Department for Education

Special educational needs and disability pathfinder programme evaluation

Thematic report: the local offer

Research report

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Key findings

This report was produced as part of SQW's evaluation of the Special Educational Needs SEN (SEN) and Disability Pathfinder Programme for the Department for Education. It focuses on the experiences of five areas in developing, publishing and reviewing their Local Offers (LO). The key learning points were that:

- **Central and local government perspectives on what the LO should be are aligned** around five core principles: collaboration in development, and accessibility, comprehensiveness, transparency and sustainability[1] of the information.

- **However, operationalisation of the LO has varied across areas.** Some areas have resourced development of their LO internally whilst others have commissioned it externally. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages; with internal development allowing the local authority to maintain control over the look and functionality of the LO, while external providers allow greater flexibility and additional capacity to deliver.

- The **involvement of parents, children and young** people in the development and design **was important in ensuring that LOs met their needs.**

- **The interactivity and accessibility of LOs has varied** depending on the level of resource and IT expertise available, and local authority communications and IT regulations. Much of the feedback has been for more rather than less interactivity, but this is harder to deliver.

- **Despite the involvement of professionals from across services the quality and quantity of information provided has still been variable** and relied on substantial chasing and quality assurance by LO staff.

- **A variety of factors have affected the comprehensiveness of LOs**:
  - More prescriptive templates for information collection tended to result in the collation of more consistent and comparable information across providers
  - Areas have differed in how far they **sought to obtain all the information at once, or preferred to phase development**
  - More maintained than independent providers have contributed information.

- **All five case study areas had published web-based LOs** by the beginning of September 2014, but **these were expected to evolve over time and require further thought around maintenance and sustainability**. In addition, **more work is required to develop solutions for those without access to a computer or the internet**. This will have implications for future resourcing.

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[1] Including ensuring the LO remains up to date

1. Introduction

Evaluation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Pathfinder Programme

SQW was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to lead a consortium of organisations to undertake the Evaluation of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Disability Pathfinder Programme. A series of reports from the study are available on the government publications website[2]. During the course of the research, a number of key issues were identified as requiring more in-depth thematic review. This report focuses on one of these issues – *the development of the Local Offer*.

Rationale for the research

Local authorities have a statutory duty to develop and publish a Local Offer (LO), following the introduction of the 2014 Children and Families Act[3]. Evaluation findings from the first 18 months of the pathfinder programme indicated that areas had made mixed levels of progress developing their LO. Development tended to be a work in progress, reflecting the scale of the task and the number of other elements that areas were working on as part of their response to the reforms.

It was therefore decided to revisit the LO later through a thematic report, in order to inform the LO development and review process across all local authorities.

Research focus

This thematic report provides further insight into various aspects of LO development, publication and maintenance, through a series of research questions which are detailed in Figure 1.

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[2] The following six thematic reports have been completed, published and can be downloaded at https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/send-pathfinders#evaluation-of-the-send-pathfinders: Key working and Workforce Development; The Education, Health and Care Planning Pathway; Collaborative Working with Social Care; Collaborative Working with Health; Engagement of Schools; and Transition and the Engagement of Post-16 Providers

[3] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents/enacted

Figure 1 Local Offer thematic study research questions

Development	To what extent has the LO been developed in your area and what level of resource has been/will be invested? How has the LO been developed? Are there common models/tools? To what extent has the LO built on other sources of information? How has out of area information been gathered? Who has led LO development? Which partners have been involved and in what ways? How were parents, children and young people with SEN and disabilities involved? What measures were taken to ensure consistency of inputs from different partners?
Content	What information is currently covered in the LO and does the area intend to make any additions to this? To what extent does this meet the expectations set out in the Code of Practice in terms of level of detail and coverage?
Accessibility	What format is the LO available in? What testing has been/will be done to ensure the LO is easily accessible and meets the needs of parents, children and young people? What measures have been/will be put in place to inform parents, children and young people with SEN and disabilities about the LO? What has been/will be put in place to support them to access the LO? What workforce development has been undertaken to ensure professionals are aware of and are promoting use of the LO?
Sustainability	How will the LO be maintained, reviewed and updated? Who is/will be responsible for maintaining it? Will parents, children and families be involved in reviewing the LO and if so how? How will their comments be gathered and subsequently published? How will the local area prepare a response and action plan in light of feedback?
Perceived effectiveness & implications for future development	To what extent do the professionals and families involved in developing and delivering the LO feel it will be/is useful and why? What are the implications of this feedback on the future development of the LO? What are the remaining challenges associated with development, implementation and maintenance of the LO and how might these be addressed?

