Summary

Part 3 of the Children and Families Bill made provision to change the way the needs of those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are assessed and met. The Evaluation of the SEND pathfinder programme: Process and implementation report considers how effective pathfinder authorities have been in implementing the proposals made in the act and some of the difficulties they have encountered. This briefing will be of interest to members and officers working with schools, children’s services, health and disability teams.

Background & Context

Evaluation of the SEND pathfinder programme: Process and implementation, produced by the SQW research agency and published by the DfE, is the first of two evaluation reports for the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) pathfinder programme. This report focuses on process and implementation, and the second will focus on impact, and be published in the autumn. This paper draws on the report as well as previous briefings published by the Local Government Information Unit. These include The SEND Pathfinder Programme – March 2013 Report published to coincide with the publication of the Children and Families Bill, The SEN Code of Practice: Indicative Draft, published in April 2013, and The SEND Pathfinder Projects: Early Experience, published in September 2012.

Thirty-one local authority areas became pathfinders to develop and trial some of the ideas published in the Children and Families Bill. These include an integrated assessment process, a single ‘Education, Health and Care Plan’; and personal budgets across education, social care, health, and adult services for children and young people from birth to 25 years. The evaluation is based on self-reporting of progress by all pathfinders and in-depth case study work in 10 selected areas.

The aims of the evaluation were to establish whether the pathfinders:

- Increased real choice and control, and improved outcomes for families with disabled children and young people and those who have special educational needs
- Made the current support system for disabled children and young people and those with SEN and their parents or carers more transparent, less adversarial and less bureaucratic
- Introduced greater independence into the assessment process by using the voluntary sector
- Demonstrated value for money, by looking at the cost of reform and associated benefits
Pathfinder authorities were asked to work out ways of placing families at the centre of a process that involved the development and trialling of (a) an assessment process (b) a single, joined up ‘education, health and care plan’ (the EHCP) (c) personal budgets across education, social care, health, and adult services as appropriate for children and young people, and (d) a ‘local offer’. They were also asked to build on the skills and resources of the voluntary and community sector (VCS).

Recognising the scale of the challenges involved, and the short (18 month) timescale, almost all of the areas set out to develop trials with a fairly small number of families, often families already being supported rather than new ones. These trials were then intended to inform their understanding of what needed to be taken forward over the longer term for a much larger group.

Pathfinders have been establishing new processes that include:

- the assignment of a key worker so that families have a single point of contact
- the development of personal profiles through which families and young people can put their views forward
- adopting person centred planning approaches
- moving to a single EHCP document.

The general feedback has been positive, with changed approaches reported to have increased choice and control for families who were involved in the development of outcomes and agreeing the plan to meet these outcomes. Pathfinders recognise the advantages of working differently, and are positive about the impact of the changes.

Coordinating workstream strands was a challenging task for the majority of case study areas and most took one of two approaches. The first prioritised the development of a new single planning process, with engagement of families and workforce development following. The second approach sought to develop work streams simultaneously, requiring additional time and closer management of the different elements.

The first approach generally led to strong progress setting up a process and trialling this with families, but often meant other pathfinder requirements (such as the development of personal budgets, resourcing and the local offer) were poorly developed. The second approach led to more comprehensive but slower progress, often with a smaller number of families having been taken through the new process.

### Integrated Planning and Focusing on Outcomes

Different models of planning trialled in the case study areas included the development of a family profile and plan by a key worker, or the ‘Team around the Family’ (TAF) model where all relevant professionals were brought together to agree a plan. Where draft plans were pulled together by a key worker they were either developed in consultation with other agencies and passed to the family for feedback, or they were developed after family engagement and then passed to other agencies for feedback. A third possibility was bi-lateral planning between the family and the key worker/coordinator and where possible, other agencies.
Some areas were using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) documents as their template for assessment and planning, others were developing instruments for their pathfinder. Templates used all tended to include the following:

- Key/basic information about the child/young person, their family, and the services they were currently being supported by
- A headline assessment/pen picture – including an evidence-based picture of the strengths and dislikes (including the identification of needs) of the child/young person and their priorities
- Outcomes (both short and longer term) and a means of measuring these
- An action plan showing how each outcome would be achieved and which agency/service would be responsible for delivering each action
- Appendices that include supporting information such as assessment evidence.

Issues that pathfinders said could have an impact on the quality of the process and plans included (a) key workers and others involved in the process lacking an understanding of what an outcome is and instead focusing on activities to be delivered, and (b) the confidence of key workers to work outside the remit of their own agency and the extent to which they could commit other services to fund actions.

The sign-off or approval of plans was something that many of the case study areas had not yet considered. Short-term solutions had included (a) multi-agency panels signing off, (to ensure different agency involvement), (b) sign off by the pathfinder lead and manager, or (c) sign-off during the planning TAF meeting. The last model was reported to work well during the trial but may be difficult to sustain over time as senior involvement in TAF meetings is unlikely to be possible going forwards.

Several areas were considering the development of a proportionate sign off process, which would be based on the risk and resource associated with each plan, and involve a mixture of low level sign off by key workers and their managers and higher level sign off by senior budget holders.

**Ensuring the Full Engagement of Services**

Whilst there is good strategic engagement with pathfinder work in most pilot authorities, professionals from a health background were sometimes less well engaged, and most projects reported some difficulties in engaging the VCS sector, largely because they were unclear about the role they could play. After a slow start, parents and carers were getting involved in most pathfinders, but the same was not true of children and young people, where work remains to be done.

