

North Yorkshire SEND Strategy Development

Analysis of focus groups

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Introduction

The Council for Disabled Children (CDC) was commissioned by North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC) and North Yorkshire Clinical Commissioning Group (North Yorkshire CCG) to deliver a series of focus groups for both parent carers and professionals to share their views and inform the development of the SEND Strategy. Details of the focus groups can be found in the [Appendix](#).

This report brings together the findings from these focus groups, identifying common themes which ran across the discussions as well as highlighting where experiences or opinions differed, either by place or by stakeholder group.

NYCC and North Yorkshire CCG will use the findings in this report, along with responses from [a detailed questionnaire](#) which was shared with focus group respondents after attending, to develop a draft SEND Strategy for the local area. This will then be shared for consultation.

Approach

CDC colleagues have supported a large number of local areas with their SEND Strategy development, and the team has developed a methodology which centres on a strategic outcomes-based approach to the SEND system and commissioning. In short, this approach drives local decision makers to move away from the question 'what are we doing for children and young people with SEND and their families' to 'what difference are we making in the lives of children and young people with SEND and their families?' This puts responsibility on local leaders not just to deliver services, but to ensure that those services have a meaningful impact on improving quality of life. This approach starts with understanding what families want to see in their lives, and planning services which will support them to get there.

[More information about CDC's outcomes-based approach to commissioning is available here.](#)

This approach shaped the questions asked in the focus group. These were kept deliberately broad, with CDC colleagues drawing out themes after the focus groups were completed. The questions asked were:

- What are the ingredients of a good life for a child or young person?
- What in North Yorkshire is helping children and young people with SEND to live this good life?
- What in North Yorkshire is holding children and young people with SEND back from living this good life?
- If you had a magic wand, what three things would you improve locally?

This report follows these questions.

It was noted by several parent carers that the focus groups were held at short notice, with limited advertising. Some people felt that all of the sessions should be available to all attendees, rather than separated between parent carers and professionals, to increase transparency. CDC reported this feedback to local leaders.

What are the ingredients of a good life for a child or young person?

This question enables us to understand what the SEND System in North Yorkshire should be aiming to achieve for children and young people. This is not a description of how life is now, but what everyone should be working towards; they were consistent across all focus groups. These can form the basis of strategic outcomes statements in the SEND Strategy, which in turn should form the core of all SEND support locally. They can be developed into a data-led accountability framework to evidence what is working and what is not in improving the lives of children, young people and families.

The key themes are as follows:

- Being loved, cared for and valued
 - Having meaningful friendships, with both other CYP with SEND and those without
 - Having romantic relationships
 - Having a supportive, caring family
 - Being valued by supporting adults in all environments
 - E.g. school, extra-curricular activities, at appointments
- Being healthy, particularly in terms of mental health and emotional wellbeing
 - Being resilient
 - Having confidence
 - Having self-worth and a sense of purpose
- Enjoying a wide range of opportunities and challenges, and celebrating achievements
 - Having lots of different experiences, both in SEND specific groups and in inclusive mainstream settings
 - E.g. sport, creative arts, spending time in nature
 - Enjoying learning and the learning environment
 - Celebrating their own strengths and successes, and being celebrated by others
- Becoming more independent
 - Being involved in making decisions in a way which works for the individual, including those who are non-verbal

- Having job prospects
- Being safe

Observations

These themes are very similar to those developed in other local areas and focus on being included, having a good time and being happy. These are not, on the whole, things which services and commissioners are used to focusing on, and they cannot be achieved by a single service or team. Rather they must bring everyone together to achieve them, with children, young people and families at the centre of planning services and monitoring progress. They drive decision-makers to ask families 'what can we do differently to help you to be happier/ more included/ more independent' etc., and this requires a culture change across the whole system.

However, it is important to note that these are adult perspectives. CDC recommends that an exercise is undertaken with children and young people with SEND to understand what they want to see in their own lives.

There was almost no mention of physical health. This is not unusual, most people in discussions such as this recognise that not all children and young people with SEND will be fully healthy, and that health is relative. Statements usually look something like 'I am as healthy as I can be'.