Source: SQW

Our approach

Evidence was gathered from five local authorities, including pathfinder and non-pathfinder areas – Barking and Dagenham, Brighton and Hove, Leicester City, North Yorkshire, and Telford and Wrekin. In addition to ensuring that the research included both pathfinder and non- pathfinder areas, the areas were selected on the basis that they had published their LO (or were on course to publish it by 1st September 2014) and had made substantial development of their LO to inform good practice elsewhere.

The research involved a desk based review of either the working or published LO documentation, and a series of in-depth face to face and telephone interviews. Thirty individuals were consulted as part of the research. Consultees included the LO leads, contributors from Special Educational Needs (SEN), children and adult's social care, health, local authority communication officers, the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and parents. We would like to express our sincere thanks to all those that contributed to the research.

Intended audience

This report is intended to support those charged with developing, publishing and maintaining LOs, in order to meet the requirements of the SEN and disability reforms.

2. What is the Local Offer?

Defining the Local Offer

The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a statutory duty on local authorities to develop and publish a LO, which sets out what they expect to be available for local children and young people with SEN and disabilities across education, health and social care.

The SEN and disability Code of Practice[4] (hereafter referred to as *the Code*) provides guidance on both the *content* of the LO (including the service and age range of provision that should be included) and the *process* of developing, publishing and reviewing it (including how different professionals, parents, children and young people should be involved) (see Figure 2). This guidance has been substantially expanded from the original vision of the LO set out in the Support and Aspiration Green Paper[5] and draws on the work of the pathfinders.

Figure 2 What should the LO be?

Collaborative	• Local authorities must involve parents, children and young people in developing and reviewing the LO • They must also cooperate with those providing services
Accessible	• The published LO should be easy to understand, factual and jargon free • It should be structured in a way that relates to young people's and parents' needs • It should be well signposted and well publicised
Comprehensive	• Parents and young people should know what support is expected to be available across education, health and social care from age 0 to 25 and how to access it • The LO must include eligibility criteria for services where relevant and make it clear where to go for information, advice and support, as well as how to make complaints about provision or appeal against decisions
Transparent	• The LO should be clear about how decisions are made and who is accountable and responsible for them
Up to date	• When parents and young people access the LO it is important that the information is up to date • Local authorities should review and publish information annually about the effectiveness of the information, advice and support provided, including customer satisfaction

Source: Adapted from SEN and disability Code of Practice

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[4] Department for Education, 2014, *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years*, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/342440/SEND_Code_of_Practice_approved_by_Parliament_29.07.14.pdf

[5] Department for Education, 2011, *Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability: A consultation*, http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eorderingdownload/green-paper-sen.pdf

Case study areas had quite a consistent understanding of what the LO should and should not be. However, there was some variation in how this had been interpreted and translated into LOs across the five case study areas, which is explored further throughout the rest of this chapter.

What this means in practice

What is the Local Offer for?

While the definition set out in later iterations of the Code was felt to be clear, in practice the LO continued to mean different things to different people:

- For **parents, children and young people with SEN and disabilities**, it was about understanding the support they could access so that they could make informed decisions on which services to use. This is true both of families deciding what services to purchase through their Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans and Personal Budgets and those understanding what they could access through mainstream services where they were not eligible for specialist support

- For **professionals** from across education, health and social care, it was about understanding what services were available to families both within, and crucially outside, their service area. In essence it was about helping professionals to better support the families they work with

- For service **commissioners**, it was about providing a tool through which gaps in the market could be identified and filled, and as a way of collecting feedback from parents on services. By bringing together provision from across the services it was also intended to support joint commissioning.

It is too early to tell the full extent to which the LO will meet these needs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the LO could have the desired effect for the parents and professionals who knew about it, although the effects upon commissioning and for children and young people and harder to reach families[6] were less clear cut.

What will the Local Offer look like?

Case study areas understood that, as the Code states, *"the LO should not simply be a directory of existing services."*[7] They intended to differentiate their LO from such a directory in two ways:

> *"It is more than just a directory of services, but a place where families can go for help and signposting."*
> Pathfinder Lead

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[6] Harder to reach families may not come into contact with the LO or may need more help accessing it.

[7] Department for Education, 2014, *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years*, p.60

- Being **more interactive and user friendly** for parents, children and young people than a simple list of providers

- Containing **more, relevant information** (for instance around eligibility and accessibility of services) to enable parents to make informed decisions.

