



# Cheshire East Overview of progress against our SEND WSOA

## Area A - The timeliness of Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans

August 2020



## 1. The issues identified within this weakness

- EHC plans are not being completed in a timely manner. This delays children and young people's needs being met and sets them and their families back.
- Capacity within the education psychologists' team has severely affected the delays.

## 2. Summary

Following our previous inspection and the introduction of improvements relating to our Written Statement of Action (WSOA), we have improved timeliness for EHC needs assessments, and thereby have improved the time within which we assess and meet the needs of local children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Our detailed performance data demonstrates the significant improvements that were made to decrease the number of ongoing EHC needs assessments over 20 weeks, and to increase the timeliness of advice and the number of EHC needs assessments that were completed within the 20 week timescale. There have been some recent delays in timeliness of EHC needs assessments, but this is not on the same scale of the delays that previously seen at the time of drafting our Written Statement of Action. Recent delays have been due to a combination of factors:

1. The implementation of a permanent structure which resulted in an approximately 80% change in staffing. The introduction of the permanent structure resulted in agency staff leaving earlier than we would have liked, as we had planned to retain them until the new staff were in post and trained as required.
2. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to complete risk assessments, create temporary provision plans and seek creative ways to meet the needs of pupils not in school. In addition, there was a need for staff to adapt to working remotely, including adapting to undertaking assessments and meetings via video calls.
3. We listened to the voice of our local parent carers, who told us that they preferred to have an EHC Plan that was late but of better quality. Quality aspects were not improving as quickly as we had planned, and we needed to invest heavily in this area (see separate themed report on process and quality of EHC Plans for more information on this area).
4. There has been a continued increase in the number of requests for EHC needs assessments, and a number of significant peaks in requests.
5. There has also been a need to consider and improve the timeliness and quality of our annual reviews of EHC Plans.

An improved interactive tracker is now in place and we are confident that the timeliness and quality of EHC plans will both be significantly improved by the end of October 2020. New leadership and management arrangements in place from December 2019, along with further investment in the service, will ensure that timeliness continues to improve and is sustained.

### 3. The impact of our changes

- ✓ There has been a significant and sustained improvement (decrease) in the number of ongoing EHC needs assessments over 20 weeks, with a reduction from **180 assessments on 17/12/2018** to **2 assessments on 29/07/2019**.
- ✓ The number of assessments over 20 weeks was sustained in single figures for 4 months until 25/11/2019 (when it reached 12 assessments). This number peaked at 91 during the initial Covid-19 restrictions in April 2020 but, despite the impact of the pandemic, this was managed to ensure that it did not reach levels that were seen in 2018 prior to our improvements. It has since been reduced by a third (with 63 assessments on 21/08/2020) and continues to decrease.
- ✓ There has also been a continued increase in the number of new EHC Plans issued within 20 weeks each month. During the period January – September 2019, this rose steadily from **11% of EHC Plans in January 2019** to **96% of EHC Plans issued in both September and October 2019**. Indeed, timeliness was sustained at over 75% for 4 consecutive months between July and October 2019.
- ✓ Between January and August 2019, there was a substantial decrease in the number of EHC needs assessments awaiting advice for more than 6 weeks – with a reduction from the highest figure of **159 assessments on 21/01/2019** to **2 assessments on 05/08/2019**. This figure did rise and reach a peak of 93 during the Covid-19 restrictions in June 2020; however, this was again managed so that it did not reach levels seen prior to improvements and has since been reducing steadily with 54 assessments on 21/08/2020.
- ✓ There was also a significant decrease in the number of EHC needs assessments awaiting advice from the Educational Psychology service for over 6 weeks between January and August 2019 - with a reduction from **135 assessments on 28/01/2019** to **1 assessment on 05/08/2019**. There has been peaks in the number of assessments since then, but these have been well managed and the number of assessments has reduced once more. The most recent peak, resulting from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, led to a sharp increase up to 71 assessments on 29/05/2020, but we managed this over June and July and the number of advice requests over 6 weeks has now significantly decreased again (to 18 assessments on 21/08/2020) and continues to do so.
- ✓ There has been a significant and sustained increase in the percentage of health advice submitted within 6 weeks, going from **37% in our WSoA (May 2018)** to **91% in July 2020**. This has remained **above 83% throughout 2020**, despite the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our health services.
- ✓ There has also been a significant decrease in the average time to complete an EHC needs assessment. This reduced from **35.8 weeks in our WSoA (May 2018)** to **15.0 weeks in August 2019**. As a result of the recent delays, our current performance stands at 25.0 weeks in July 2020 (however with an average of 17.8 weeks for completed EHC Plans that were due in July 2020); this still represents an improvement in our performance but we are confident that we will be able to return this to expected levels by the end of October 2020.

