Improving information on childcare for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

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Acknowledgements

About this report

This project was commissioned by Suffolk County Council and London Borough of Hillingdon as part of the Department for Education 30 hours Delivery Support Fund.

About Coram Family and Childcare

Coram Family and Childcare works to make the UK a better place for families by bringing together what we learn from our on the ground parent-led programmes and our research to campaign for solutions that parents want and need. We focus on childcare and early years to make a difference to families' lives now and in the long term. Before August 2018, we were known as the Family and Childcare Trust.

About Suffolk County Council's Family Information Service

Suffolk County Council's Family Information Service offers free impartial advice about childcare, funded early education for two, three and four year olds and other services that support parents and carers of children and young people aged 0-19 years, and up to 25 years for children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities).

About Hillingdon Families' Information Service

Hillingdon Council's Families' Information Service provides information and advice to families about childcare, early education and other services that may benefit them. The FIS aims to secure sufficient childcare for children aged 0 -14, with a particular focus on disadvantaged two year olds and for three year and four year olds including up to 30 hours free childcare. The FIS provides childcare funding for vulnerable families and implements the Local Offer for children and young people with special educational needs or a disability.

Summary

In the summer of 2018 we ran a project aiming to improve information provision on childcare for disabled children by local authorities. This included developing a self-assessment tool and running peer review workshops for local authority staff and parents in London and the Eastern region. This report summarises the key learning from the work.

Some of the key points that parents of disabled children raised about the most important things to be considered when providing information were:

- They are often time poor and sleep deprived, meaning that it is even more important that information is easy to find and understand
- They will often have significant concerns about leaving their child as result of more complex care and health needs
- They want to be able to access a lot of information about childcare settings, particularly around experience and skills in working with SEND, in order to know whether they are likely to be meet their child's needs
- Location and accessibility of settings are particularly important, for example, how easy it is to park nearby

These priorities helped to inform the peer review of information offers. Some of the key learning points from the peer review process were around:

- **User testing:** Participants found that there was a lot to learn from watching how parents navigated their website
- **Optimising search engine results:** Most parents started from a Google search but local authority webpages were often not the top search results
- **Ease of navigation and filtering:** Parents liked the ability to filter directory search results, but sometimes struggled to find their way between different parts of the website. They also favoured use of symbols and clear formatting to make it easy to find information.
- **Information on childcare providers:** In depth information was valued by parents, but local authority staff sometimes struggled to get in depth and up to date information from childcare providers
- **Information on financial support and rights:** Most local authorities are providing comprehensive information on the childcare locally, but some parents struggled to find information on help with paying for childcare for children with SENDs, their rights around childcare and the obligation on childcare providers
- **Language:** There were still some instances of the language used being hard for parents to understand, most common examples were 'local offer', 'settings' and 'providers'

Many of the improvements identified by local authorities linked to these areas and included:

- Better integration between mainstream and SEND information, particularly around funding and help with paying for childcare
- Regular reviews and testing with parents
- Working more closely with other teams across the local authority to increase signposting
- Reviewing the search functions and formatting of childcare directory
- Reviewing tags and meta data to improve search results
- Reviewing language used to make sure it is free of jargon

Introduction

In the spring and summer of 2018, Coram Family and Childcare ran a project to support local authorities to improve their information provision on childcare for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). We designed a self-assessment tool for local authorities so that they could identify opportunities for improvement in their practice. We then ran two workshops with local authority staff and parents to build on this self-assessment through peer review and user feedback. This work was commissioned by Suffolk County Council and London Borough of Hillingdon using funding from the Department for Education 30 Hours Delivery Support Fund. This aimed to support Local Authorities to improve the information they hold. Some key considerations for local authorities to help them improve information specifically related to the 30 hour offer are:

- Parents with children with SEND may start to look for formal childcare later than other parents
- Fewer mothers with children with SEND will find employment
- Parents of children with SEND have less time to look for relevant information about childcare
- Working parents with children with SEND are likely to need very specific information about the 30 hour offer to help them to access this entitlement
- Parents need to find information quickly and in one place (including any other financial benefits and support available to help them access up to 30 hours of childcare for their 3 or 4 year olds)