In practice, the interactivity and user-friendliness of the relevant LOs varied across the case study areas (see Figure 3). The interactivity and visual natures of the LOs have tended to be affected by:

- The amount of time invested in LO development

- The level of IT expertise available to support development

- The restrictiveness of local authority communications or IT regulations on what the LO could look like

- The quality and quantity of information collected from providers.

Figure 3 What do LOs look like?
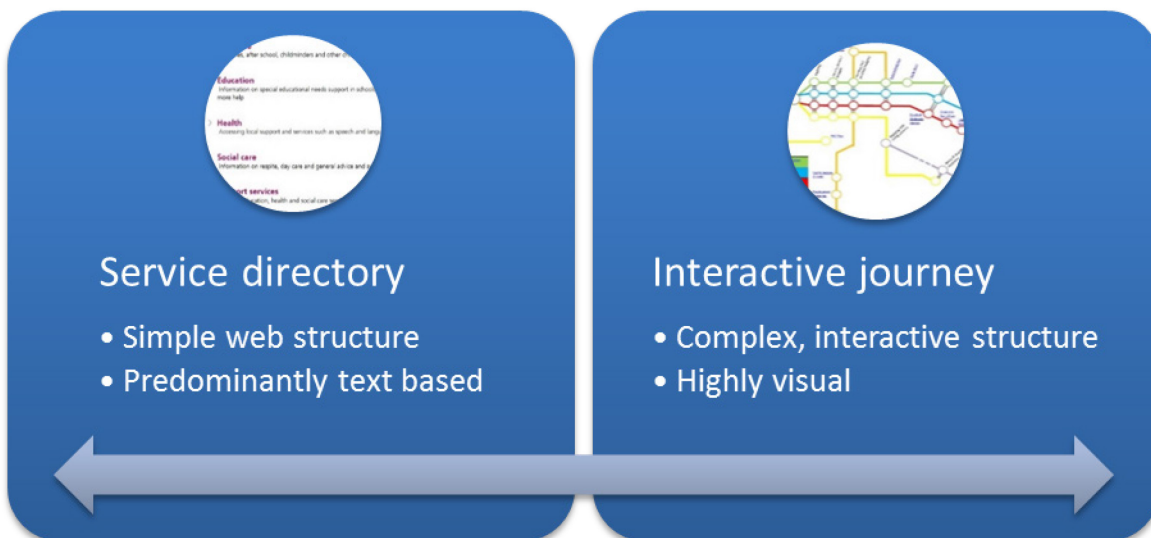
Source: SQW

Figure 4 uses snapshots from published LOs to demonstrate some of the key features of the LOs developed by the case study areas. While some areas utilised icons (which tended to be favoured by parents, children and young people), others were unable to do this, in part due to concerns about mixed meanings of icons, and in part due to a desire to ensure consistency with the rest of the council's website.

All of the areas had developed and published a web-based LO, but much more limited progress had been made in relation to an alternative for those without computer/internet access. One option was to develop a paper-based LO, although there were two main challenges with this approach:

- **The need for the LO to remain 'live'** – Given that all areas planned to ensure their LO was kept up to date, there was a risk that paper-based versions would become quickly out-dated and would need to be reprinted and redistributed, which would incur

additional costs. All areas felt having a printed version would make the LO less user friendly and more like a directory of services, a format most were trying to avoid

- **The quantity of information included** – Web-based LOs typically contain a lot of information spread across a series of webpages which are connected by hyperlinks. This means that, if a reader wants more information on a particular service/type of service they can 'click' to be redirected to find more information. If the same level of information were included in a paper-based LO it would risk becoming very unwieldy and unusable. Therefore, a selection of leaflets with 'bite-sized chunks' of information or the tailored printing of relevant sections of the LO based upon individual family needs may be more appropriate and was being considered as an approach by two of the areas.

An alternative to a paper-based LO being considered by a number of the case study areas was the use of a helpline or 'guides' to talk families through the web-based LO. The helpline would be virtual, while guides could offer this service in libraries and children's centres, and one area planned for social workers with iPads to undertake this role as part of their ongoing casework with families. However, while this could provide a good alternative to a paper-based LO (negating the challenges outlined above), it is associated with cost and workforce development implications, which had not yet been fully considered.

Figure 4 Some features of case study area LOs

Source: SQW, Using screenshots from published case study area LOs

What will be included in the Local Offer?