Principles

There were a number of things identified in these discussions which are not outcomes in their own right, but are ways of working which enable the achievement of the outcomes above. These are more about the quality of services and service delivery:

- Services are proactive in meeting need, with a focus on early intervention
- There is transparency around why decisions are made
- Diagnoses and recognition of emerging needs are timely
- The mainstream workforce (school, clubs etc.) are skilled in supporting CYP with SEND
- There is a smooth transition to adulthood
- Parent carers and families receive the support they need to support their child/ren
- Services acknowledge and respond to families' complex lives (e.g. flexible appointments)



What in North Yorkshire is helping children and young people with SEND to live this good life?

Focus group attendees were invited to share the positive elements of support for their children, however small. There were some recurring themes across the groups, as well as locality specific comments.

Across multiple localities

Key individuals

Parent carers across almost all focus groups recognised key individuals who had a positive impact on their children's lives. These were overwhelmingly from voluntary sector organisations, but some were from local providers. Several professional groups also recognised the important role that 'trailblazers' had to play in delivering high quality services. While all of these individuals different, the things they have in common are:

- Taking time to understand CYP as individuals and respond to their needs
- Having a positive view of CYP with SEND and supporting others (including other CYP) to do the same
- Being flexible; shaping their activity or service to the individual rather than the other way around

Focus group attendees would like to see these qualities normalised and embedded across the system, rather than being dependent on the individual's personality.

Voluntary sector support

Almost all parent carer groups identified voluntary sector organisations as providing vital support, but also that access to these is limited and dependent on location. These included:

- AWARE (Craven)
- Ryedale Special Families (Craven and Selby)
- Pendragon Centre (Hambleton and Richmond)
- Go Getter (unclear)
- Daisy Chain (Hambleton and Richmond)
- POSCH (Hambleton and Richmond)
- Be Able Saturday club (Selby)

Pockets of good practice

Joint working

Professionals felt that joint working is improving in some instances, with particular recommendations for the **Mowbray School Parent Support Officers** (Hambleton and Richmond, professional) and **Portage** (Scarborough, professional), as well as increasing recognition that education, health and social care 'all have something to bring to the table' (unclear, professional).

Improvements in particular services/ processes

Some local improvements were noted, although it is clear that the positive impact of these is not being widely felt among families yet:

- Greater awareness of personal education budgets (Hambleton and Richmond, professional)
- Inclusion service locality hubs (Hambleton and Richmond, professional)
- Good collaboration regarding Virtual Schools (professional)
- CAMHS- single point of contact, Compass Buzz, Mental Health teams in schools (Harrogate, professionals)
- Strategic referrals are being made, although need is not always met as a result of the referral (Scarborough, parent carer)
- 16+ Personalised learning pathway (Scarborough, professionals)
- Improved attendance at annual reviews with the move to digital meetings (Hambleton and Richmond, professionals)



What in North Yorkshire is holding children and young people with SEND back from living this good life?

Again, there were many recurring themes across all localities, with the majority of these concerns shared by both professionals and parent carers. Attendees were invited to respond freely, with some of the concerns regarding particular services or pathways, and others being more generally applicable across the SEND system.

Across multiple localities

The following concerns echoed across the focus groups, both professional and parent carers. We have divided them here between strategic (applicable to the SEND system as a whole and operational (related to a particular service or pathway).

Strategic concerns:

- **Insufficient accountability and transparency:** strong language was used by parent carers here, demonstrating a lack of trust in local leaders and the system. There is a clear ask for a change in culture and a new language around SEND which moves away from apportioning blame and towards shared responsibility for improving the lives of CYP with SEND and their families. Parent carers feel that they are 'kept out' of decision-making, and want more open communication from professionals about decisions made at all levels of the SEND system.
- **Insufficient joined up working:** This is partially related to **attitude** and partially to **sharing data**. CAMHS in particular was identified as being out of step with other services (Selby, professional) as well as there being a lack of alignment with adult services (Hambleton and Richmond, professional). Parent carers across the area felt that the 'tell it once' approach is not working as there is no central record held. Parent carers and professionals both felt that families are 'bounced around' the system rather than experiencing continuity of care.
- **Insufficient engagement with parent carers:** Parent carers talked mostly about engaging in decision-making regarding their own child, but professionals also noted challenges around engaging with parents in developing services. Professionals felt that reaching parent carers is often a challenge, with face-to-face meetings a challenge due to geography and digital meetings not fully inclusive due to low literacy or digital poverty. Some parent carers who have engaged have received 'disrespectful' responses from professionals, or have been ignored, which has resulted in crisis when parent carers have been trying to flag early warning signs. Social care and educational were identified in particular (Harrogate, parent carer). It was also noted that engagement with CYP also should be improved.
- **Poor communication:** In general, parent carers felt that communication across the area is poor, with a particular emphasis on the **local offer**. Parent carers across all focus groups commented that either people are not aware of it or that they struggle to find the information they need.