This project was designed to help improve uptake of free childcare, and the new 30 hour offer in particular, by children with SEND. To date, uptake of free childcare has been lower for children with SEND than for other children: 41 per cent of parent / carers do not access the full 15 hours of the universal free entitlement for three and four year olds (Contact, 2014). There are a range of reasons why children with SEND are less likely to use their full free entitlement, but information provision can play a key role. In 2014, there was a Parliamentary Inquiry into Childcare for Disabled Children which found the key barriers to access were:

- **Affordability:** Parents are often charged higher fees for children with SEND, without additional financial support, making it unaffordable

- **Availability and inclusion:** Some providers have a poor understanding of reasonable adjustments

- **Quality:** Lack of support for providers to access additional training, resources and physical adaptations

- **Access and information:** Uncertainty for parent / carers about what support they can expect, and confusion among local authorities and providers about what the childcare system should deliver for children with additional needs

In a number of these areas, improvements to information provision could help to overcome barriers. High quality information about help to pay for childcare can make it more affordable for families. Better information for childcare providers about how to make adjustments could help them to meet a wider range of needs, improving quality and raising awareness among parents about what to ask for. Most importantly, easily accessible information about available childcare will help families to find a provider who is able to meet their child's additional needs.

If families are not able to find the childcare they need, children and parents can miss out. There is strong evidence of the boost to outcomes that high quality early education provides (Sylva, 2008) and head teachers identified it as a key factor influencing children's school readiness (NAHT and Family and Childcare Trust, 2017). Being unable to access childcare also limits parents' ability to go out to work: only 16 per cent of mothers of children with additional needs work compared to 61 per cent of other mothers (Contact). If parents cannot work, it reduces the income of the household and increases their poverty risk. 32 per cent of children in households with a child with additional needs are growing up in poverty – 5 percentage points higher than households without a child with additional needs (DWP, 2018).

The information that is provided also needs to be improved, with only one in four parents agreeing that 'It is easy to find out about childcare providers in my area that can cater for my child's illness / disability' (DfE). The most common way for parents to get information from their local authority is over the internet, with 57 per cent of parents accessing information this way. For this reason, our work focused on improving online information, but also looked at other information provision.

The self-assessment tool and workshops both focused on identifying improvements that local authority staff could implement, rather than looking at broader policy issues. At the workshops, we started with a group discussion on the most important issues relating to information for families of children with SEND, giving the parents an opportunity to share their experiences and expertise. Participants then worked in pairs and larger groups to probe online information to try to answer different questions. They were given different scenarios to find information on, and criteria to consider to prompt them to think about the quality of the information. Parents of children with SEND played a key role at the workshops feeding back to local authorities about what did and did not work for them. At the end of the two workshops, local authorities were asked to identify key learning points from the day and write an action plan of changes they wanted to make locally.

This report summarises learning from the workshops and sits alongside the self-assessment tool for local authorities. It provides the key points of discussion and the improvements and successes that local authority staff identified. It is intended to support local authorities to reflect on their own practice and identify possible areas where they can make changes to better meet families' needs.

Understanding parents of children with SEND and the information they need

To help improve participants' understanding of the needs of parents of children with SEND, we encouraged local authorities to complete the self-assessment jointly with parents and began the workshop with a discussion on parents' needs, drawing on the knowledge and experiences of the parents present. This chapter summarises their feedback during this session and throughout the workshop.

The parents stressed that it is important for local authorities and providers to recognise the perspective of parents of children with SEND and the additional stress they are under, especially in the early years. With the added responsibility of managing the additional needs of their children, parents of children with SEND are more likely to be sleep deprived and time poor. Parents of children with SEND are also statistically more likely to have their own additional needs. It is therefore even more important that information is available, can be found easily and is concise.

Depending on the situation of the child, some parents may be later in starting to organise childcare than parents of other children, due to the time it can take to get a diagnosis and appropriate treatment in place. Once they are in a position to think about using childcare, the application process can act as a barrier, especially given that they may face a large number of forms and applications for other support services.

In many cases, parents will not only be dealing with the feelings of responsibility and stress that all new parents face, but could have spent time worrying if their child will survive their medical conditions and complications. Trusting someone with the responsibility to care for their child after what can often be a very traumatic start to their child's life, is therefore likely to be even more challenging for these parents. Some children will be less able to communicate with parents about the quality of care they are receiving.