Coverage of the Local Offer

Case study areas have tried to develop widespread LO coverage across mainstream and specialist health, education and social care services and across the 0-25 age range (see Table 1). However, whilst all case study areas had gathered and published some information across each, most acknowledged that some gaps remained. Information tended to be particularly patchy around the 16+ age group and, in some cases, amongst pre-school children. This partly reflected that a number of the areas had adopted a phased approach to information collection, beginning with school-aged children (approach discussed further in chapter 3).

The level of information collected on out of area provision to date also varied substantially (with most case study areas prioritising the collation of information of in-area provision first). Where areas had begun to collect out of area information, the key challenge seemed to be around 'where to stop', as if the wrong balance was struck the *'local'* offer could quickly become a more national offering. This would also be likely to lead to significant duplication across LOs and have big cost implications for their development and maintenance. Therefore, those areas which had reached this stage tended to take a pragmatic approach to the collation of out of area information; focusing on provision that resident children and young people were currently accessing or had accessed in the past rather than collating information on the whole range of possible provision.

Table 1 Common themes covered within case study area LOs

Theme	Examples of types of provision/information included
Early years and childcare	Early years education, children's centres, early support
Education	Mainstream and special schools, SEN support services
Health	Community mental health services, doctors, children's hospitals, speech and language services, occupational therapy, specialist nursing
Social care	Information on assessments, disabled children's social work team, children's centres, short breaks, key workers, social workers, counselling, parent groups and courses, groups for involving parents and young people
Leisure	Cinema, cubs and brownies, leisure clubs for children and young people with SEN and disabilities, museums and heritage, libraries
Preparing for adulthood	Information on transition planning and the transition team, colleges, sixth forms and approved learning providers for post 16, services for post 16

Theme	Examples of types of provision/information included
Life (money, housing, transport etc.)	Transport, independent travel training, student grants and loans, help with travel and living costs for post 16s, supported employment team, youth employability service, supported housing, housing adaptations, housing benefits and council tax support
Statutory assessment/ EHC planning process	Information on EHC plans, personal budgets
Information and support	Parent partnership service, family information service

Source: SQW

Comprehensiveness of the Local Offer

The case study areas sought to ensure their LOs provided comprehensive and consistent information across services. Figure 5 provides an overview of some of the main types of information included, although the exact nature of the information collected varied by area, and in some cases across services (see Table 2).

"There is a broad spectrum of information across all themes, but more work is involved to add detail in some areas."

Local Offer Lead

Whilst most areas were aiming for consistency of information across services, often hosted on the LO website, some areas also included web links to wider websites. These tended to not be consistent in format or content with the LO website and were not subject to the same quality assurance processes.

Figure 5 What information is included in the Local Offer?
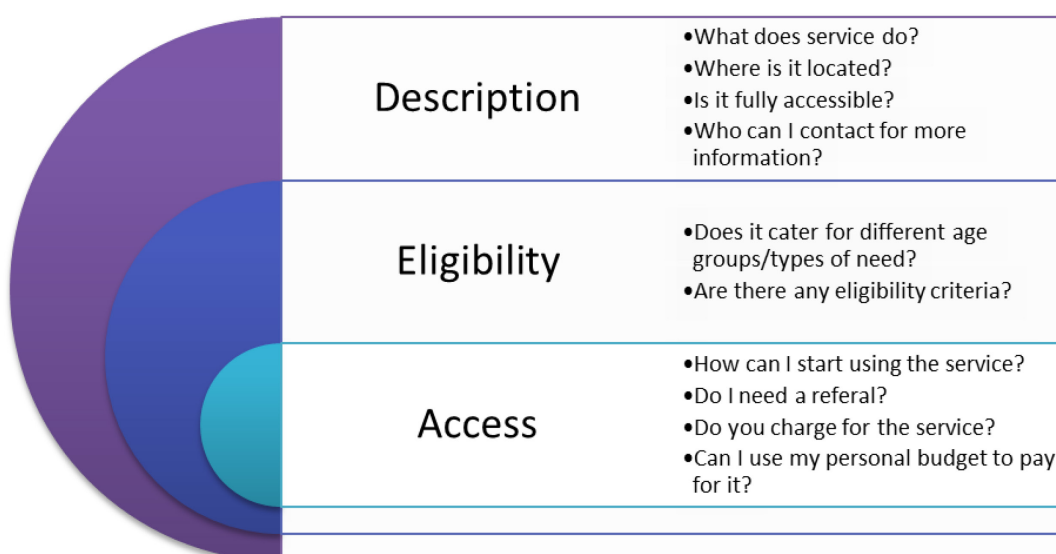
Source: SQW

