Mapping user experiences of the Education, Health and Care process: a qualitative study

**Background:** The Children and Families Act 2014 entitles individuals aged 0 to 25 with special educational needs (SEN) to an Education, Health and Care (EHC) assessment and plan when additional learning support from educational settings has proved insufficient. The EHC plan aims to improve an individual's outcomes and help prepare them for adulthood. It recognises that special educational needs may be driven by health and social care circumstances, not just difficulties with learning, behaviour and/or disability. EHC plans address these factors holistically through high quality, LA led multiagency assessments. Individuals with SEND and their families are placed at the centre of the process and should have a positive experience of gaining support.

**Research purpose:** The DfE permanent secretary challenged officials to use innovative methods as part of a wide evidence gathering programme to support local delivery of the reforms. One requirement was to understand whether EHC assessment and plans were proving to be a positive experience for families and identify causes of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. This learning could then be used to inform local authorities and service providers so they can ‘maximise user experience’ as well as achieve bespoke, joined-up educational support.

**The approach:** The DfE SEND Analysis and Research team designed a qualitative research project that would not only provide user experience insight but make that insight tangible and practical for local managers, practitioners and parent/carer groups so they could improve their services. Working with policy makers, the team commissioned a study that would use multiagency workshops in four local areas (120 participants) to investigate practitioners’ perceptions of how EHC plans were being implemented. The results would then be contrasted to the opinions of ‘user’ families across those areas via 92 semi-structured interviews stratified by age and category of need. The point of this exercise was to map the process and any important differences between intended and actual practice, investigate what was most important to parents and then explore the findings with the participant local authorities in a second round of workshops to help improve practice.

The project data was synthesised into two outputs: an accessible research report with recommendations and a high impact, practical web based tool that was rooted in the research.

The web tool was developed with contractors and achieves a number of objectives: it brings the research to life with visual/audio testimony of service users’ rating of different aspects of the EHC process; provides service checklists aligned with users’ feedback and code of practice; highlights promising ideas for improved practice; sets out different methods that LAs can use to consult service users themselves; and asks for visitors to comment on the site to help with its evaluation and development.

**Initial impact and further work:** The website was launched April 2016 endorsed by DfE and DH. It has been tested with, and well received by, the participant local authorities, an expert advisory group and demonstrated to parent/carer forum representatives. They thought that the research “reflected the experiences of far more than 77 parents”, and voiced that “[the DfE] needs to get LAs to use [the research], because it’s great”. In its first week, the website received 1,600 unique visitors and 5,400 page views with the research report also receiving 2,232 unique views. The publication has also generated a large social media response with @ehcplans gaining 200 followers and positive tweets about the project being sent by NNPCF, Special Needs Jungle and the IASS network.

The website is being monitored, updated with new practice case studies and evaluated over 12 months. Monthly feedback from website visitors will provide information on how the research and resources are being used.

http://ehcpjourneys.com/
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Department for Education
The Issue

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) reforms introduced through the September 2014 Children and Families Act made significant changes to improve the system, such as:

- Greater involvement of children, young people and their parents
- A coordinated assessment of a child or young person’s education, health and care needs
- A clear and transparent local offer of services for children and young people with SEND

One of the aims of the reforms was to improve families’ experiences of the SEND system and ensure their involvement in the planning, commissioning and review of services.

An important part of measuring the success of the 2014 reforms is to assess whether children and young people with SEND and their families have a better experience of the SEND system and better outcomes.

“The vision is of children and young people with SEND achieving well in their early years, at school and in college; finding employment; leading happy and fulfilled lives; and having choice and control over their support.”
The Issue

The SEND framework sets out how progress with the reforms will be monitored and National and Local roles and responsibilities for improving outcomes and experiences for children, young people and their families.

One of DfE’s roles is to support the development and sharing of innovative and best practice, and to publish transparent and accessible data on user experience.

Feedback on user experience from children, young people and their families provides evidence of the quality of services.

To support local areas DfE commissioned a small-scale qualitative study to examine user satisfaction with the Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan process.

EHC plans replaced Statements of SEN and describe a child or young person’s educational, health and social care needs and the support they need to meet those needs and achieve their goals.

A framework for SEND to show how the system is performing, to hold partners to account and support self-improvement: *Special educational needs and disability: supporting local and national accountability*, March 2015
The Solution

DfE commissioned a project that aimed to:

1. Understand user’s experiences of the EHC process and determine their satisfaction with their local service
2. Explore how approaches to capture user feedback can help local areas assess user satisfaction and make improvements to their services

The project identified **ten factors that influence families’ satisfaction** and produced a research report and website – [ehcpjourneys.com](http://ehcpjourneys.com). The website of resources was designed to extend the reach and impact of the research by improving the accessibility of findings for local managers, practitioners and parent/carer groups.

The website was launched in April 2016 and supports practitioners in delivering the EHC planning and assessment process. All the resources on the site were developed through the research and reflect the perspective of young people, families and practitioners in the 4 local areas.

The following slides show examples of resources available on the website...
Family stories: a tool that brings the research to life with visual and audio testimony from young people with SEND and their families
The Solution

- **Service checklist**: a practical resource aligned with users’ feedback and the SEND Code of Practice to help local areas assess their service from a service user perspective.
The Solution

- Help to collect feedback: tools to support local areas collect quality feedback from children and young people with SEND and their parents
The Impact

- Use of the website was monitored for 12 months to assess impact of the site
- This information helped us tailor our communications around specific resources and target different groups, such as health practitioners
- We saw site usage drop during the summer and Christmas holidays and then pick up again at the beginning of the school terms

In the first 10 months the site was live... (26\textsuperscript{th} April – 10\textsuperscript{th} March 2017)

- 11,096 site visits
- 30,985 page views
- 19% of visitors come through social media
- 62% visits from computers
- 27% from mobiles
- 12% from tablets
The Impact

- Site users were encouraged to **provide feedback through the website** on the resources and how they’ve used them to improve their service
- Early feedback from practitioners was positive— the tool was used to help **train staff** and **identify areas for improvement**

Feedback from SEND practitioners:

“We are working with reps from our SENDIAS service, independent supporters and mediation advisors initially to go through the service checklist. I hope it will help identify areas for change” Head of SEN service

“We’ve used it to underpin our training sessions, focusing on key findings. The checklist is a really helpful tool and the links are excellent” Commissioner

“As a local team we’ve worked through the checklist and rated ourselves. We intend to get parent feedback on it too. We used the suggestions to make some quick changes and have focused our development on areas identified as weak for us” Head of EPS
Next steps

- We will continue to monitor use of the site and collect feedback from practitioners on how they are using it.
- In Spring 2017 new content will be added to the site: case studies to share examples of practice in other local areas.
- People can sign up to the site mailing list to keep up-to-date on developments.

We will be adding content to this site as practice develops further. Stay up to date with our latest news and developments via email.
This research project was carried out by ASK Research on behalf of the Department for Education

To find out more about the research please contact:

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