

Effective Practice case study: implementing the Designated Social Care Officer role in Shropshire

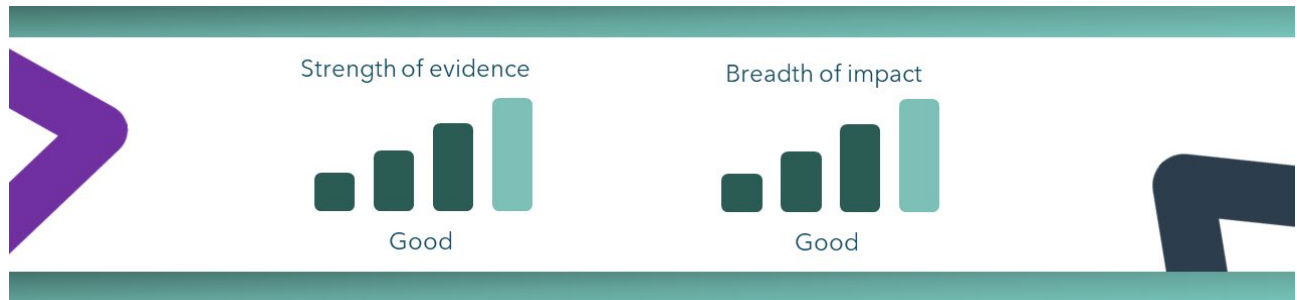
Summary

A joint Care Quality Commission (CQC) and Ofsted SEND Inspection took place in Shropshire in January 2020, identifying a range of improvements that were required to achieve better outcomes for disabled children and young people and children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) in Shropshire. Among six areas of significant concern, the inspection highlighted inconsistency in the quality of input from education, health and care (EHC) into EHC assessment and planning, and inconsistent strategic leadership and planning across the area. As part of the development of Shropshire's Written Statement of Action (WSOA) following the 2020 inspection, the Shropshire Area SEND Partnership identified three core issues to address in social care:

- ✦ **Gaps in social care leadership, strategic links and partnership working between education, health and care:** quality assurance of social care input into Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) was not sufficiently robust, and advice provided by social care staff to health and education colleagues was often not suitably reliable or timely. Social care was not routinely involved in decision-making around proceeding to an Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA), or the content of EHCPs;
- ✦ **Weak coproduction:** parent carers and children and young people in Shropshire were dissatisfied with the degree and quality of social care involvement in the formulation of EHCPs, leading to care needs not being reflected in EHCPs which were insufficiently person-centred; and
- ✦ **A need for workforce development:** limited knowledge and experience of SEND policy, legislation and guidance across the social care team was hampering the quality of advice social care workers were feeding in to EHCNAs. Limited knowledge also meant disabled children and young people and those with SEN in Shropshire were receiving inadequate support from social care staff.

Shropshire adopted the post of Designated Social Care Officer (DSCO) in February 2022 to provide leadership in these three priority areas, mirroring other local authorities that have adopted the DSCO role since its introduction in England in 2018.

The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the “strength of evidence” of this case study is **good** – the work has been evaluated internally and externally, sustained for more than 12 months with clear plans for future extension, and is demonstrably replicable. The “breadth of impact” of this case study is **good** – there is evidence of impact in three of the four broad areas of impact considered by the framework.¹



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

The work was undertaken in response to the following issues in Shropshire, identified in the 2020 SEND Inspection and through longer term internal monitoring:

- ✦ Inadequate involvement of social care practitioners in the process of issuing and updating EHCPs, manifested in: the poor quality, or lack, of information and advice from social care in decision-making around proceeding to EHC needs assessments; a significant number of children not known to social care, leading to EHCPs being issued without social care advice, and issued without recognition of care needs, outcomes and provision; and social care workers not regularly participating in EHCP Annual Reviews, meaning social care needs and provision were not being updated to keep plans person-centred.
- ✦ Dissatisfaction among parent carers and children and young people around the lack of social care involvement in the formulation of EHCPs leading to plans being insufficiently person-centred.
- ✦ The absence of a robust SEND quality assurance framework.

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.

- ✦ Low workforce knowledge and understanding of SEND across social care teams, leading to disabled young people and those with SEN being supported by social care workers without the requisite SEND expertise.
- ✦ A lack of understanding of social care roles, responsibilities and legislation beyond the Children's Social Care team, and a lack of clarity around service expectations and provision, leading to inconsistency in how needs were met.