Table 2 Examples of variations in comprehensiveness within and across case study LOs

Variation in comprehensiveness *within* case study LOs	
Example 1: Schools vs wider service providers	A number of case study areas collated different levels of information from schools and other providers. Within some areas this variation was temporary, with discrepancies relating more to the phasing of the data collection rather than a strategic decision around content. However, one area purposefully collected different information from schools and wider providers; perceiving the core school offer to be more homogenous than wider provision, and the point of difference (which would help parents, children and young people to make appropriate choices about schooling) was around the accessibility of the offer, the adaptability of support to meet individual needs, how the setting matched resources to children's special educational needs etc. Therefore the school element of the LO focuses more around these types of information.
Example 2: Maintained vs non-maintained provision	The comprehensiveness of information on maintained schools tended to be better than that of non-maintained or independent provision. This, again, partly related to the phasing of data collection, and to the level of control (and therefore pressure that could be applied) over different providers. Consultees felt that information from non-maintained providers would improve as families began to use the LO as a key source of information for deciding which provision to access, although it is too early to tell whether this will occur in practice.
Variation in comprehensiveness *across* case study LOs	
Example 3:	Some of the templates developed by areas were more prescriptive, resulting in the collection of more consistent information which was comparable across providers and services. Other LOs provided more generic information in a less consistent format and signposted users to providers own websites for additional information. This made it less easy for the user to make comparisons about services available in their LO.
Example 4:	Case study areas which had engaged parents, children and young people in the development and design of the LO tended to have a more wide ranging offer of services and provision to meet their needs. For instance, in addition to the information on health, education and social care, these LOs contained details on broader provision to support the family, such as the money advice service and leisure facilities with accessible changing rooms.

Source: SQW

When will the Local Offer be published and completed?

Case study areas adopted different approaches to developing their LO, which had implications for when their LOs were first published:

- Some adopted a **phased approach** to development meaning that they published a partial LO (e.g. just the educational elements) or an initial audit of services prior to publication of their 'full' offer – *In these cases areas published a partial LO and added to this information over time as more became available. The first case study area to launch a partial LO did so in early 2013*

- Others have **held back the launch** of their LO to undertake further user testing or ensure they had gathered as much information as possible prior to publication – *In these cases areas did not intend to publish their LOs until September 2014, when the new legislation required them to do so, by which point their LO would be 'nearing completion'.*

> *"The LO will not and shouldn't ever be finished, it is an ongoing process of refining and improving."*
>
> Pathfinder Lead

Regardless of the approach taken, there was a perception that the LO would continue to evolve over time (beyond September 2014), and would need to remain a 'live' document. In this sense all the LOs would continue to remain a work in progress, which has implications for the resources required for maintenance. These implications are discussed further within the remaining chapters.

3. Developing a Local Offer

Who is involved?

The exact make-up of the LO development team varied across areas, but there were also similarities with how the five case study areas developed their LOs. This section describes the typical involvement of different professionals, parents, children and young people and discusses the variation across the areas.

The core team

Each area assigned a designated individual or team to lead development the LO, who typically sat within education. Their role varied substantially, from one of coordination through to leading on the development of all elements of the LO. The amount of time assigned to undertake the role also varied considerably; from 2-3 hours per week of one professional's time to one or more full-time equivalent roles. This often fluctuated across the period, with additional resource being brought in at 'crunch points', for instance when uploading provider responses onto the LO website. However, the amount of designated time inevitably had implications for development of the LO, with better resourced teams able to dedicate more time to consultation with parents, children and young people and wider professionals. The LOs developed with wider consultation appeared to better meet the needs of their users (although technical expertise and IT/local authority communication restrictions also had a big effect on the ability of the LO to meet communicated need). On the other hand, those that had dedicated less time and involved less consultation tended to be more focused, although the extent to which they would meet user needs was less clear.

> *"The young people have been our biggest critics, they were clear they wanted something which felt individual to them."*
> VCS Representative

Involvement of wider professionals

Beyond the core team, wider professionals and providers from across education, health and children and adult's social care were encouraged to contribute to working groups and pull together information for the LO. However this needed to be undertaken within the confines of existing roles, with no additional designated resource.