Parents of children with SEND told us they want as much information as possible on potential childcare settings. From the workshop discussions, the information parents would like about childcare settings should include:

- Staff skills and experience of working with children with SEND and levels of qualifications
- The provider's most recent Ofsted reports
- Feedback from other parents: is their child likely to be getting the level of care indicated to parents?
- The size of the setting
- If parents are able to observe the care being given
- Whether children can receive therapies at the setting
- If children can stay with one key worker
- The accessibility of the setting
- If there is nearby and accessible parking
- If the setting is easy to get to and within practical travelling distance from home
- What additional financial resources may be available to access or pay for childcare

A significant challenge for parents is knowing where to look for information, as many do not know about key information sources including Local Offers or Family Information Services. This is particularly important when it comes to enacting rights: parents need to know what their rights are before they can use them. Parents discussed instances of childcare providers turning their child away or wanting to charge higher fees. They needed further information in order to be able to challenge these decisions. Childcare information for children with SEND is often more complicated, including around the funding available and what families are entitled to, which makes information provision more challenging.

Assessing current offers

Prior to the workshops, local authorities were sent a self-assessment tool to support them to assess their on and offline information. Many local authorities completed these with local parents and with feedback from different teams across the local authority. This self-assessment tool was used as the basis for peer review at the workshops. Each local authority was able to gain an understanding of the website user experience from people who more closely represented their target audience, as they were assessed by people unfamiliar with their websites and by parents of children with SEND.

Feedback fell into three categories: content, navigation, and language. Some attendees also recognised the range and depth of expertise needed to keep this information up to date and accessible, and the need to have specific staff to fulfil this work.

Content

For the majority of local authorities, most of the information that parents would need is provided on the website but often it proved difficult to find. However, there were small areas where there could been more information available. There was a lack of sufficient guidance for parents about their rights and expectations of childcare settings. There were also issues around finding information on the financial support that is available, and in particular, how these work for families with children with SEND.

Some local authorities also found problems with keeping information up to date, particularly within the childcare provider directories. This can be challenging for local authorities as they are reliant on childcare providers updating their own information. In order to improve the information they were receiving from childcare providers, some local authorities had simplified the information they ask for and increased the frequency of their communications with them. In some areas, there was much less information about childcare settings than parents would have liked, and it was difficult to narrow the list of providers down for further research and visits based on the available information. It was agreed that the option to view providers on a map was very useful.

There was debate about approaches to providing information on specialist provision and whether it was preferable to separate the childcare settings who identified themselves as SEND specialists from other provision, or whether information should stress the duty on all childcare settings to make reasonable adjustments under the Equalities Act. It was suggested that it was good to put a sentence on all listings on the main childcare directory search page about the equality duties of settings, but also to allow navigation of SEND specialist providers.

Language

A lot of the language used on the websites included more sector jargon than professionals working in the area had appreciated. Both workshops clearly identified that many parents are unfamiliar with the term 'Local Offer', so this was not helping them to identify relevant content.

Parents also did not understand what was meant by the terms 'setting' or 'provider', instead needing it to be clear that this referred to childcare. Some local authorities were

commended on their websites being accessible in other languages, but this was not always the case. Some directories use a glossary so that the meanings of unfamiliar terms are displayed.

Navigation

Peer reviews identified many positive aspects on website navigation, including accessible layouts, being able to find results through several paths and the presentation being visually pleasing and user friendly.

There were some issues around moving between the Family Services Directory and Local Offer listings and different information being held on these two platforms. Often there was additional information available through the Local Offer, which was missed because parents simply did not look at these pages. Some groups found areas where information targeting mainstream and specialist service users could be integrated but was not. For example, activities listings could include both SEND specific and mainstream activities, childcare listings could link to Local Offer information and information on help with childcare costs could also link to funding for children with SEND.

On some websites, easy navigation relied on knowing the key terms to begin with, which the majority of users would not. Formatting played a key role in helping parents to find and understand the information they needed. It was agreed that formatting can be really important in making large amounts of text more accessible. Big headers work well, especially those that were in bold, or underlined to help them stand out. Many also favoured the use of symbols for individual childcare settings to give a quick and easy insight into what was on offer.

There were quite a few instances where links did not work or linked to the wrong or expired pages. This was most common with local authorities who linked heavily between a separate Local Offer, Family Information Services and other pages on the local authority website.