In response, the work had three primary aims:

1. **Improve partnership working and co-production:** prior to 2022 parents and carers frequently voiced dissatisfaction at the lack of joined up working between education, health and care teams, and low levels of consultation with parents and carers in the formulation of Plans. The DSCO role aimed to provide a clear, strategic link to the social care team for key partners in education, the Integrated Care Board, commissioned services and the parent-carer forum. The role was also designed to develop the social care elements of the local SEND strategy, and ensure they are embedded in working practices for children and young people aged 0-25 across all services, raising the profile of Social Care within the local SEND system, and improving engagement with SEND within the Care team. The work also aimed to strengthen co-production with parent carers and children and young people so their voices are incorporated into service planning and delivery.
2. **Upskill the workforce:** increasing the social care workforce's knowledge and understanding of SEND, and thus improving the quality of expertise, advice and guidance they provide as part of EHC assessment and planning, through staff training and 1-1 support. When the role was created social care practitioners did not receive mandatory SEND inductions or regular SEND, Social Care and EHCP training.
3. **Improve quality and timeliness of EHCNA advice:** through more robust quality assurance. At the time the DSCO role was created, 70-80% of Social Care advice for EHC needs assessment was returned within the 6-week statutory timescale, while initial baseline audits of the quality of Social Care advice for EHC needs assessments revealed only 2% of advice was 'good' or 'outstanding'.

What was the impact?



- ✓ Lived experience of children and young people with SEND and their families
 - ✓ Education, health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people
 - ✓ Feedback from professionals
- Long term outcomes for children and young people

The project has been able to demonstrate impact in three of the four areas captured by the SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework, through a range of qualitative and quantitative data sources, including:

- ✦ Feedback from professionals and parents/carers as part of an internal annual report produced in July 2023. The review drew together feedback from colleagues across education, health and care and the Parent Carer Forum (PCF), including the Designated Clinical Officer (DCO), SEN Team Manager, a senior social worker, a Service Manager (Disabled Children) and PCF Participation Leader. The report was scrutinised by the Social Care Strategic Leadership Team, SEND Partnership Board, and Local Area SEND Quality Assurance Group including the PCF and SEND Information, Advice and Support (IAS) service.
- ✦ A range of monitoring data, gathered as part of the internal annual reporting process.
- ✦ The findings of an Ofsted/CQC Local Area SEND re-inspection in November 2022.

These data sources suggest the creation of the DSCO role in Shropshire had the following impact against the three primary aims of the work:

1. Improving partnership working and co-production

Feedback from professionals identified that the creation of the DSCO role in Shropshire provided a single clear contact point relating to social care. The DSCO supported the local SEND system to be more responsive to national policy such as how to implement aspects of the Improvement Plan, and developed new ways of working with the Virtual School, enabling explicit alignment between Children Looked After (CLA) reviews and EHCPs. The DSCO also supported the DCO's understanding and navigation of the care system:

"Having a consistent contact within social care to discuss all things SEND has been invaluable. The Designated Social Care Officer role has been able to effectively signpost and provide navigational support within the social care system which as an outsider in health has been beneficial, especially as different systems can be difficult to navigate independently." **DCO**

*"The main value [of the DSCO] is to have a dedicated role which can focus on strategic partnerships so that Social Care are involved in the wider SEND system and can use this engagement and knowledge to better shape both SEND and Social Care services and provision to ensure the best possible outcomes for Children and Young People with SEND and their families. Having a strategic Social Care link to the PCF has been invaluable to ensure co-production is threaded throughout Social Care at all levels of practice and decision making." **DSCO***

More social workers are now invited to Annual Reviews, and parent-carer feedback suggests care needs are now better reflected in EHCPs:

*"I wish we had a DSCO in place 3 years ago when my child first had an EHCP. Until his last review his social care needs had not been acknowledged because he didn't have a social work plan. Having the DSCO saying that everyone has care needs regardless of whether they have a social worker supported me to challenge why his needs relating to his SEN were not written in his plan." **Parent carer***

Parents and carers also feel that EHCPs are now more person-centred; that there is better alignment between young people's care needs, aspirations and outcomes, and provision of support, and that parents and carers have more coordinated and consistent interactions with the social care team.

An Ofsted/CQC Local Area SEND re-inspection in November 2022 specifically identified the positive impact of the creation of new strategic roles which had strengthened leadership and improved provision across education, health and care:

*"The creation of new roles which better meet the area's strategic needs have further strengthened leadership. For example, there is now a designated social care officer who has the oversight of children and young people with SEND... The corporate commitment to children and young people with SEND is now embedded. The strong strategic leadership is successfully beginning to improve the provision, across education, health and social care, for children and young people with SEND in Shropshire." **Ofsted/CQC***

The DSCO is currently putting measures in place to ensure social care practitioners' input into Annual Reviews is more proactive and systematic in future, including:

- ✦ Producing a new Social Care EHCP Annual Review report template, Social Care guidance and process map to clarify practitioners' roles and responsibilities in the Annual Review process and clearly outline legal timelines.
- ✦ Sharing a termly list of upcoming Annual Reviews with social care practitioners and ensuring they make contact with education settings to obtain meeting dates, allowing them to prepare reports proactively and align EHCP Annual Reviews with Personal Education Plan (PEP) Reviews for looked-after children.
- ✦ Tracking and quality assuring all Social Care input into Annual Reviews, to ensure high standards of input and monitor timeliness.

2. Upskilling the workforce

Feedback from professionals identified that the creation of the DSCO role in Shropshire had supported social workers' knowledge and practice relating to SEND, and enabled queries and requests for advice from social workers to be actioned in a timely way. The DSCO had also supported Statutory Assessment Panel members' understanding of children and young people's needs and any social care involvement.

