16th March 2017

**SEND Family Voices response to the Lenehan Review**

SEND Family Voices is an independent charity run by a steering group of 20 volunteers; all are parents of children or young people with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND). Many are also representatives from disability specific support groups or special schools; this gives the steering group a strong network of skills and understanding.

We are also the parent/carer forum for Kingston and Richmond (London) boroughs.

[www.sendfamilyvoices.org](http://www.sendfamilyvoices.org)

**SEND Family Voices’ response to each of eight queries below**

* the characteristics of the children and young people currently in residential special schools and colleges;

Medically and/or developmentally complex, requiring 24/7 care.

Emotionally, neurologically complex, with anxiety and other factors that manifest as ‘challenging behaviour’

Unsuitable educational and/or insufficient social care provision locally, so the family is not supported enough to allow the young person to stay at home. The impact on the family is maximum, and not reduced. So, the young person with complex needs becomes the whole centre of the family, not one equal part of it. Something has to give.

* how and why these children and young people come to be placed in residential special schools and colleges;

No local provision.

Medically and/or developmentally complex, requiring 24/7 care.

Emotionally, neurologically complex, with anxiety and other factors that manifest as ‘challenging behaviour’

Families can’t reasonably cope.

Some families already have problems plus having a child or young person with SEND (eg: parents who have SENs themselves, parents with mental health conditions or substance abuse issues); this makes such families much more vulnerable to start with – and then add children with SENDs to the mix.

Although there are many families that would like local provision and/or respite so that they can keep their child at home. Often, there is a leap in local capability that results in residential provision being the only option (with nothing in the middle ground) – and not necessarily at the desire of the family.

Wouldn’t it be great to think creatively about supporting and keeping a family together – that want to stay together?

*“We want the same for our disabled children as any parents want for their children.”* (Parent)

* the pattern of provision across the country and how it is commissioned and procured;

SEND Family Voices can’t comment on national provision and commissioning with any degree of authority.

* what good quality support looks like for these children and young people, both pre- and post-placement (including the role of early intervention, family support and community services);

Here is the place to talk about the services around the school… All too often, parents end up as the project managers, relying ‘on the kindness of strangers’ eg the Transport person who sends a text to say the traffic is bad on the way to / from school or college.

There is also the sad default that a child/young person is in a local provision, and it is only when that fails, that the residential special school is funded. So much for early intervention.

Good quality support includes being centred around the child or young person, and their family; highly skilled, knowledgeable and trained staff, decent staff to child/young person ratio where indicated. SMART targets, efficient communication, especially when transferring back into borough from a residential placement. Good and timely transfer from children to adult services where this is indicated.

*“A school sinks or swims on the calibre of staff within it. My child is in a school with 60 acres, but the ever-changing staff & therapists make this meaningless.”* (Parent)

Services do not listen carefully enough, or often enough, or respectfully enough, to families. Parents are usually the experts when it comes to their own children; not enough professionals are confident enough to appreciate this.

There is too much reliance on what the statutory duty is, over and above the needs and human rights of the child.

*“Basically, what I wanted, was just to be another kid on a PGL trip, not to be excluded or put away. The best thing was just having the girls knock on the door and having a good gossip in our rooms.”*

Young Person (with physical disabilities, no learning difficulties)

*“The specialist centre students are allowed to leave five minutes early so they can get fast tracked through the canteen before the crowds of chimpanzees start running down the stairs.”*

Young Person (with autism)

The two quotes above are from young people in mainstream secondary schools. However, their desires and aspirations are equal to those in special and/or residential schools and colleges.

In terms of the community, disability is still taboo. In the 21st century, it’s OK to be gay, transgender etc (which it wasn’t in the 1970’s; only forty years ago). It’s not OK to be autistic, or to look, sound or behave oddly.

* the experiences and outcomes of these children and young people and their families, and how these can be improved;

Outcomes… that’s a tricky one. We hear plenty of stories about those at the higher functioning end (of any condition) who learn life skills in the locality of their residential placement – only to find the buses are a different colour when they return to their parent’s community.

For those at the more profound end of learning disabilities there are tales of a carousel of ‘life skills’ courses, and mental health difficulties, or an existence within supported accommodation.

Listen to the voices of the families and young people. They are the experts by experience. Work in partnership with them to try and improve experiences and outcomes.

It may sound odd, but flexibility and awareness training for all staff about the importance (and success) of keeping the child, young person at the centre of everything.

*“...the child’s local social life and friendships are also curtailed by an out of borough provision.”*

* how schools and colleges are supported to meet the needs of these children and young people by all agencies;

By seeking funding from multiple local authorities and hoping for the best! The students are reliant on the leadership’s intentions and ethics. ie If the founding fathers are good, and still in situ, the provision is probably thoughtful and good. If the provision is a business, think again… it’s all about return on investment.

Given the present economic climate and shortage of funding, not sufficiently!

The needs of the child/young person are paramount. If there is good local provision, all well and good, but in a lot of cases there isn’t, so parents don’t have any choice.

Unless mainstream provision can acquire the skills and resources of a specialist school or college, it is very likely they will not be able to adequately address the needs of their SEND pupils

Consistent staff and good, consistent, therapies overrule all. The school could be in the most heavenly place on earth, but if there is a high attrition in staffing, all is lost.

*“A school sinks or swims on the calibre of staff within it. My child is in a school with 60 acres, but the ever-changing staff & therapists make this meaningless.”*

In particular, Occupational Therapists (OT) are trained for the mainstream and the older population. Unless an individual chooses to take a paediatric module within their training, there is no paediatric OT training as part of the qualification. In Australia, OT’s are routinely trained in paediatrics. Oh how lucky a family is to have a visiting Aussie OT (before they return home after their gap year)

What training is the UK offering in specialist paediatric therapies?

* how effectively the workforce in residential special schools and colleges meets the needs of these children and young people;

This is dependent upon the establishment, but in family’s experience, in the main, the workforce is very effective. Specialist teacher/TA training, smaller class sizes, higher staff to pupil ratios, therapists on site and working in tandem with the teaching staff, life skills training for the pupils. These are some of the major differences between mainstream and residential special schools.

The majority of parents don’t want to send their children into distant residential provision but it’s a question of needs must if there is nothing locally that can meet the child’s needs and offer the best possible outcomes and life chances.

* destinations for these children and young people.

For the most complex, the destination is more of the same (a carousel of the same).

For those with spld (ie deafness), the outcome may differ. However, it’s rare that a young person that has learnt a trade or profession at a special college will actually end up with employment in this trade. Very often, it’s an interlude – a promise – that is never fulfilled and the outcome is fully supported living. No job. No social value.

*“Having a place to ‘belong‘ where we don’t feel different” (*Parent)

*“I’m different already, why make it even more obvious?”* (Young Person)

**Sources:**

(pre-SEND Family Voices) parent research ‘SEND Young People’s Input’ in special schools – published January 2013

SEND Family Voices Issues Tracking Log (the XXX files of anonymised contacts with families) – November 2014 to present

SEND Family Voices consultations on:

(Richmond) SEND Family Voices – Integrated Services Report – published June 2014

(Richmond) SEND Family Voices – Post-16 Consultations – published December 2014

The Chocolate Cake Consultations on Reasonable Adjustments – published November 2015

Free Schools Consultations on proposed local residential provisions – published June 2016

Film on Reasonable Adjustments (in young people’s own words) – published November 2016

Children and Young People’s Plan qualitative report – published December 2016

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