

Effective Practice case study: developing a holistic approach to SEN support in the early years in Herefordshire

Summary

Herefordshire was seeing increasing numbers of, as well as the need for a more holistic approach to identification, support and transition for, early years children with SEND. Working co-productively with practitioners, parents / carers, and partners, the Early Years Inclusion Service in Herefordshire co-designed and rolled out a new multi-faceted, whole-system approach to SEN and inclusion support in the early years. Accurate and timely identification of – and consequently oversight of support for – children with SEND in the early years has increased, while the support that has been put in place to boost skills and capacity in settings has meant more children are having their needs met without the need for an EHCP, and increasing numbers of children with SEN (both with and without EHCPs) are making a successful transition when they start school. Feedback from professionals about the training and development they have accessed is very positive, while there is evidence from parents / carers that they are seeing the benefits of the new early years offer. Crucial to this work has been improving the accuracy of data and oversight of early years children with SEN, pro-actively building the skills and capacity of the early years workforce, and ensuring 'every door is the right door' when families or professionals are seeking support.

The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the "strength of evidence" of this case study is **promising** – the work has been evaluated and shared internally, and has been sustained for more than 12 months. The "breadth of impact" of this case study is **promising** – there is evidence of impact in three of the four broad areas of impact considered by the Framework.¹



¹ The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework uses two "signal strength" indicators to present the strength of evidence and the breadth of impact of a case study. Each indicator has four bars – emerging, promising, good and robust. The "strength of evidence" indicator is based on how the project has been evaluated and the length of time it has been sustained. The "breadth of impact" indicator is based on whether the case study can demonstrate impact in four broad areas – the more areas of impact, the higher the signal strength indicator.

Why was this work undertaken? What did the work aim to do?

During the academic year 2021/22, leaders in Herefordshire identified a trend of rising numbers of children with SEND in the early years. At the same time, their ambition was to create a new, holistic approach to supporting early years children with SEND that had three core elements, which were to ensure:

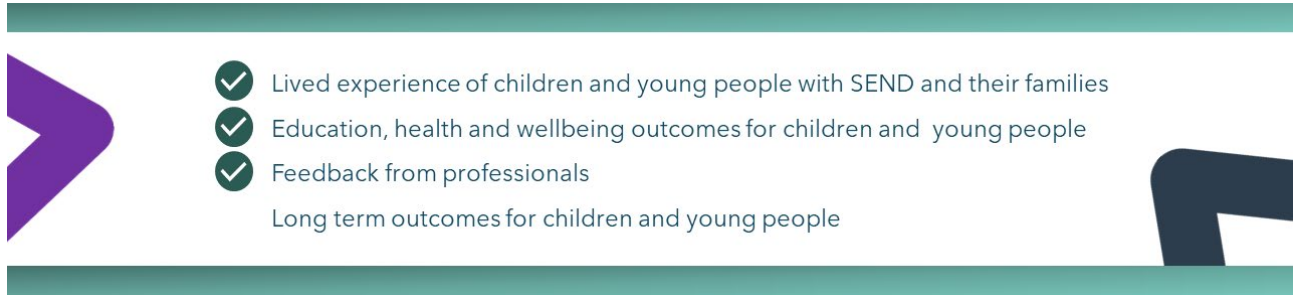
1. Timely and accurate identification of need;
2. Settings were supported, trained and skilled in providing effective support to children with SEND; and
3. Effective transition from the early years to school.

At the time, identification of children with SEND in early years settings was inconsistent – for example, fewer than half of children in Reception who received an EHCP were previously known to Early Years Inclusion Support in 2020. Practitioners reported lacking confidence in supporting children, with data showing the need for specific support around working with children with social communication needs. Increasing numbers of children with SEND in the early years would mean increasing numbers of children with SEND making the transition to primary school, increasing the need for effective planning and practice before, during and after that important transition. At the start of the work, data suggested that there were potentially 25 children with high levels of need who may not have an appropriate school place.

A whole-system approach to supporting inclusion and SEND in the early years was planned. This was undertaken:

- ✦ In a spirit of co-production and collaboration - working with and listening to families and practitioners;
- ✦ With a clear understanding that of that the greatest asset in the Herefordshire early years system is the early years workforce – which a consequent focus on upskilling practitioners and ensuring the system was designed to enable support; and
- ✦ By an integrated, well-managed and well-structured Early Years Inclusion Service that focused on every child with SEND in Herefordshire – which aimed to provide holistic, joined-up, wraparound support so that children did not fall between different services.

What was the impact?



