

The SEND Pathfinder Projects: Early Experience

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Summary

This briefing provides an overview of the experience of the [Special Educational Needs and Disability \(SEND\) Pathfinder](#) programme launched to explore further the ideas outlined in the Green Paper, [Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability](#). A briefing on the supporting [Draft legislation on Reform of provision for children and young people with Special Educational Needs](#) will be available from CSN shortly.

The briefing will help colleagues including school governors learn about the pathfinder programme that has supported the development of this draft legislation. It summarises overall discussion and development within the pathfinders as currently outlined on their website. The briefing considers pathfinder thinking and developments under the headings of personal budgets, banded funding, assessment and a single education, health and care plan, and the Local Offer. Pilot work has only been partially completed, and the briefing also indicates some of the thinking of parent and practitioner groups in relation to the draft legislation.

Overview

The Green Paper, [Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability](#) was published by the Department for Education in March 2011.

A subsequent '[Progress and Next Steps](#)' follow-up was published in May 2012. It re-iterated the commitment that by 2014 a new assessment process will be introduced including a single plan, the Education, Health and Social Care (EHC) Plan, for children and young people from birth to 25 which focuses on improving outcomes. It will be more streamlined, completed quicker, and include an offer of a personal budget for all families with an EHC plan as a means of offering more freedom of choice to families. See [Related Briefings](#) for CSN briefings on these documents.

[Draft legislation on the Reform of provision for children and young people with Special Educational Needs](#) has now been published for consultation and will be introduced to Parliament in early 2013.

The 18-month [Special Educational Needs and Disability \(SEND\) Pathfinder](#) programme was launched in September 2011 and is due to complete in March 2013. During this time the 20 SEND pathfinders, involving 31 local authorities (LAs) and their Health Authority partners, have been testing many of the commitments included in the Green Papers. The experiences of pathfinders and Individual Budget (IB) sites are intended to inform debates that the new legislation can draw and learn lessons from. The Departments has welcomed news of Pathfinder and IB site progress,

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and the emergence of innovative practices with strong parental engagement. The Pathfinder project website has included report backs on progress from participating authorities and a series of events focusing on key issues. Mott Macdonald are providing support for the project and its activity strands.

This paper draws from the SEND Pathfinder website and distils the debates and experiences of pathfinders under the headings used for pathfinder events up to the 15 September 2012. It does not represent final outcomes for authorities involved, but access to this debate can help readers to appraise critically how the new arrangements may impact on the work of LAs and their partners locally.

Briefing in full

Personal Budgets

Most of the SEND pathfinder authorities are reporting that not all parents are interested in holding money personally or in the increased responsibility that implies, although they are interested in greater transparency. Hartlepool and Darlington suggest this has benefits for providers as well as parents as there is greater understanding of the costs involved. Nottinghamshire are also reporting that working with parents/carers to enable greater understanding is bringing positive results. Derbyshire, who have implemented individual budgets in social care services, also reports benefits from notional budgets and greater transparency, but also suggests a clear bottom line is important for families. Many authorities think time is needed to build the understanding of parents and families, believing guidance and support for them is important. Lead professionals/key workers could play an important role in managing families' expectations and helping authorities understand their wishes. There could also be a role for an independent voluntary and community sector (VCS) broker or negotiator to help families (called a navigator in some authorities).

Most pathfinder authorities report that cultural change is required across professionals providing services, if a new parent and family focused market is to be established. Authorities such as Gloucestershire with a history of block contracts are pointing to a need to work hard to change professional cultures and unlock resources currently tied up in block contracts. A personal budgets policy across the three main services (education, health and social care) is challenging as it implies greater consistency in terms of funding, delivery and monitoring. Wigan has established new multi-agency key working services specifically to ensure that the views of pilot families are at the heart of the process developing through the Pathfinder programme. The implications of this cultural change and working practices appear to be:

- Greater use of pooled budgets, or at least, greater transparency of funding streams;
- Better information sharing across agencies; and
- A change in resource allocation systems, for example Southampton has developed a new in-house system and Gloucestershire is working to develop a new IT based system.