In some cases health and social care were involved relatively late in the development process, either because: organisational restructuring had restricted their representative's capacity to attend meetings; it was not clear who should be approached to act as their service lead (particularly for health); or because the local authority had initially focused on developing the LO for education. However, once involved, these professionals were felt to have a key role in terms of collating their service inputs and/or signposting the LO core team onto relevant providers within their service.

The involvement of local authority communications teams was also variable across case study areas, and where involved, they intended to be engaged relatively late in the development process.

Involvement of parents, children and young people

Each of the case study areas involved parents in the development of their LO and the majority involved children and young people with SEN and disabilities. However the level of engagement varied across areas. Key methods of involving parents, children and young people in the development of the LO included:

> *"Parents and children are coming up with new ideas all the time … we want them to feel an ownership."*
> VCS Representative

- **Parental representative on LO working group** – This meant that selected parents were able to contribute to discussions with professionals throughout the developmental process

- **Wider engagement of parents** – Areas frequently tried to engage parents more widely, through presentations and focus groups with parent carer forums, other community groups and at wider VCS events

- **Focus groups with children and young people** – Most areas tried to engage children and young people through focus groups at schools, further education colleges and/or VCS groups. These were generally well received, although one area reported difficulties getting parental consent for children to be consulted

> *"I am now very confident the LO will meet the needs of families."*
> Parent carer

- **Recruitment of a young apprentice** – One area recruited a young person with SEN and disabilities to work as a local authority apprentice, supporting the team and development of the LO. This young person contributed to various aspects of the LO, including choosing icons for each of the main themes.

These and other core mechanisms for engagement and delivery are discussed further towards the end of this chapter, in the context of what they have achieved.

The decision to commission out or develop in-house

Many of the case study areas considered whether to commission an external provider to develop the LO (either to lead the whole process, or to specifically develop the IT element) or to develop it internally. The key reasons for adopting each approach are set out in Figure 6. While most of our case study areas chose to develop at least part of their LO internally, the level of contracting out varied across areas:

- One area fully commissioned out development of their LO to a local VCS organisation and was intending to issue a subsequent tender for the maintenance of their LO rather than bringing it back in-house

- One area recruited external consultants to work within the local authority to develop their LO. Their roles ranged from undertaking an audit of existing provision to co-producing the design with parents, children and young people

- Another area developed their main LO in-house, but commissioned an external IT provider to develop a children's version. This decision followed feedback from young people that their LO needed to be more colourful and interactive than the local authority system would allow.

Figure 6 Deciding whether to commission an external provider

Local authority provider	External provider
• Consistency with local authoroity website and branding • Easier to update/maintain information • More cost efficient	• More freedom over what LO looks like/its functionality • Have capacity to deliver project • Costs clearer from outset

Source: SQW

One area had a capacity issue within their local authority IT provider – which had large implications for delivery. It meant that, following basic training, an administrator developed their LO within the local authority website. Whilst this led to all the information being successfully uploaded, it meant the LO was still lacking the functionality that parents, children and young people and the team had hoped for (including search functionality, trip advisor style service ratings etc.). They hoped that their local authority IT provider would, in time, be able to add this functionality in.

How is the Local Offer developed?

Across each of the five case study areas, there have been two main stages involved in developing the LO:

- Gathering the information from providers
- Deciding what the LO should look like and how it should be accessed.

Within some of our case studies these stages have been undertaken sequentially while in others they have been undertaken simultaneously.

Gathering the information

This process has tended to begin with an audit of the existing providers and information available. Providers have been identified through a variety of means including:

- Local authority records of provision

- Existing council or VCS databases of providers (e.g. lists of short breaks providers, Family Information Service lists of childcare providers)

- Service leads on LO working groups

- Financial records of existing (or previously commissioned) services

- A commissioned independent audit of services.

Areas have tended to take a pragmatic approach, starting with providers they know (e.g. maintained providers), with a later movement to include independent and out of area providers that will continue beyond September 2014. Often areas started by gathering information from schools, although reasons ranged from schools being the most familiar (for LO teams based in SEN teams) to a recognition that within the timeframes, it could take longer to gather information from schools due to school holidays.

Most areas used a template (or in some cases different templates for different services) to gather the necessary information in a consistent format. The method of collection varied from a Microsoft Word template to an e-survey, but in either case it required providers to populate responses to specific questions. This approach was felt to provide a good basis for collecting information in a consistent format from across providers and would therefore be recommended to other areas. However, this process did throw up a number of challenges, which are detailed along with their implications in Table 3.