The project has been able to demonstrate impact in three of the four areas captured by the SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework - showing significant impact in the three core elements on which it has focused. This has been achieved despite the fact that the numbers of children supported by the Early Years Inclusion Service have increased – 146 children received early years inclusion funding in 2018/19 (pre-pandemic), whereas 220 children received this support in 2022/23.

1. Identification

In 2020, the number of children in Reception who received EHCPs who were previously known to the Early Years Inclusion Service was 43%. This rose to 92% in 2021, and was 100% during the 2022/23 academic year. Better identification, knowledge and oversight of children with SEND in early years settings has had wider benefits – for example, this has allowed professionals to encourage take-up of disability access funding, which has doubled between 2022 and 2023.

2. Support

Effective support in early years settings has seen an increasing number of children make the transition to mainstream school without needing an EHCP. Of the children known to the Early Years Inclusion Service in 2021, 21% moved to mainstream school without an EHCP, whereas in 2023 this had increased to 39%. Broader knowledge of these children meant LA and setting leaders were confident this meant the children were getting the support that they needed and making progress without the need for a statutory plan.

Staff in early years settings have reported that the support available for children with additional needs has made a positive difference to their practice and has had a positive impact on the children and staff. They have also noted the positive impact of working with and alongside specialist practitioners and settings to upskill their staff to strengthen inclusion of children with additional needs. In 2022-23, there was an increase in the hours attending early years settings for 17% of children receiving early years inclusion funding, which settings reported had been enabled by early years inclusion funding.

Settings report that the support they receive has had a positive impact on their setting and their practice. For example, when surveyed, 97% of SENCOs interacting with the Early Years Inclusion Service reported that the support they have received has had a positive impact on their setting, and 97% reported feeling more confident in their practice and in meeting the needs of children. Examples of testimonies from SENCOs is included below:

"The team have been hugely supportive to myself and my nursery team. The visits have already made a significant impact on myself, my practice and in turn will have a significant impact on the children in my class. I know that I am able to contact any of the team if I have any questions. I can't thank you all enough."

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3. Transition

Increasing numbers of children with EHCPs are moving from early years into a mainstream school, reflecting parents' and practitioners' confidence in the support the child has received before, during and after the transition process. Over half of children with EHCPs making the transition to school in summer 2023 moved into a mainstream school (27 out of 53), up from 16 in 2022 and 20 in 2021 (from a cohort of c.50 each year). In addition, of the 25 children with EHCPs who might not have had an appropriate school place in September 2023, appropriate places have been identified or created to ensure that all children were placed appropriately. This has included placing 10 children in new or existing SEN units, and a further 10 in newly-created early years autism bases. Parents of five children chose that their child should attend a local mainstream school.

Furthermore, survey responses showed high levels of positive feedback from early years practitioners following the training they had been able to access:

- 100% practitioners attending training sessions said they felt they had gained strategies that they could implement;
- 100% SENCOs attending a new SENCO training course said that they better understood the role of the SENCO and 89% felt that they better understood the processes and services in Herefordshire as a result of the course; and
- 100% of those trained state that Herefordshire's Autism Progression Framework training has helped them assess and plan for children with autism.

In addition, there has been positive feedback from parents and carers, for example:

"The Early Years Inclusion Team is the most valuable service I have encountered as a SEN parent. Nursery have always felt support was available via the EY SEND Team."

"Our school has already had transition meetings with Nursery – which is fantastic!"

"I spoke to school and they said – don't worry, we can do this. It's made all the difference."

"I am very grateful for the help and support of our Portage worker, the Portage team have helped some very difficult issues and made things so much easier and accessible thank you so very much for your ongoing support hard work hours and much needed help it's scary being a parent and not knowing what to do with a child with extra needs this service has been a huge blessing and support."

As this piece of work develops, leaders in Herefordshire are developing a toolkit to train practitioners in settings, the local authority's Early Years Inclusion Service, and partners in health services working with the early years in capturing the voice of young children. This will add the voices of children to the evidence of impact of this work.

The learning and outcomes of this work have been shared regularly with early years SENCO networks and the local area's SEND Strategy Group. The latter includes the Parent Carer Forum, and leaders from across education, health and care services. Learning and outcomes have also been shared regionally. The work has been recognised regionally, winning a team excellence award for the West Midlands, and nationally, featuring in a [case study](#) published by the Local Government Association.

What were the key actions and practices involved?

There were four key components of Herefordshire's early years SEND work.