Search

Some of the biggest problems came when workshop participants started a search from Google rather than within the local authority webpage as local authority webpages often did not show up near the top of search results. It was felt that it was important for local authority staff to understand the search terms that parents might use so that they could make sure that their pages were more likely to appear in these results. Local authorities should also consult their IT or digital teams to understand how to make sure search results are optimised (brought to the top of search results) and to test this using Google and other popular web browsers.

Filter

Not all websites reviewed had a filter option within their childcare provider directories. Of those that did, many had clear categories to choose from when searching local offer, though some were less clear than others – for example having a 'Local Offer' filter which many of the parents did not know referred to SEND provision.

Some raised concerns about filtering for particular conditions that might not adequately represent the complexity of a child's needs and so be difficult to use for some parents. There were also concerns that using these specific filters could narrow results too far and mean that parents might miss out on potential childcare settings that meet their needs.

In many cases the filters rely on information given by childcare settings, who might not have identified themselves as being able to meet a particular condition even if they are able to adapt to a range of additional needs. It is important for local authorities to use skilled staff who can review childcare provider records (for example, to add any meta data and key words and select appropriate filters) to help parents find relevant information more easily.

Ideas for improvements

Following the peer review sessions, and group discussions with parent feedback, the representatives from local authorities were asked to regroup with colleagues to agree on what they could do to improve, and create action plans. Detailed below are the tasks local authorities set themselves, as well as what to feedback to their teams, based on key learning from the day. Ideas from the discussion which were widely agreed as good practice have also been included.

Content

A common agreed task was adapting some of the existing childcare information for the Local Offer to be included on the Family Services Directory to make clear that this childcare is relevant for all children, including those with SEND. For some, this included adding a guidance statement on SEND duties to all mainstream childcare pages on their website.

Other examples of ideas that some local authorities will implement:

- Creating a parent guide to funding, for parents of mainstream children and children with SEND, with specific sections integrated on how this may differ for children with SEND
- Transferring information from the council website to Local Offer pages, for example, information on choosing childcare
- Making sure there is clear information about eligibility for the 30 hour offer including information on different eligibility for disabled parents and parents of disabled children
- Increase the amount of online information for single parents and those receiving benefits
- Putting contact details online as an alternative for when information cannot be easily found on the website or for parents who need to get in touch but do not have access to the internet

Some local authorities decided to add information on SEND programmes and community events to their 'What's On' pages or calendars. There was a general consensus in some of the group discussions that it was best to include SEND related events in the main calendar, even if there was also a dedicated events section for children with SEND on other areas of the website.

Many local authorities identified improvements to be made to the childcare provider directories, including:

- Include more information on accessibility and what needs are catered for in settings, for example, which additional needs the provider has experience of, and how many years' experience they have in supporting these needs
- Continue to positively encourage childcare providers to write their SEN information reports to be added to the Local Offer website, assess if the forms sent to

childcare settings could be improved to facilitate this and look at how information is currently gathered to identify ways to improve current practice

- Include opening and closing times of settings
- Support childcare settings to write their Local Offer
- Provide settings and services with the ability to update their own Local Offer, with the Local Authority providing administrative functions
- Adapt the layout to show a summary, and then clicking to expand with further information for each listing
- Add clear icons to service directory so places that have SEND programmes / adjustments in place already can be quickly identified
- Include link to Childcare Choices from Local Offer homepage so parents can easily access this information

Many authorities recognised it was important to publish local authority expectations of providers. Some authorities also plan to add information for how parents can register a complaint about providers.

Some local authorities also considered offering parents the opportunity to review childcare settings. There was some discussion if this would be helpful or not due to the variable experiences to be had with a childcare setting and that local authorities could be viewed as responsible for the content of the reviews. Parents felt that reviews from other parents was a trusted source of information and would help inform their choices.

Navigation

One representative commented that the websites are very helpful for providing lots of information, but only if you know how to use it. Many committed to making their website easier to navigate for parents by looking at the journeys parents would need to take and finding ways to make this easier, including working to reduce clicks**.**

Most action plans included tasks to better integrate the various parts of the website with relevant content. Some committed to improving the links to the Local Offer pages from the main local authority webpages and from the Family Services Directory, including childcare provider directories, funding support and guide to choosing nurseries. One recognised the importance of 'more integration with our directory and information around entitlements'. It was also recognised that families move between boroughs and that it is important to provide links to neighbouring local authority websites.

Local authorities also thought about what other information parents would need that could be found on other websites, and providing links to these sites from their own webpages, for example, HMRC's Childcare Choices website.