## **4. The key changes we have made**

### **4.1. SEND Team staffing and culture**

We finalised and consulted on a new structure for the SEND team and the Educational Psychology (EP) Service. As part of the new structure, the Council committed an additional £500,000 to increase capacity across the SEND service in April 2019 and a further £500,000 in April 2020. We have appointed individuals to a significant number of posts within the new structure and, as of January 2020, the majority of posts in the new structure for the SEND team are filled.

We have significantly reduced reliance on agency staff for EHCP writing as this has been leading to lack of pace in quality improvement in EHC plans. There have also been significant changes in leadership of our SEND team. The previous Service Manager left in August 2019, the previous Team Manager in December 2019 and the previous Head of Service in January 2020. Two Interim Head of Service posts have been appointed in order to ensure that we can move the improvement of the service forward with greater pace. A new Head of Service with responsibility for the SEND Assessment and Monitoring started in December 2019 and the Head of Service for Quality Development and Specialist Services started in February 2020. The Three Locality Managers started in December 2019 and an Interim Quality Manager, seconded from another LA team who has made significant impact in a school improvement role, started in January 2020. Officers are also now in post for the three Locality Manager roles within the SEND service. In the last month, we have also recruited 3 additional Key Workers and are currently interviewing for additional EHC Plan Writers, with an intention for all new staff members to join us in September for a joint induction and training programme.

### **4.2. Educational Psychology Service staffing and culture**

In addition to the two new SEND Heads of Service outlined above, further Head of Service support was introduced in order to increase management oversight of our Educational Psychology (EP) service. Responsibility for the EP service was moved to our Head of Service for Education Participation and Pupil Support. Our Principal EP is currently on long-term sickness absence; however, the two Senior EPs in the service are working with the Head of Service to move the service forward and are supported with supervision from the Principal EP in Solihull.

We launched a recruitment campaign for our Educational Psychology (EP) service and have new Trainee EPs and Assistant EPs starting with us in September 2020. As an interim measure whilst new staff join the service, we are also continuing to fund a high level of additional agency staff for EP assessments in order to provide consistent levels of service. We have also recently changed the contracting arrangements for Locum EPs. We are currently finalising our strategy to redesign the EP Service and will be launching this in the Autumn.

### **4.3. Scorecards and Tracking**

At the time of the original SEND Inspection in March 2018, a monthly operational SEND scorecard covering the EHC needs assessment process and local authority SEND services was already well established and was being routinely shared and scrutinised at SEND management meetings and the 0-25 SEND Partnership Board. During the first half of 2018, the measures within the scorecard were reviewed and amended to ensure relevant information was being shared, and a number of significant new measures relating to timeliness were added. This scorecard was then updated again to include the WSoA Key Performance Indicators relating to EHC needs assessments and Plans. This scorecard is a standing item on the SEND Partnership Board where appropriate challenge and support takes place.

We also developed a health scorecard so that consistent information is gathered from all provider trusts in order to track performance. Performance data within both health and the local authority continues to be refined, and the Local Authority and CCGs each have an identified Business Intelligence officer with a focus on SEND.

In addition to the monthly scorecards, we have created weekly reports (using data from comprehensive live trackers) which provide detailed information on the number and timeliness of EP advice requests and ongoing EHC needs assessment requests. A further detailed tracker is also in place to monitor Annual Reviews of EHC Plans.

We established weekly operational meetings for SEND Team managers focused on timeliness of EHC needs assessments; these meetings provide management oversight and challenge around timeliness of EP advice and EHC Plans using the EP and EHCP reports and trackers described above.

