



Cheshire East Overview of progress against our SEND WSOA

Area B – Autism timeliness and pathways

August 2020



1. The issues identified within this weakness

Lack of an effective autism spectrum disorder (ASD) pathway and unreasonable waiting times.

2. Summary

Over the past two years, work has been undertaken to improve services so that waiting times are reduced, and we have worked collectively with partners, young people and families to ensure a single equitable offer across Cheshire East.

3. The impact of our changes

- ✓ By December 2019, no children or young people within Eastern Cheshire were waiting for more than 12 weeks for an assessment.
- ✓ We can demonstrate positive outcomes for children, young people and their parents/families through the completion and monitoring of satisfaction questionnaires following the assessment process and diagnostic feedback. The Speech and Language Therapists have also received verbal feedback from parents that they have appreciated the new ways of working as their child has started their Autism assessment.
- ✓ We have worked with local charities to bring in more specialist support and training for children, young people and their families. Two staff members in the assessment team have been nominated by parents for the Autism Professionals Award 2020.
- ✓ Feedback from parents and families who have attended the training programme is very positive (questionnaires are completed pre and post training).

4. The key changes we have made

There has been significant work to redesign and increase capacity across the 4-19 age pathway, including a new clinical triage process and Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) Panels being implemented, with Educational Psychologists and Specialist Teachers from the Cheshire East Autism Team (CEAT) working alongside the Consultant Psychiatrist, Specialist Nurses and Speech and Language Therapists to assess children's needs.

JSNA and Strategy

A revised All Age Autism Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) has been developed which has informed the new All Age Autism Strategy for Cheshire East. Autism Workstream B is in place to ensure effective delivery and monitoring of the Strategy through an agreed delivery plan which is updated annually. There is Parent Carer Forum representation on the Workstream and supporting Working Groups. Two task and finish groups sit below the Workstream meeting to ensure continued development of services and consistency of offer across all providers.

Assessment Services and Timeliness

We have invested in our assessment services to bring waiting times in line with the three-month guideline recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. As a result, waiting times for diagnosis fell by 80% in one year despite a large rise in referrals.

In October 2018 there were 478 children and young people waiting for an Autism assessment across Cheshire East with the longest wait being 104 weeks (almost 2 years). On 6th June 2020 there were a total of 59 children and young people waiting less than 12-weeks in the Eastern Cheshire area. Where there are individual concerns about waiting times, we are working with families to address them and to give an individual response about their child.

The challenges presented due to Covid-19 have been mitigated by clinical staff offering virtual and telephone contact with families where appropriate or possible; however there has been some impact on waiting times. There has been an increase in both the number of children waiting for ASD assessment and the length of time from referral to initial assessment. This has been as a direct consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions that have been in place. Providers have looked at alternatives to ADOS and are about to trial BOSA that is a shortened version of ADOS. ADOS is not validated as an assessment when wearing masks, therefore alternatives are being sourced.

The challenges facing the services during this unprecedented time have included the following:

- Some families have been reluctant to attend hospital for a face to face appointment. Children on this pathway by nature of their difficulties find it challenging to cope with the different experience that a trip to out-patients brings with the PPE and distancing requirements. PPE makes assessment of communication and social interaction skills very challenging.
- Children have been out of school for a significant length of time so getting up to date feedback and information from staff has been difficult.

In general, the verbal feedback from parents during the lockdown period has been positive. Teams have continued to keep in contact with families who have understood that face-to-face visits or assessments could not be completed during this time and that virtual appointments would not necessarily be appropriate to complete a more formal assessment.

Additional clinical staff and Speech and Language Therapists appointed in the previous period are now established in post and are developing their roles in line with the needs of the service. A single Clinical Care Coordination function across all providers in Cheshire East is being planned to ensure greater consistency across the Cheshire East area. We have recently recommenced 'in person' appointments to complete speech and language therapy (SALT) Assessments, and the Specialist Speech and Language Therapist and another member of staff are completing additional hours over the Summer in order to complete more assessments in order to catch up on the delay in completing assessments due to the challenges of not being able to complete these in person.

A multi-disciplinary team of healthcare and education experts has been commissioned on a recurring basis to assess the needs of pre-school children, aged 0 to 4 years, in the Eastern Cheshire area to ensure there is a consistent offer across Cheshire East and early identification and intervention is promoted.