Search

The importance of Google searching for childcare and SEND pages, with terms that a parent would use, was widely recognised, given this is how many parents start looking for information. Many decided to improve findability of the websites by checking the meta tag data for SEND is up to date and include common typos, for example, 'rest bite' in addition to 'respite', so as not to limit search results.

Attendees also examined the search tools within their own webpages, and recognised that search statements do not always take users to the right place. Websites that did have existing search functions can be improved by adding extra search functions and increasing results, and improving the relevance of results shown for SEND connected keywords that were likely to be used by parents.

Filters

Following the discussion on whether filters by conditions were helpful, some decided to review their current filters. Some wanted to change to filter by childcare settings already set up for children with SEND, and that are specialist carers. Similarly, being able to filter results by times providers are open was agreed to be helpful, as well as whether the childcare provider offered funded childcare.

Some local authorities who did not currently offer any filtering decided to start using it. Others wanted to improve their filters, including changing the name of the filter option from 'Local Offer' to 'SEND' or 'disabled children'.

Language

Local authorities committed to change language used to make sure it is as clear and accessible as possible, particularly around reducing the amount of text and webpage clutter, using clear icons instead of words when appropriate, and to use plain English and to avoid using jargon and acronyms that are less parent-friendly.

Improvements in language choices that a lot of authorities committed to were:

- 'Special Educational Needs and Disabilities', or 'SEND', instead of, 'Local Offer'
- 'Childcare Provider' or 'childcare setting' in place of just 'setting' or 'provider'
- 'Quarter' or, '3 months', instead of 'Term', to describe how often parents need to confirm their details. 'Term', in some cases lead parents to believe this meant every school term
- Many local authorities also committed to check if webpages can be easily translated for non-English speakers

Working with other professionals

Many thought they could improve their work with other professionals within the local authority and with partner organisations such as education and health sectors so that they were able to signpost families about their childcare entitlements. Local authority representatives committed to various ways of using other professionals to help signpost to appropriate services and sources of information. Planned actions to support this included:

- Early years SEND hubs to develop and share inclusive practice across all settings
- Develop a leaflet and toolkit for specialist workers (Health Visitors, GPs, Speech and Language Therapists, social care, physios etc.) that explains childcare for SEND, where to get help and more information
- Raise awareness with SEND professionals of childcare entitlements
- Gather specific feedback on content, wording and linking from other teams including Local Offer, Family Information Services and Equality Inclusion

- Feedback to Early Years consultants the possibility of partnership working between nurseries and childminders regarding inclusion planning
- Complete action plan to support settings in celebrating their good practices with children with SEND and support them to include this in their Local Offer

Review

The workshops revealed the importance of regular review, including gathering feedback from website users. All local authorities in attendance committed to including regular review into their practice. The methods chosen to incorporate review included:

- User experience testing from parents and practitioners
- Use parent experience case studies and local focus groups for different areas of the Local Offer
- Engaging more with parents to get feedback on services on the Local Offer and their experiences, to help plan the service going forward
- Liaise with Parent Carer Forums for feedback and collaboration opportunities
- Use more peer reviews for when changes are made and when adding new information, to check it works and flows
- Review the whole childcare for children with SEND website – and create an action plan from this
- Schedule a yearly review of SEND information with key stakeholders
- Use the peer review form from the workshop to fill in any gaps of information and facilitate the ongoing auditing and maintaining of the website

Workshop feedback

At the end of the workshop, representatives were asked to fill in evaluation forms from the day. In general, the feedback was very positive with all attendees saying that the workshop mostly met or fully met its objectives. 86 per cent of attendees rated the workshop as very good. Attendees were asked to provide any further comments on the workshop and the majority were very positive:

> 'This was a very useful session in allowing time to focus on our current offer and learn from parents and other local authorities.'

> 'A good starting point for taking back to the relevant people in our local authority. We have some clear actions will improve our information. Good to look at this from a parent's perspective.'

> 'This has been a really useful day - it is great to have the time and opportunity to look at other FIS services. Thank you.'

There were some areas that were identified for improvements that will be changed for future work in this area:

> 'Scenarios were too detailed for looking online in the time we had - but still useful for discussion.'

Participants particularly commented on how useful it was to work with parents and other local authorities to gather feedback. Many of the areas for action were also prompted directly from parent feedback so we will make sure that this plays a central role in any future work in this area.

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