Making it Personal (http://www.kids.org.uk/information/106214/making_it_personal/) is a project working in partnership with the Council for Disabled Children, Disability Rights UK, Radar (Royal Association for Disability Rights), OPM (The Office for Public Management), In Control charity, and

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NAFIS (National Association of Family Information Services, managed by the Daycare Trust) funded by the DfE. They are developing:

- Case studies to illustrate how families have accessed and used personal budgets;
- A handbook for parents about what personal budgets are, why they are being promoted by the Government and how they can be successfully used to provide families with more choice and control over the support and services that they access;
- Online guidance, to complement the handbook, covering the basic facts about personal budgets, this includes a useful glossary.
- Supportive guidance for commissioners on how to implement effectively the whole system changes required in order to make personalisation and personal budgets for disabled children and young people possible.

Banded Funding

The DfE used the pathfinder network to explore further a national banding model for the allocation of funding. The need to ensure transparency, brevity and achieve a consistent match between needs and support are the two most important objectives driving the development of the banded model. If this is to be achieved, the language used in the model will be important in two ways:

- the way in which needs were expressed and support defined must be understandable to parents, children and young people,
- it must use a shared language across the different professional agencies providing services

Pathfinder authorities felt that as with Resource Allocation Systems (RASs) being developed around individual care budgets, bandings should be part of the assessment process. That process and the resulting EHC plan needs to be person-centred and outcome-focused with the bandings matched to support in a transparent and consistent manner. The role of the model is to provide a decision-making tool which will support the achievement of outcomes. Banded Funding will also help to make the Local Offer more transparent, by providing clarity and guidance on the accessing of funding for local offer services.

Discussion included the possibility of a band describing 'universal' needs and provision. This would mirror, for example pupils under the current Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice with its 'School Action' and School Action Plus' categories. The Manchester Pathfinder has developed a three part age-related banding system focusing on children up to 4, from 4 to 14, and from 14 to 25. Issues to be faced include the challenge of applying bandings across service delivery areas. A banded funding model that is person focused does not necessarily have to specify education, health or social care elements of service delivery, although there are challenges in achieving this level of integration. There are also tensions implicit in implementing a system based on individual needs where most services for children and young people (including schools, colleges, etc) work within a framework of institutional funding.

Assessment and a Single Education, Health and Care Plan

Pathfinder authorities have debated amongst themselves whether a single assessment process and plan should be followed for all children with SEND and others who felt this approach overly bureaucratic as the needs of many are being met through standard provision/services. One of the

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second group is Wiltshire who expressed the view that those whose needs were not met by standard provision or who needed support to 'participate fully in everyday life' and to have the 'same opportunities and aspirations as all' should have access to a single plan. Some suggested a plan might operate in two tiers, with statutory and non-statutory (or local) elements. In Bromley and Bexley's case, the first part is 'owned' by the parent, child or young person, and the second part completed by service providers.

How the referrals are then managed is a key issue. This could be via a 'multi agency panel', a 'Single Point of Access' process, an extension of the CAF approach or a variety of other ways. Requests for access to a single plan from children, young people and families is a core aspect for many authorities if they are to be at the heart of the process. Many felt that within a multi-agency context a transparent approach where a range of referral routes is open, clear, and accessible, with the child and family at the centre, is required.

Some pathfinder authorities are considering the voluntary and community sector (VCS) playing a role as advocates or navigators in support of parents and carers. Manchester are piloting this approach as well as considering innovative ways to store and develop the plan using cloud computing as a way of ensuring the parent, child or young person remain at the centre. There is general agreement that the main contact role (whether it is termed key worker, navigator, plan co-ordinator or lead professional) is a critical one that requires a high level of understanding not just of parent and carer wishes, but the commissioning process and service delivery locally. Pathfinders agreed, in general, that one person should be a family's key contact working with the family and guiding them through the process. Many felt that families should be allowed to nominate or choose a person for this role.