Operational concerns:

- **Insufficient local provision, particular social opportunities:** Participants in all focus groups shared concerns about negative relationship between reduced services and a large, rural county. Parent carers shared many examples of the long journeys they have to make to access support, with a particular concern about the lack of local social activities for their children. Parent carers want to see both more opportunities designed for CYP with SEND, but also more inclusive mainstream opportunities.
- **Negative attitudes to CYP with SEND in schools:** This was another consistent message across all focus groups. Both parent carers and professionals feel that many schools still see CYP with SEND as 'a burden' (Craven, parent carer) and as a result seek to 'get these children out of our schools' (unclear, professional). The underpinning reasons for this were:
 - o Insufficient training for teaching assistants re. SEND
 - o Insufficient understanding of behaviour as communication – hampered by conflicting DfE messaging regarding inclusion versus behaviour policies
 - o Insufficient understanding of mental health and how this intersects with SEND
 - o Low expectations for CYP with SEND
 - o Insufficient reasonable adjustments
 - o Insufficient accountability, particularly for delivering provision as agreed in EHCPs
- **Poor experiences of the EHCP process:** Again, this is a concern for both parent carers and professionals. Specific issues include:
 - o Plans often not completed in the 20-week timeframe, largely due to insufficient capacity
 - o Outcomes are not always holistic
 - o Focus is on budget rather than the appropriate provision to meet outcomes
 - o Poor implementation of agreed support
 - o Annual reviews are not well attended
- **Services are not needs led and early help does not always work effectively:** Many parent carers talked about CYP 'falling through the gap/net' because they did not have the right diagnosis or reach thresholds to receive support, which can result in crisis. There is a clear request for services to be intervene early and proactively, rather than being reactive.
- **Heavy 'burden' on parent carers to coordinate support:** All parent carer groups identified this as a concern, with one participant saying that she had recorded spending almost 40 hours in one month on admin regarding her child and their support. Professionals in several groups expressed concern that parent carers with low literacy, English as a second language and/or wider family concerns are particularly unsupported in the system. There is a clear ask for a key point of contact for families to coordinate support around the individual. There were also several comments about the importance of finding the balance between the parent carer as an expert and the parent carer as someone requiring support from services; understanding that parent carers often but not always hold the answers.
- **Overstretched, understaffed workforce:** Parent carers were, on the whole, very supportive of the staff who work with their children. They acknowledge that times are tough, and that staff across services have very high workloads. However, both parent

carers and professionals are concerned about the impact this has on their children as waiting lists are very long across a number of services, with referrals for autism diagnosis (Harrogate, Selby) and CAMHS (Harrogate, Hambleton & Richmond, unknown) a particular concern.

- **Insufficient respite support:** Respite services are limited and/or expensive, and families who have a personal budget struggle to spend it as there are insufficient staff to recruit as respite supporters (Hambleton & Richmond, professional and parent carer; Craven, parent carer)

Locality specific concerns

The following concerns were only mentioned in one or two focus groups, but are still important:

- Insufficient condition-specific support locally (Craven, parent carer)
- Consideration of the child in the wider family context rather than the child as an isolated individual; i.e. awareness that parent carers have multiple children, jobs etc. which also place demands on their time, so greater flexibility is needed (Unknown, parent carer)
- Transition support does not start early enough (unknown, parent carer)



If you had a magic wand, what three things would you improve locally?

We have already identified a number of key asks for change in the previous section, which we shall revisit here. This question pushed focus group participants to prioritise the issues they face in the system, and this can serve as a guide for local priorities.

While the 'what is holding children and young people back?' conversations highlighted issues with particular services, the priorities identified are much broader and are much more focused on attitude and culture.