Pre and Post diagnostic support

We are offering consistent early intervention support as part of both a family-centred and settings approach with specialist support being offered in all Children's Centres, including peer-led groups and workshops through our Early Start Team and seconded Health Visitors.

The local charities commissioned to provide additional pre and post diagnosis support and training for the parents or carers of children diagnosed with autism or on the autism assessment pathway continue to operate successfully. These community-based programmes offer practical help and strategies on issues such as sleep management, sensory advice, anxiety management and positive behavioural support.

When Covid-19 restrictions were put in place, both community providers (Space 4 Autism and ChAPS) swiftly moved to an online offer and they have continued to support families virtually through this time. It has been vital to continue to support these parents, as once the schools closed, some of them will have found the circumstances very stressful and challenging as all the social clubs also stopped in line with government requirements over social distancing.

These programmes of support link with NHS and local authority services such as the Cheshire East Autism Team (CEAT) as well as with the valuable support provided by schools and other education settings in Cheshire East. We have recently evaluated, reviewed and widened the programme to ensure there are more courses available for children, young people and adults with autism (including widening social groups where attendance has doubled since the programme began). All the training can be accessed by people who are on the waiting list as well as people who have already received a diagnosis (pre and post diagnostic support).

Communications are being maintained through regular engagement with parents, carers, families and adults with Autism through attendance and presentations at the Parent Carer Forum. There is parent carer representation on all work relating to Autism.

Training support for staff (health, education and social care sector) has also been reviewed. More work needs to be done to review the offers available across Cheshire and align the offers, where it makes sense to do so.

Single Integrated Autism Assessment Model

We have developed a single Integrated Autism Assessment Model/Pathway across Cheshire East. Joining up services in this way means that children, young people and their families can access appropriate help and support according to their level of need based on four connected pathways, which are based on the child and family centred 'Thrive Multi-agency Framework':

- **Getting advice** - first concerns/early identification
- **Getting help** - local offer/specialist Autism assessment
- **Getting more help** - post-diagnostic support
- **Getting risk support** - prevention of crisis/specialist risk support.

The implementation of a single assessment model/pathway has ensured that the Autism assessment process is aligned and consistent across the whole of the Cheshire East area, regardless of the providers used, to deliver equality of assessment and consistent delivery of service.

We have developed and implemented a single Integrated Service Specification that has been written and agreed by all partners including feedback from young people and parents. The purpose of this specification is to provide a clear, single commissioning agreement and approach across four commissioning organisations and four statutory providers, to describe how health, education and care will work together to deliver a single, accessible, streamlined, consistent and cost effective Autism assessment pathway, alongside evidence-based and innovative interventions and support.

A review has also been completed on the range of Autism training for staff across Cheshire East. We have commissioned a two-day accredited training course for 15 professionals from across Cheshire East in standardised autism assessment (ADOS) including the 'toddler module' to ensure that we have enough staff trained to deliver the new assessment pathway both now and in the future. A summary of schools that receive training from CEAT has been compiled and a register will be maintained. The recently published 'Right to be Heard' document – the government's response to the consultation on Autism and Learning Difficulty (LD) training for healthcare staff - is being reviewed. It presents a tiered approach (linked to the amount of contact staff have with people):

- Tier 1 – general awareness
- Tier 2 – staff routinely caring for people with LD or Autism
- Tier 3 – those with high degree of autonomy providing care in complex situations.

5. Learning and next steps

As a result of the response to Covid-19, we have been looking at how best to address recovery of the waiting times and numbers waiting for ASD assessment, which include the following:

- Exploring new ways of working, looking at what can be done virtually, or through video software
- Allocating additional clinic and administrative hours to be allocated over the summer period where required
- Learning from the adapted ways of working and feedback from parents, carers, children and young people to utilise good ideas to take forward
- Progressing with the prevention of crisis pathway and links between the Dynamic Support Database
- Learning and embedding revised CETR process following a regional review
- Ensuring sustainable pre and post diagnostic support.

Cheshire and Wirral Partnership (CWP) is undertaking an evaluation of staff, patient and family experiences of service delivery during the Covid-19 period. The patient and family element of the evaluation commenced 27th August 2020.