician
- Mobility Orientation and independent living skills training
- Resources in alternative formats e.g. Braille
- IT technical support

Regarding the question of where the Service sits within NCC organisation, this will not be implemented for September 2017 however discussions with the potential schools are ongoing.

A number of new proposals have now been developed as a direct result of feedback which we have received during the course of this consultation. The review will take these proposals forward into the new model. These included:

- Termly information events with parents to discuss service developments, areas of good practice, new initiatives and feedback on parents' views of the service.
- The establishment of a representative group of individuals from parents, professionals, staff and the voluntary sector who will act in a similar way to a governing body, in ensuring best practice and challenge.
- The development of a robust quality assurance framework for the centrally managed service which may entail the involvement of external agencies for certain aspects of this process.
- Improved information published about the services offered and how these are reviewed and adapted to take into account the changing needs of children and young people. This would also include improving the direct communications to parents/carers about the support provided for their individual child/young person.