



FWL & Associates

Cheshire West & Chester
SEND High Needs Provision
Strategic Review 2018
Summary Document

16/11/2018

Version 3.0

1. Background

English local authorities have a statutory duty to regularly review special educational needs and disability (SEND) provision in their area, to ensure it meets local needs and that resources are being used as effectively as possible.

Cheshire West & Chester (CW&C) last reviewed the area's SEND system and high needs provision in 2013/14, just as the most significant reforms to the SEND system for 30 years were being implemented. Given the scale and pace of change since then, it is timely to take a fresh look at the area's provision and consider whether this continues to meet needs as effectively as it could.

In the spring of 2018, the council commissioned **FWL & Associates** – a consultancy with significant experience in this area – to carry out this work. This document sets out the findings from analysis of the data, including the perspectives of headteachers and special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) as well as the lived experience of young people with SEND and their parents and carers.

This document summarises the findings of this review and is being shared in order to stimulate debate, feedback and dialogue. The full report is also available on the Council's website.

The Council recognises that if this process is to be effective it must be carried out in partnership; therefore the review has gone to some lengths to ensure all stakeholders have been consulted and engaged. This approach reflects the principle that **all** partners; the local authority; early years providers, schools, and colleges; parents and carers have a collective responsibility for outcomes for learners with SEND. Any recommendations for changes to SEND provision in CW&C will undergo a comprehensive process of co-production with all relevant stakeholders during the spring of 2019, before these are implemented.

No decisions regarding the future of SEND provision have been made and any input you provide during the co-production stage will play a significant role in the shaping the final development plan.

2. Local context

- In January 2018 there were **174** schools in Cheshire West & Chester:
 - **130** state-funded primary, **9** of which operate SEN resourced provision
 - **20** state-funded secondary, **2** of which operate SEN resourced provision
 - **10** state-funded special
 - **6** Further Education Colleges
 - **2** Universities
 - **2** pupil referral units
 - **11** independent schools
 - **1** state-funded nursery school
- **53,509** pupils were in attendance at these schools, including **958** in the state-funded special schools (including non-CW&C residents).

- CW&C's special schools are judged to be of a very high standard with **7 out of 10** being **judged** by Ofsted to be 'outstanding' and **3** as 'good' in their most recent inspections.
- The local authority has promoted inclusion and invested in local provision in order to reduce the proportion of learners with education, health and care plans (EHCPs) attending independent provision to well below national and regional averages; in 2013/14 there were **86** pupils in this type of provision, and by 2017/18 this figure had reduced to **46**.
- The council achieved **100%** conversion of statements of special educational needs to EHCPs by the deadline date of March 2018 – one of only **3%** of local authorities (LAs) in England to do so.

Population Projections

- The overall population is forecast to increase by 10% and the child population by 8% by 2035, but this does not factor in growth through new housing developments.
- By 2035, 22,000 new homes are planned during this period, but the exact pace of growth is unpredictable.
- Given recent trends and the growth outlined above, the reviewers estimates that there will be somewhere between 60 to 275 more learners with EHC Plans by 2025.

3. Feedback from stakeholders

A key element of the process has been to consult broadly with a wide range of stakeholders in order to ensure the review reflects and includes as wide a spectrum of views of the local picture as possible. This engagement has included parents and carers of young people with SEND, young people with SEND themselves, headteachers of mainstream primary, secondary and special schools across the area, post-16 providers and partner agencies including health providers, SENCOs and partners in commissioning.

Stakeholders have identified a wide range of recommendations and suggestions that have informed the '*Identified issues and challenges*' listed below.

4. Identified issues and challenges facing CW&C's SEND system

Although the high quality of CW&C's specialist provision should be applauded, pressure is mounting on the SEND system locally (as nationally) and there are a number of issues and challenges that need to be addressed if the system as a whole is to remain effective and to continue to deliver high quality outcomes. These challenges have been identified by a range of stakeholders consulted during the review process and are also confirmed by analysis of the data, as set out below:

i. Partnership, engagement and communications

- Communications need to be sharper and clearer with many stakeholders feeling very unclear about what support is available or how to access services.
- The SEND strategy itself needs to be more widely shared, supported and understood; there is a limited sense of awareness, collective ownership or shared purpose between parents, schools and other partners regarding the local SEND strategy.
- In recent years national education policy has not been actively encouraging inclusion and this has been in decline, but recent messages from the DfE indicate a growing recognition that this needs to change; schools need to find ways of working together more cohesively to respond to the challenges of growing demand by catering for a wider range of needs in mainstream settings.
- There is the need to build closer partnerships, collaboration and increased joint commissioning between education, health, social care and adult services.

ii. Skill sharing and capacity building

- Need to enhance skill-sharing and partnership between specialist and mainstream providers in order to develop capacity and build confidence in the mainstream system.
- Academic attainment for learners with SEND is below national expectations, despite funding being higher than average. More critically life outcomes could be better.
- Concerns have been identified about early identification of need in pre-school.

iii. Imbalances in the mix of provision

- There is strong evidence that the vast majority of children with SEND benefit academically, socially, in confidence and self-esteem from education in mainstream schools rather than further away from home or in specialist settings. This will not be true for all children or in all circumstances, but research strongly supports a policy of adopting mainstream placement as the default position wherever possible.
- CW&C has very high rates of placement in special schools compared with elsewhere and there are indications of an over-supply of special school places. Too many with lower level needs are currently attending special schools who could thrive in mainstream schools with appropriate support.
- There has been dramatic growth in special school placements in recent years with a **33.3%** increase in pupil numbers since 2014.
- An insufficient proportion of pupils with education, health and care (EHC) plans are attending mainstream secondary schools.
- Transition from primary into secondary mainstream for SEND pupils could be better supported by schools working more closely together.
- Increasing numbers of EHC plans are driven by post-16 growth – provision and policy needs to develop to cater for this and the post-16 offer needs to be clearer and more diverse.
- Preparation for adulthood - there is a need to start earlier in developing routes into employment for SEND learners.