Meanwhile, monitoring data gathered as part of the internal annual reporting process indicates that:

- ✦ 100% of social care practitioners providing advice for EHC needs assessments are now sent reminders at the 4-week stage and offered a 1-1 consultation with the DSCO to help inform advice.
- ✦ 21% of social care practitioners received mandatory SEND, Social Care and EHCP training within the first 12 months of the DSCO being in post. Monthly mandatory training continues to be provided with an aim of at least 75% of the Social Care workforce receiving training by April 2024.
- ✦ 100% of new staff joining Children's Social Care receive a SEND induction with the DSCO.

A Senior Social Worker provided the following feedback after attending SEND, Social Care and EHCP training:

"Following the training, I have begun to focus a lot more on the aspirations of the child/young person during annual reviews and being more creative in how I/we can support the child/young person to achieve these goals. I feel more equipped to contribute to the plan and use the plan as a working document." **Senior Social Worker**

3. Improving the quality and timeliness of EHCNA advice

Monitoring data gathered as part of the internal annual reporting process indicates that:

- ✦ Compliance in returning Social Care advice for EHC needs assessment within the 6-week statutory timescale increased from 70-80% to 97% in the 18 months after the creation of the role.
- ✦ The proportion of Social Care advice for EHC needs assessments of 'good' or 'outstanding' quality had risen from 2% at baseline to 55% after 18 months.

The DSCO role was recommended for adoption by all local areas in the government's 2023 SEND and AP Improvement Plan. As this piece of work develops, there are plans to draw more heavily on youth voice in future annual reviews, such as through the 'buddies' group for 14-25 year-olds run by the PCF, recruiting Youth SEND Champions, and conducting learning reviews for young people taken into residential care.

What were the key actions and practices involved?

There were four key components to Shropshire's creation and implementation of the DSCO role:

1. Scoping and recruitment

The Area SEND Partnership drew up the role in 2021, based on the existing DSCO specification created by the Council for Disabled Children (CDC) but also tailored to the specific local challenges and objectives identified in Shropshire's WSoA, service plan and SEND priorities, and with input from parent carers. £50k of growth funding was secured to meet the initial costs of creating the role, and recruitment concluded in early 2022 – with disabled children and young people and those with SEN and the PCF playing an active role in the recruitment process.

2. Strategic oversight and leadership

When recruiting the DSCO, leadership qualifications and extensive knowledge, understanding and experience of SEND and Social Care legislation and practice were prioritised over qualified social worker status. The role built leadership and partnership capacity across health, education, social care and the voluntary sector, and forged closer links between Children's and Adult Social Care. The DSCO was embedded as a core member of the SEND Partnership and Strategic Board, the Statutory Assessment Panel, and involved in SEND Tribunals, to ensure consistent social care involvement in EHC decision-making. The DSCO developed and promoted the SEND agenda across the local system, and provided peer support to the DCO.

3. Workforce development

The DSCO led on social care practice guidance, workforce development and training to upskill and increase quality. This included induction training for new staff, mandatory social care, SEND and EHCP training for advice givers, individual staff consultations to focus on specific children's needs, and co-production and person-centred practice training. Training is also being adapted and rolled out to SENCOs and Early Help practitioners. 1-1 time with social workers to review their practice appeared to have a significant impact, with all subsequent advice judged good or outstanding according to a newly-introduced audit framework. The DSCO supported social workers to understand their legislative duties relating to SEND, and how the care and SEND systems dovetail. The DSCO shared the SEND and AP Improvement Plan with staff, encouraging them to engage with the Green Paper consultation.

4. Co-production

The DSCO held early conversations with the PCF during the 'contracting' phase of the role, and made clear to parent carers what could and could not be co-produced. The DSCO sought the views of the PCF when designing their workforce development activities and objectives, and held regular meetings with the PCF and SENDIAS service to receive feedback and build this into service planning.

"Having parent carers co-produce workforce training and operational tools has undoubtedly driven up quality in practice as we have been able to introduce a different perspective and focus which prioritises a meaningful person-centred approach." DSCO

The DSCO introduced a Social Care Questionnaire to inform EHCNA and reduce the number of assessments identifying "no care needs", which asks parents about a range of care-related factors including groups and activities, informal care and support, and the impact of their child's SEND on family life.



How has the work been sustained?

Initial funding was identified in the Children's Social Care budget following a Growth Bid made in 2020 to support the WSoA. Ongoing financial investment has been required to keep the project going: £53,000 annually, funded through the Children's Social Care budget. The DSCO has become a permanent role within the Local Area SEND leadership team, replicating the approach taken in other LAs. There is high level recognition of, and support for, the DSCO role. The revised SEND Inspection Framework places greater emphasis on social care, and the SEND and AP Improvement Plan recommends the adoption of the role as part of effective SEND system leadership.

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

Finding out more

Contact to find out more	Sharon Graham - Designated Social Care Officer (DSCO), Shropshire Council sharon.graham@shropshire.gov.uk
Useful resources and links	DSCO Handbook: Implementing the role of the Designated Social Care Officer (DSCO) for SEND