There was also discussion of a potential mismatch between the social care assessment process (where the Munro review recommended removing statutory timescales), and the current level of legal prescription in timescales for SEN statements. Some pathfinders expressed a view that the health service should be under a duty to provide the health elements of an EHC plan, similar to the duty LAs are currently under to provide the special educational elements of SEN statements as this could increase parental confidence. Many authorities are exploring how to address these issues through improved joint planning and coordination. There was also recognition that cross-authority issues are raised by looked after children placed out of authority and consequently whether (or not) other specialist plans (e.g. safeguarding) need to be included.

Local Offer

Most pathfinder authorities are still at an early stage in the development of a local offer. The local offer would need to include a large amount of information across multiple services, disabilities and ages but could also provide an opportunity for the adoption of a 'one stop' approach across services. As the SE7 Pathfinder consortium put it 'the key issue is how can the right information be provided at the right time' that is detailed enough to meet the needs of those making market choices, but remains manageable and understandable for a group with diverse needs as well as a wide age range. Some authorities, such as Manchester, Northamptonshire or Wigan are considering existing or previously published Family Services Directories as the basis for the offer whilst others are thinking in terms of new web delivery systems. Hertfordshire are considering a layered format that can help users to move from the overall picture to more specific information,

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focusing around 7 transition points where users will be looking for service provision. There is universal agreement that the engagement of parents/carers and children/young people in the development of local offers is important.

Pathfinders also suggest that some families need additional support in accessing information, no matter how simple and clear it is. Manchester, for example links each section of its Family Services Directory to a 'real person' telephone contact.

Most pathfinders feel that local provision meeting local need is a strength, although they can also see advantages in a nationally prescribed overarching framework setting out minimum requirements and parameters for a local offer. This could include values and principles such as co-production with parents underpinned by multi-agency working practices, and support transferability making the local offer accessible to parents across local boundaries. In addition the local offer would need to include the 'pathways to the Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan' that is to be required. There is agreement that schools, colleges and academies should be engaged in the process of developing the local offer although many identified this as a challenge. One pathfinder thought that the role and responsibilities of SENCOs and inclusion officers could be raised to fulfil the requirements of providing information about services in the local offer.

Comment

It is clear that Pathfinder authorities are working hard to provide clearer and more integrated assessment pathways, ensuring parents and families have more control within the procedures for determining appropriate service provision and funding allocations. A major concern is an article headed '[Government risks premature SEN legislation](#)' on the TAC (Team Around the Child) website which suggest that insufficient time has been allocated to understanding the outcomes of pathfinder work in this complex and difficult area, potentially resulting in weaker legislation. *"the wording of the new legislation will need to be carefully scrutinised to ensure that speeding-up assessments and extending the protection of sen law to twenty-five year olds (which will inevitably place an increased burden on LAs' budgets) will not be 'paid for' by a weakening of children's entitlement to special educational provision across the whole of the age range"*.

The SQW research and evaluation group has produced [Evaluation of the Send Green Paper Pathfinder Programme](#). Reports show that most projects have only recently got to the stage of recruiting families, and early feedback from families is much more likely to report improvements in process than outcomes. [IPSEA \(Independent Parental Special Education Advice\)](#) have published a press release welcoming the draft legislation, but also expressing some caution about the potential loss of benefits provided by current SEN statementing processes: *'It is time to be clear and transparent about what can and cannot be expected to be provided by any system. This needs to be a system that works for all children and young people – not just those that have parents to "police" and enforce it.'* There is a possibility that insufficient work has been done to address the concerns of some parents.

External downloads

[Special Educational Needs and Disability \(SEND\) Pathfinder programme](#)

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Department for Education, [Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability](#) (2011)

Department for Education, [Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability: Progress and Next Steps](#) (2012)

Kids, Working with Disabled Children Young People and their Families, [Making it Personal](#) (2012)

TAC (Team around the Child) website, [Government Risks Premature SEN legislation](#), (2012)

SQW, [Evaluation of the SEND Green Paper Pathfinder Programme](#) (March 2012)

Related briefings

[SEN and disability Green Paper: Support and Aspiration](#)

[Support and aspiration: a new approach to SEN and disability – progress and next steps](#)

[Learning Difficulty Assessments: new DfE statutory guidance for local authorities and PAC on special education for 16-25 year olds](#)

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