- It is beyond doubt both nationally and locally that the system is facing an increasing complexity in need. In the future there will be more young people for whom special school will be the only option. CW&C faces urgent pressure to ensure that local mainstream provision is better able to cater for lower level needs so that specialist provision can focus on the most complex needs.

iv. Financial pressures

- Current pressures on the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant present a financially unsustainable position; unless the local system adapts to find more effective ways of meeting needs, the position will become untenable.
- There is evidence that CW&C's overall levels of high needs funding for schools are currently generous compared with averages elsewhere, which given that outcomes are below average indicates that resources could be used more effectively and that there may be efficiencies available.

5. Possible solutions for discussion

A number of options, examples and possible solutions are presented below to address CW&C's identified challenges.

It should be stressed that these potential solutions are not focused on delivering financial savings, but rather on improving outcomes for CW&C's most vulnerable learners by making the best use of the resources available.

A theme underpinning the solutions to all of these challenges is to build on **partnerships between mainstream and specialist providers and families** in developing a comprehensive strategic offer to meet the needs of a wider range of learners closer to their homes.

i. Develop additional specialist provision integrated within mainstream schools, for secondary-aged learners with MLD, as part of a wider strategy promoting inclusion and developing capacity within mainstream schools

Many of the pupils attending CW&C's special schools could, with the right support, thrive in mainstream schools. It is therefore recommended that specialist resourced provision hubs are developed on mainstream secondary sites, providing **72 places for secondary-aged learners with MLD** to begin the process of changing the system towards 'Right Child, Right Place'. There are a spectrum of available options to deliver this:

- Mainstream-led as resourced provision
- Special school-led as a satellite base on a mainstream site
- Dual placements across a wider number of mainstream schools

... and ...

ii. **Implement a CW&C policy that the majority of learners with MLD will be educated in mainstream settings**

Nationally the trend over recent years has been for special schools to move away from providing education for learners with MLD, as there is evidence that high-quality mainstream provision can enable pupils with MLD to be educated closer to home alongside their mainstream peers. If the provision in **Option i.** above were established, implementing such a policy across CW&C would increase the capacity of special schools for more complex needs and would 'raise the bar' for inclusive practice.

It must be acknowledged that this policy would create challenges for some special schools more than others (notably Oaklands, Dorin Park and Hebden Green) in that it would impact on their intake, but the skills and experience of these settings would be required in developing the necessary high-quality provision in mainstream schools. This process would by necessity be phased in over a number of years, which would provide time for these schools to adapt to meet the needs of the growing numbers of more complex learners.

iii. **Revisit the business case for residential special school provision**

Revisit the changes recommended in the last review of residential provision to establish whether these have been implemented. This includes identifying options to diversify the funding or consider phasing out this provision altogether, which is inequitable in its availability to only a small number of learners and is highly expensive.

iv. **Review special school funding bands**

There is currently some tension expressed with regard to the high levels of reserves held by some special schools/academies and a commonly raised view from mainstream schools is that some special schools are over-generously funded. Countering this, there are also indications from some special schools that they are struggling to meet needs within current levels of top-up funding. In order to restore confidence and ensure appropriateness and equity of funding, it is proposed that a comparative review of special school banding is carried out.

v. **Develop and publish 'foundation' SEND documents setting out expectations for all education settings and admission processes and criteria for all specialist settings**

This would assist in building and reinforcing consensus and understanding about inclusion. There are opportunities to consider in developing a shared framework with Cheshire East, who have established a model of good practice in this area.

vi. **Revisit the business case for top-up funding for non-EHCP learners**

Consider phasing out the current system, which is judged to be ineffective, and instead refocus the funding currently allocated to this on more targeted support (such as **Option vii.** below).

vii. **Develop enhanced transitions pathways to support more learners to remain in mainstream provision**

Build on partnerships between special and mainstream, as well as between primary, secondary and FE phases, to ensure planning starts early and to ensure effective transitions.

- viii. **Actively encourage placement in CW&C special schools by neighbouring LAs to provide additional funding for surplus capacity**
Initial investigations prove that Cheshire East and Halton would both welcome a more formal arrangement.
- ix. **Enhance networking and professional development for SENCOs**
Build on existing models of good practice to develop more effective and focused support for SENCOs as well as providing clearer progression routes.
- x. **Develop enhanced peer support – SEND training and support/leadership coaching and mentoring**
Draw upon the huge assets of the Teaching School Alliances to develop a programme of SEND training for all schools.
- xi. **Re-introduce and develop quality kitemark/standards for education providers**
Consider adopting the increasingly popular ‘SEND Review’ developed by the London Leadership Strategy and funded by the Department for Education (DfE). Consider adopting this in conjunction with neighbouring LAs to improve economies of scale.
- xii. **Engage and stimulate the market to develop a wider post-16 offer**
Build on excellent local practice, such as at Petty Pool Vocational College, as well as capitalising on the opportunities arising from more stability in the local FE market, by extending the work with FE providers to further enhance and develop this offer.

6. Proposed next steps

The council are committed to an extended period of dialogue and coproduction to ensure all stakeholders’ views are fully heard and understood before any changes are made; this will take place between December 2018 and May 2019. There is a clear statutory process that must be followed in the case of changes to special educational provision, should any such changes be agreed. Not all of the proposed changes will need to follow this full statutory process, as some are of a lower order of change, but all will be consulted upon.