Attendance from senior health representatives was reported as variable in some pathfinders. Nearly all the case study areas voiced frustration at the lack of guidance on expectations around health engagement with the pathfinder. Joint-sponsorship of the programme was not sufficient to engender the required engagement with many senior health professionals struggling to balance the demands of the pathfinder with their core health work.

The pathfinder has now been formally recognised within the most recent NHS Mandate, although other uncertainties created by reorganisation of the health service and on-going health reforms...
could still lead to problems. A lack of understanding around how health services for families with children and young people with SEND would be commissioned from April 2013 onwards has also been an issue. It is hoped that the clearer duty now placed on Clinical Commissioning Groups will improve things.

The pathfinder brief (and the Bill) expect the involvement of the VCS. After initial uncertainty in pathfinders, this has increasingly focussed on supporting families through a support, facilitator, key worker or advocacy role. For this approach to work it is important that all services work effectively together at both strategic and operational levels. More change may be expected as families become more confident in participating in the new system, and as the pathfinder approach increasingly reaches new families rather than those already receiving services.

Areas that had previously implemented ‘Aiming High for Disabled Children’ found they had a legacy of inclusion workers/service coordinators whose job included providing support to families to increase their access to mainstream and community based services. The skill-set and approach used by these staff was felt to work well. One area noted that these workers had also helped with the development of local authority based Family Information Services, which could also act as facilitators of the pathfinder approach and local offer.

### Ensuring the Engagement of Parents & Families

Case study areas recognised sustained parent carer engagement as vital to meeting the requirements of the SEN reforms. Some were beginning to embed this in their normal working practices, but many were concerned about how to resource this when pathfinder grant funding runs out. Parents have been involved in the assessment and planning process, through the use of person/family centred approaches and key working. There has been less progress in terms of the involvement of children and young people. The report expects more inputs from parents and children and young people as pathfinders move forward.

There has been a tendency to work initially with existing service users with the risk that approaches developed may only be applicable to them and not to new families. This could create issues when areas start to consider how to scale up their approaches to include a wider cohort of families, which will need to include both new families and those that are more difficult to engage.

Improving coordination across services is largely down to the key worker understanding the range of assessments that may be required and joining these up wherever possible. Shifting the focus to outcomes was clearly demonstrated in pathfinders, although many key workers found it challenging. Further workforce development and support for cultural change are important to moving forward.

Families were pleased with the offer of a choice of key worker as it enabled them to ensure that they were working with someone they liked and, most importantly, trusted. Difficulties of this approach included:

- (a) capacity problems where several families nominated the same individual(s) which led to an alternative offer being made by the pathfinder manager
- (b) Uncertainty on the part of some families about who to nominate leading to pathfinder managers allocating key workers and explaining why the allocated worker was a good choice
(c) Key workers from one service not being selected by families and resisting them when suggested leading to ill-feeling within the service in question, (although this provided an opportunity for that service to reflect on the skillset of staff and how to incorporate key working training).

In general, across the case studies, there was acceptance that some form of choice should be offered to families, even if the choice was simply to ask for someone else.

The development of the local offer is also expected to help families to identify different services. Progress on development has been slow, although it has gathered speed in the last six months as areas increasingly recognise its importance. Many areas underestimated the level of resource required to develop their local offer, and were unclear about what should be covered.

The take up of personal budgets and SEN direct payments has also been limited. This is largely because developing a robust process that includes gathering information on the unit costs of services has been complex and challenging. In addition, demand for SEN direct payments amongst parents and carers has been low, although they were keen to be involved in the decision making around support for their child, and to have choice and control.

Comment

The SEND requirements in the Children and Families Bill imply a major change management responsibility for local authorities that includes working with other service delivery agencies, the voluntary and community sector and parents and carers. The language used to describe the changes may match with parental expectations, but whether real change can be delivered within the timescales envisaged, when there are no additional resources, remains to be seen.

The experience of the pathfinders could be summed up as the expenditure over two years of significant amounts of effort and money that "Overall, ........ appears to have led to mainly small changes in the support packages received by families and young people. These changes were often to resolve issues around the delivery of the main services, rather than changes to the services themselves (e.g. when/how things are delivered as opposed to what is delivered)" (page 106 of the Evaluation).

The Evaluation shows that while new processes can be put in place within the timescale expected, the cultural change across a range of service deliverers that will deliver what parents seem to want, and ensure the full engagement of those parents, carers and children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities, cannot be rushed. The evaluation may therefore be too early to tell the full story.

Service deliverers that need to engage include many that may be pre-occupied with other changes they are going through (e.g. schools and health services) and this could create further difficulties. The process is however, an interesting model for the local authority that wishes to develop further its role as an advocate for the needs of local people and ‘market maker’ or commissioner of services to meet those needs.
External downloads


TSO *Children and Families Bill* (HL Bill 32 - June 2013)

Related briefings

*SEN Code of Practice: Indicative Draft*, (April 2013)

*SEND Pathfinder Programme – March 2013 Report* (March 2013)

*Children and Families Bill* (March 2013)

*SEND Pathfinder Projects: Early Experience*, (September 2012)

*Support and aspiration: a new approach to SEN and disability – progress and next steps* (May 2012)

*SEN and disability Green Paper: Support and Aspiration* (March 2011)

For further information, please visit [www.lgiu.org.uk](http://www.lgiu.org.uk) or email john.fowler@lgiu.org.uk