From most frequently requested to least:

1. More positive attitudes to CYP with SEND and their families across the system, but particularly in schools, with a strengths-based approach.
2. Clearer, more accessible information for families and more transparent communication generally, including honesty about limitations.
3. All services are needs-led rather than diagnosis- or threshold-led, and take a proactive approach rather than reactive.
4. Invest in relationships to build 'a compassionate system', with families supported consistently throughout their SEND journey.
5. Better joined up working between services so families feel supported, including a key worker to coordinate support.
6. Better quality education, including more inclusive mainstream schools, more special school places and more choice for families.
7. Equality of services across the county; an end to the postcode lottery.
8. Greater capacity across the system.
9. More social opportunities and skilled care workers who provide respite for families as well as fun and friendship for CYP.

The final asks were each identified in one focus group:

- Improved EHCP process (*this was only specifically identified once but may be implicit in other asks*)
- Greater support for professionals
- Greater trust in professionals
- More skilled care agency workers
- A review of the approach to EHCPs for CYP in custody
- Specialist careers advice
- Shared aims (*this would be achieved by adopting a strategic outcomes framework approach*)
- Signs of Safety training for all professionals
- Development of a key worker role as a single point of contact for families (*during discussions this was raised frequently, but perhaps was only 'wished' once as improvements in the system would make it less necessary*)
- Improved and increased mental health provision
- Improved early identification
- Listening more to the family (*this is implicit in many of the other 'wishes'*)

Conclusion and potential further support

The concerns and asks raised in these focus groups echo those we have heard across the country, and we will continue to highlight these in our work at the national level. Many of them are due to capacity, limited resource and ever increasing pressure on the system, however many others are due to the local culture. Culture change is always a challenge, however North Yorkshire have taken a very positive step in beginning the SEND Strategy refresh with the views of parent carers. We understand that a parallel exercise is taking place to understand CYP perspectives, which we welcome.

We were asked during one of the focus groups 'we have been here before, why should this be any different this time?' While CDC colleagues are not familiar with the details of past SEND Strategy consultations, the Parent Carer Forum representative was keen to stress that there seems to be a greater willingness from local leaders to move forward and work in partnership with families, which is a very positive step.

These focus groups have provided:

- A series of themes which can serve as strategic outcomes for the system to work towards
- Principles or ways of working which can be used to measure quality of service delivery across the system
- Successes to celebrate and learn from
- Challenges to address, with priorities identified, which can serve as a framework for a system-wide workplan

CDC can provide further support with this process, potentially through the funded Delivering Better Outcomes Together programme. Other areas who are on similar journeys have requested support to:

- Develop a theory of change which draws together on-going and future improvement work to drive towards achievement of the strategic outcomes
- Develop a system-wide monitoring framework to measure and communicate progress towards the implementation and achievement of the strategic outcomes
- Identify opportunities for implementation of the strategic outcomes across the local SEND system
- Implement the strategic outcomes in a particular pathway or group of services (e.g. therapies, neuro-developmental pathway)
- Explore data around each of the outcomes to identify key interventions for accelerating achievement of the outcomes ([a Turning the Curve conversation](#))
- Strengthen the quality of Education, Health and Care Plans through [freely available e-learning](#) and/or facilitated workshops

Thanks

CDC would like to thank everyone who gave up their time to attend and deliver these focus groups, and we hope we will continue to work with you on this journey in the future.

Appendix

Date	Area	Audience	Number of registrations
28/06/21	Craven	Professionals	Cancelled due to low registrations
30/06/21	Hambleton and Richmond	Professionals	5
01/07/21	Craven	Parent Carers	4
01/07/21	Selby	Professionals	Cancelled due to low registrations
01/07/21	Any	Parent Carers	4
06/07/21	Any	Professionals	8
07/07/21	Hambleton and Richmond	Parent Carers	9
07/07/21	Harrogate	Parent Carers	4
08/07/21	Harrogate	Professionals	4
08/07/21	Any	Parent Carers	10
12/07/21	Scarborough	Parent Carers	9
12/07/21	Any	Professionals	10
13/07/21	Scarborough	Professionals	17
15/07/21	Selby	Parent Carers	8
Total number of Parent Carers registered:	48	Total number of professionals registered:	44

Where 3 attendees or fewer registered, the focus group was cancelled and the attendees invited to attend one of the 'any area' sessions or complete a written submission. Likewise, where attendees registered but did not attend, they were given the opportunity to submit a written submission.