Table 3 Challenges associated with gathering information from providers

Challenge	This meant…
The quality and completeness of information was inconsistent, despite guidance being offered across areas	Substantial quality assurance of information was often required by the local authority, even in areas which had tried to designate this responsibility to providers In some areas, the LO team went back to providers that had left gaps in their returns whilst others uploaded the information they had available
Some providers did not provide a response	LO core teams and wider professionals have tried to chase to ensure they received as many responses as possible (although the extent of this depended on the time available to manage the task) However, there are still a number of non-responses. The LOs will remain 'live' with information inputted as it becomes available. In the meantime, some authorities have included links to provider websites to be replaced by the consistent information when it becomes available. Although far from ideal, this is probably the best that can be achieved in the very short term
Provision of information that is inaccurate or non-compliant with existing legislation	Even with quality assurance within the LO team, the level of expertise has not always been sufficient to pick up issues with the information received. For instance, in one area, a number of schools submitted responses which were non-compliant with the Equalities Act. This issue was picked up by the local authority equalities officer

Challenge	This meant…
	after the information had been uploaded. This information was immediately taken down
Information can become out of date	The consequences of this haven't yet been fully considered (discussed further in the next chapter). However, maintaining, reviewing and updating the LO will have resource requirements. This is a particular concern within some areas where designated posts will no longer be in place beyond September 2014

Source: SQW

Deciding what the LO should look like and how it should be accessed

As discussed previously, LOs have tended to be developed collaboratively rather than by individuals, which was felt to be crucial to ensuring the LO met the needs of service users. The main mechanisms for supporting collaborative development were consistent across most areas and are set out in Table 4.

Table 4 Core delivery mechanisms

Approach	What this has achieved
LO working group (in all areas)	Enabled a variety of parents and professionals from across services to feed into the different design stages; from deciding what the information templates should include to deciding what the LO should look like and what functionality it should contain.
Feedback mechanisms for parents, children and young people, as described earlier in chapter (in most areas)	Enabled users to provide feedback on the LO to ensure it met their needs. This has led to some significant changes in some areas including the development of slightly different children and young people versions (that are more visually interesting and interactive and less text-heavy as they requested).
	However, in some cases it has not been possible to fully meet parent, children and young people's expectations due to restrictions imposed by the local authority communications team or IT providers (for instance with LO interactivity and use of images/icons being restricted by a need to fit in with local authority website functionality or branding). Involving the communications team and IT provider in these discussions from the outset would likely prove a better means of addressing issues.
Promotion to professionals, including through workshops, presentations in team meetings (in some areas)	Increased awareness of the LO amongst professionals will support them to better understand the provision available across services and will enable them to signpost families both to the LO and the services.
	However, there was widespread recognition that there was more to do in terms of raising awareness of the LO; particularly amongst those who have less regular contact with children with SEN and disabilities and are less aware of the reform agenda.

Source: SQW

4. Looking forwards

Progress to date

The case study areas have made considerable progress in the development of their LOs with respect to the principles set out in the Code of Practice (see Table 5). However, the LOs remain a work in progress and will need to continue to evolve and be updated over time in order to meet both central government and local aspirations.

Table 5 Progress to date in relation to the Code of Practice LO principles

LO principles	Progress to date
Collaborative	Professionals and providers from different services, parents and (in most cases) children and young people with SEN and disabilities have been involved in the development of the LO, as outlined above
	The review processes are still to be developed/finalised across most case study areas, although it was widely acknowledged that the same stakeholders would need to be involved in this process
Accessible	The formats of the LO varied substantially; both in terms of the level of interactivity and the balance of text to images. However, LOs remained a work-in-progress with many planning to add additional functionality (e.g. family case studies, search functions) beyond September 2014. In addition, a key challenge going forwards is to ensure that the LOs are accessible and can be used by all, including those without internet access
Comprehensive	By September 2014, the case study area LOs each contained information across education, health and social care services and across the 0-25 age range. However, information remained 'patchy' across some of these areas (notably in terms of the 16+ age group) and there was also some variation in the comprehensiveness of information provided. However, the LOs were expected to continue to evolve and be added to beyond September
Transparent	Eligibility for provision and the processes involved with seeking support (including through the EHC assessment and planning process) are detailed within the LOs
Up to date	Limited progress has been made across most areas in terms of planning for the sustainability of the LOs, including how they will be kept up to date and how family comments will be published and actioned. However, all areas acknowledged that maintenance of the LO would require resource and so consideration of how to sustain their LO should be a priority, particularly in areas where the LO team will be disbanded following September 2014

Source: SQW

Key challenges moving forwards

Within this context, case study areas face three key challenges moving forwards, which are likely to also be echoed by other areas developing LOs across the country.