1. Data

A crucial first step was to ensure that there was accurate data about all early children with SEN. As the Early Years SEND Manager put it, 'My background was in schools, where I held a range of roles. All of those roles required data if I wanted to know about impact on individual children. I looked at the early years SEND cohort, and this was essentially "my school".' The aim was to ensure that the Early Years Inclusion Service had accurate, up-to-date information on every child with SEN in an early years setting across the County. This was crucial in providing a baseline from which to track trends, consider sufficiency of provision, identify and address gaps in support (e.g., identifying a high proportion of children with communication and interaction needs informed the decision to deliver training for staff in this area), and track impact. Regular sense-checking of the data to ensure accuracy is also important.

2. Workforce

As the Early Years SEND Manager described it, *"the biggest tool we have at our disposal is not us, in terms of local authority services, but is the workforce in settings, childminders. We have to treat the workforce as our greatest asset – they are the ones doing the practice, so everything we do has to be about enhancing that. We needed to recognise that, in order to have a positive impact on our young children, we had to upskill and empower SENCOs – they needed to believe they could make a difference."* As part of their work, Herefordshire have rolled out an extensive programme of training, advice and follow-up support for early years practitioners, setting leaders and SENCOs. These have focused on specific practices (identifying needs, support strategies, working with children with specific needs such as autism, planning and setting targets), on the Herefordshire early years and SEND system, and on specific pieces of work, such as the "child readiness project". The child readiness project focused on working with settings, schools, other professionals and families as young children prepare for transition to primary school. The project has included a whole-day event on preparing for transition, training on best practice around transitions for children with additional needs, advice and follow-up surgeries, LA early years SEND staff joining transition meetings and keeping in regular touch during the transition period, and dedicated transition funding. As the Early Years SEND Manager put it, *"The work may seem daunting, but if you know where your baseline is and have the workforce on board, you can get a lot done."*

3. Ensuring systems and processes enable support

Herefordshire have been prepared to scrutinise and revise all forms and processes so that these are tools that enable action to be taken, rather than acting barriers to getting the right support. For example, Herefordshire have instituted new monitoring phone-calls to replace paper-based reporting on the use of early years inclusion funding. Work has been undertaken to streamline and remove unnecessary paperwork for accessing social, emotional and mental health support.

4. Every door is the right door

Making sure that all practitioners involved in SEND in the early years give a consistent set of messages whenever approached. Families need to be working with people who are well informed and who believe that they can make a difference. A key part of Herefordshire's work has been training professionals so that whichever "door" families or other professionals' approach, they receive the same messages and pro-active offer of support. This has included professionals in SEND, health visitors, community nurses, peri-natal mental health, paediatrics, and therapy services.

Key to the success of the work has been the ongoing engagement of and co-production with early years practitioners, as well as the ongoing and pro-active oversight and interest of the local authority's senior leadership team. Equally, the work in Herefordshire has benefited from having a clearly thought-out structure for the Early Years Inclusion Service. There are three key elements to the service:

- ✦ Portage: with a focus on the family;
- ✦ Early Years Inclusion Officers: who work directly with settings to provide advice and enhance practice; and
- ✦ Child Development Specialist Teachers: who can focus on individual children.

Having these three elements working together within the same service, with links to the all-age SEN service and wider early years support, ensure that the Early Years Inclusion Service can provide a joined-up holistic offer and avoid children and families falling between different services.



Has the work been sustained?

The work has been sustained over a period of three years. It is very much now business-as-usual, and the established way of working for SEND in the early years across the County. This work would be relevant to any local area seeing increasing need for SEN support in the early years and/or wanting to put in place an effective, holistic, whole-system approach to providing effective support to early years children with SEND.

This project has required investment to fund additional posts within the Early Years Inclusion Service. The Council have done this on the basis that investment in SEN support in the early years will deliver benefits to the individual children and their families, but also on the basis that the early identification and support will avoid children's needs going unidentified and escalating to the point where most costly interventions are required. The Council is not yet in a position to evidence these long-term effects but have plans in place to gather this evidence.



<p>Resources required</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Financial investment ✓ Human resources Physical space 	<p>Value for money</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Sustained £ needed Cost neutral Savings (+outcomes)
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Finding out more

Contact to find out more	<p>Della Pascoe, Early Years SEND Manager, Herefordshire Council della.pascoe@herefordshire.gov.uk</p> <p>Emily Garner, Early Years Lead Advisor, Herefordshire Council emily.garner@herefordshire.gov.uk</p>
Useful resources and links	<p>Flow-chart on Herefordshire's early years graduated approach. Herefordshire early years handbook. Available here.</p>