The Designated Clinical Officer continues to provide close monitoring and oversight of the timeliness of all EHC needs assessment health advice and any themes or specific causes for concern are fed back to providers, the CCG and Local Authority.

## **5. The steps to ensure timeliness continues to improve and is sustainable**

As discussed above, there has been a recent increase in the number of ongoing EHC needs assessments over 20 weeks. As at 21/08/2020, 25% of ongoing EHC needs assessments (63 cases) were over 20 weeks. This has also resulted in a recent dip in the percentage of EHC Plans issued within 20 weeks in each month (going from 96% in September 2019 to 67% in January 2020 to 37% in July 2020, excluding exceptions). The current decrease in performance in timeliness of advice and overall EHC needs assessments is due to a number of factors, including:

- A very significant increase in the number of EHC needs assessment requests received in July 2019 (105 requests). The average number of requests in each month in the period January – June 2019 was 47. There was also a peak in the number of requests in December 2019 (67 requests). We have completed a deep-dive analysis of all of the requests and have been working with

educational settings and parent/carers to understand the factors leading to increased requests towards the end of academic terms and are taking steps to improve this in the future.

- Extended school holidays over the summer period and then over the Christmas and New Year period, which impacted upon the ability of Educational Psychologists (EPs) to meet with pupils and their educational setting. The majority of the assessments that were awaiting advice for more than 6 weeks from our EPs following these periods were subject to exceptions to the 20 week timescales, in line with The Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014. However, we continually monitor all assessments awaiting advice from the EP service carefully in order to minimise the impact on overall timeliness as far as possible. In addition, we have made a number of new appointments in the EP service which are now being made sustainable through the redesign of how the service operates. The EP service has also moved to an experienced Head of Service who has introduced weekly allocations meetings and prioritised the EP service to focus on statutory service. There is a focus on changing the culture within the EP service. This has had an immediate impact.
- There has been a lot of change within the SEND service due to moving to the new structure which has caused some delays. We previously identified this as a risk and had put in measures to allow agency and permanent posts to overlap, but some agency staff members chose to leave early as they had new assignments and this caused some gaps. Following a significant influx of permanent staff over December 2019 and early 2020, officers are now in place in almost all posts within the new structure. The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted and delayed further service changes by causing challenges in the induction and training of new staff. We continue to invest additional staff in the service in a managed way, so that we can support new starters, and the service is now predominately permanent staff.
- As part of our drive around quality, we reintroduced the 2 'working TOGETHER' (co-production) meetings held during the EHC needs assessment process. This puts pressure on the timeline; however parents tell us they prefer EHC Plans to be late and have a co-production meeting and improved quality, over a drive to achieve timeliness.
- The need to ensure transitions were confirmed for transfers in September 2020 created pressure at the point where we were also addressing timeliness. Further planning around transitions has been prioritised and will be built into the tracker so that we can learn from experience and mitigate future impact.
- Most recently, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to complete risk assessments, create temporary provision plans and seek creative ways to meet the needs of pupils not in school has had a large impact on staff capacity. In addition, there was a need for staff to adapt to working remotely, including adapting to undertaking assessments and meetings via video calls.

Despite the recent dip in performance, there has still been a significant improvement in timeliness of EHC Plans since our Written Statement of Action (WSOA) was drafted, as shown in section 3 of this report. We are confident that our timeliness will improve again by the end of October 2020. The

following steps have been taken to meet this target, and we have ensured that all steps put in place are sustainable:

- Weekly Director and Head of Service review of timeliness and to confirm priority areas for Keyworkers.
- Weekly Operational Managers' Meetings to ensure workloads are managed and staff supported.
- Additional support for complaints to enable us to simultaneously support families who remain dissatisfied whilst keeping Keyworkers free to support new assessments and plans
- We have created an annual review team to take pressure from the locality teams; this supports the locality teams to ensure timeliness of new assessments. This capacity will be retained from April 2020.
- We recruited additional temporary plan writers and built this post into the structure from April 2020 on a permanent basis. This will support addressing any ongoing peaks and troughs in demand.
- The structure from April 2020 also includes additional capacity to support transitions so that Keyworkers can remain focused on new assessments
- Delays in EP advice have been addressed and the Head of Service will ensure that further capacity is brought in along with the new allocations methodology and prioritisation of statutory advice.