1. Accessibility for all

The LO needs to be accessible to all families with a child or young person with SEN and disabilities, not just to those with a computer and access to the internet. There seem to be two potential options for facilitating this, but both have associated challenges and limited progress has been made pursuing these to date. They include:

- **Developing a paper copy** – This would mean that the LO could be available from a variety of places (ranging from supermarkets to GP surgeries and schools) to maximise the number of families who would have access to it. However, the quantity of information available through online LOs would mean that paper copies would need to include a subset of the information available, possibly printed on an individual section as required basis, to avoid becoming too bulky and unusable. In addition, the information would be likely to become out of date quickly and would be expensive to update, reprint and redistribute

- **Creating a helpline or guide role** – This would mean that a range of individuals (e.g. social workers, information officers, VCS organisations) could introduce the LO to families and explain the content to them, which may help engage otherwise hard to reach families. It also avoids the issues associated with having a static paper copy. Reliance on professionals to undertake this role creates challenges around workforce development and puts additional pressure on capacity, by needing to be built into existing job descriptions.

2. Widening usage

Linked to this, all families do not just need to be *technically* able to access the LO, they need to be aware of its existence and understand the benefits of accessing it. In this sense, whilst case study areas have taken some steps to 'launch' their LOs to parents, there is more to be done in terms of raising awareness with parents, children and young people and professionals. Indeed, awareness raising amongst professionals was felt to be key to facilitating wider usage amongst parents. While a number of areas have begun this process, building awareness and familiarity within professionals was felt to be crucial to giving them confidence to introduce the LO to parents (as well as becoming more aware of the content themselves).

3. Ensuring sustainability

Ensuring the LOs remain up to date is crucial in order for them to be useful (and used) by parents, children and young people and professionals. The process for reviewing and updating content has not been given extensive consideration by most case study areas to date, with areas focusing upon getting LOs published first. However, maintaining and updating the LO was expected to require a level of continued resourcing; whether

through the continuation of a designated LO officer role, building it into existing job descriptions or funding its maintenance through an outside provider.

Areas should seek to develop policies for such review processes and ensure these are signed off by all partners who will be required to contribute. The resourcing arrangements should also be carefully considered and planned for, to ensure LOs don't become out of date, and consequently obsolete.

Annex A: Glossary of terms

EHC   Education, Health and Care

LO   Local Offer

SEN   Special Educational Needs

VCS   Voluntary and Community Sector

Annex B: Research methods

Research was undertaken in three pathfinder and two non-pathfinder areas, selected in discussion with the Department for Education and Pathfinder Support Team. The basis for selection of the areas included: areas that had published their LO (or were on course to publish it by 1st September 2014); a mix from across the regions; a mixture of rural/urban and large/small areas; and at least one pathfinder champion.

Once the five areas had agreed to participate in the fieldwork, a scoping consultation was held with the pathfinder and/or LO lead in each area to discuss the research focus and objectives, gain a better overview of progress developing their LO to date, and identify staff to participate in fieldwork.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork was undertaken between July and September 2014, and typically consisted of area-based consultations with the LO lead, and wider individuals involved in development and where relevant implementation of the LO. This included strategic/operational staff from across health, SEN, social care, schools, VCS, IT professionals, local authority communications staff and parent carers.

Where possible consultations were conducted face-to-face, although some consultations were undertaken over the telephone to ensure good coverage of stakeholders. Thirty participants were involved across the five case studies.

The interviews followed a semi-structured topic guide designed by the research team, which covered the five broad research themes outlined in the introduction of the report. Participants were asked to set aside approximately 45 minutes - 2 hours for the consultations, and most face-to-face interviews were recorded[8].

Analysis and reporting

The analysis took place in two stages. Firstly, each area 'case study' was written up in alignment with the five research themes. Secondly, the research team looked across the five write-ups to explore commonalities and differences in responses across areas and the themes covered by the research questions.

The report was drafted based on these findings, with an emphasis placed on developing a 'readable' and pragmatic report, which drew on a range of experiences and would be useful to those involved in developing, publishing and maintaining LOs, in order to meet the requirements of the SEN and disability reforms.

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[8] Exceptions included where participants withheld consent for the interview to be recorded.