In addition, we have put in place arrangements to ensure that there are improvements in the timeliness of annual reviews for EHC Plans. A multi-agency working group is in place, with crucial input and representation from our Parent Carer Forum. This group co-produced a wide variety of detailed information on processes, timings and responsibilities for annual reviews, and this was published on a dedicated section of our Local Offer in July 2020. Letters on the new expectations and timeliness have been issued to all schools and all parents of children and young people with EHC Plans. Significant work has also been taking place on the development of trackers for annual reviews (which mirror those for new assessments), along with data cleansing exercises to ensure that all annual review information within our case management system is accurate.

## **6. Listening to feedback**

In January 2020, we introduced a new online parent carer survey; we plan to run this annually, with the same questions on EHC needs assessments, as one method of measuring our progress and any changes in parental satisfaction. During the initial January 2020 survey, when asked whether their child's EHC needs assessment was completed in 20 weeks or less – 36% of parent carers whose child's EHC Plan had been completed in 2019 said yes, compared to only 27% of parent carers whose child's EHC Plan had been completed in 2018 or earlier. Whilst this shows an improvement, we hope to see this figure increase further in the next survey (planned for January 2021).

Further to the online survey, a telephone survey was carried out in February 2020 with a dip sample of parent carers whose child had recently had a new EHC Plan finalised. Over half of the respondents

of this survey (65%) were satisfied with the overall EHC needs assessment process, with some specifically appreciating the timeliness of the process (e.g. *'it has been a quick process for me'*). However, we appreciate that this was not the case for all respondents and know that there is further work to be done. Furthermore, whilst we did not specifically ask about timeliness in this survey, this is something we would look to include in future telephone surveys.

In addition to wider surveys, we recognise the importance of gathering routine feedback for all new EHC needs assessments wherever possible, and are now collecting satisfaction information when finalising EHC plans so that we have regular feedback from our parent carers about what is and isn't working well during the process. SEND team members also carry a link to a short satisfaction survey in their email signatures, which can be completed by anybody (young person, parent carer or professional) in order to give feedback on their interaction with the SEND team – some responses to this survey are shown below:

*"A swift process on this occasion which is different from our experiences in earlier years. So a positive improvement."*

[Anonymous response, July 2019]

*"Two of my EHCPs have been finalised recently, both within the time allocated. The draft documents have been well written and the parents have been very happy with them. We feel that the hours allocated reflect the level of need appropriately. This is partly due to fantastic support from our link EP [X] who has captured the needs of each child and provided helpful advice that is then reflected in the quality of the final EHCP"*

[SENCO, September 2019]

*"Communicating with the SEND EHCP Interim Annual Review team re updating the EHCP's for my sons following their Annual Reviews. [SEND Keyworker] and [SEND team admin] were very efficient in keeping me informed on progress. [SEND Keyworker]'s professional input and friendly manner were much appreciated and we managed to sort out finalising the Amended EHCP's in quick turnaround."*

[Parent Carer, June 2020]

*"Impressive EP report  
Clear and useable EHCP  
Excellent time frame  
Always a pleasure to deal with all professionals"*

[High School staff member, June 2020]

## 7. Learning and next steps

- The main learning has been around managing peaks in EHC needs assessments and ensuring that we have capacity to respond to these. In particular, the EP service need to ensure they maintain advice in 6 weeks; delays in EP advice has resulted in EHC needs assessments being over timescale by the time advice is provided. We have carried out a detailed piece of work on demand management and will use the learning from this to plan for anticipated peaks in demand going forward.
- Further development and integration of the health scorecard will be carried out in order to include more data and link in more closely with the Local Authority SEND scorecard. Health and local authority scorecards are shared at SEND Partnership Board meetings to allow scrutiny and challenge as needed.
- An interim Annual Review Team is in place until October 2020. Additional capacity is being recruited into the locality teams so that this work can be embedded sustainably into the teams.