# What works in SEND

# Ingredients for improving delivery of services for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities drawing on the experiences of the Delivering Better Outcomes

## Key messages

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## Overview

This resource sets out some of the headline messages from research carried out by the What Works in SEND researchers at the University of Warwick.

The researchers set out to identify the key 'ingredients' for successful improvement of local SEND services, drawing from the experience of Delivering Better Outcomes Together (DBOT), a programme of support delivered by a group of organisations. The programme offered specialist advice, training and support to local areas and regions over 8 years. The researchers held interviews with policy-makers, commissioners and SEND practitioners who had been involved in the DBOT programme.

The findings resulted in **6 key 'ingredients' to successful service improvement** on the basis of leaders and practitioners' experience with the DBOT programme.

## What are the 6 key ingredients to successful service improvement?

### 1. Effective co-production between agency partners in SEND

The interviewees reported the following:

- That co-production between professionals was essential for making sustainable change and felt that DBOT had supported agencies to come together and build trusting, cooperative relationships.

- The program had created a 'safe place' for practitioners of different backgrounds to learn from one another and ask questions they may have previously felt unable to share.

- Participants valued the peer-to-peer support facilitated by DBOT, as well as the time and space offered for professional reflection.

- A shared child-centred approach was essential for effective co-production between SEND partners, as was developing a common language to break down institutional barriers.

- Some professionals, particularly in Health and Social Care, lacked awareness of their legal obligations towards young people with SEND. This often resulted in young people 'falling off a cliff edge' when they left formal education due to poor partnerships between agencies leading to inadequate support for their transition into adulthood.
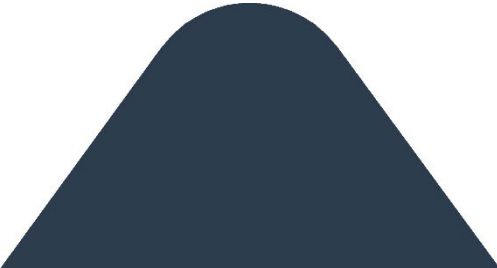
## 2. Co-production with parent carers and children / young people with SEND

- Co-production with parent-carers and children / young people with SEND was key for securing improvement in services and should be embedded at every stage of service development, with service users involved at both the operational and strategic level.

- Parents and Young people with SEND sitting on SEND Partnership Boards allowed them to make a vital contribution to strategic decision-making.

- Local areas needed to understand what was meant by successful co-production with parents /carers and young people in order to address the challenges arising from the demands on time and resources of parent carers, many of whom had to juggle participation with work and caring responsibilities.

- Setting clear parameters and informed committing of resources avoided tokenistic 'box-ticking' and enabled successful co-production with parent carers.

## 3. Leadership

- Leadership is key to driving change in the SEND system.

- Leadership Training: The NDTi delivery of leadership training and the CDC's 'train a trainer' programme were both praised as effective examples for embedding long-term change.

- Strong leaders who are able to advocate for SEND at the highest levels and can create a business case for funding.

- Leadership is most effective when it is values-led, driven by a moral responsibility for children and young people with SEND, and based on a shared vision of outcomes.

- 'Brave' leadership and an openness to peer learning are invaluable, encouraging risk-taking and innovation.

- Effective Leaders also offer stability and an 'anchoring' effect in periods of overwhelming pressure, spotlighting key issues when staff are struggling with competing demands.

## 4. Workforce capability, stability and morale

- The hiring and retaining of 'the right people in the right places' in order to preserve a workforce capable of driving change.

- Challenging inflexibility within agencies which forced staff to work within strict parameters and prevented collaboration on cross-cutting issues.

- Ongoing professional development programmes, involving continuous multi-agency working and appropriate training, were essential to overcoming these barriers.

- Links with Higher Education could help to instil SEND focus amongst trainee professionals such as social workers, which was key for achieving change in institutional culture.

- High staff turnover was identified as a challenge across the sector with large numbers of staff seeking better working conditions and pay with private agencies.

- This staff turnover also contributed to a loss of 'corporate memory' (the knowledge and skills accumulated through long-term experience in a given organisation). This was particularly impactful when leaders and key decision-makers left local areas.

- Although high staff turnover was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, local areas varied in their responses to these challenges. Some offered flexibility for remote work, while others focused on creating a stable and attractive workplace to strengthen employee retention.

- Although some areas had made a successful case for greater staffing levels, there was a widespread frustration with the lack of additional funding available to increase staff numbers in line with the increase in EHCPs.

- Staff morale was increasingly impacted by heavy workloads due to increased demands on SEND resources.

- The frustration many service users felt towards the system was often directed towards staff, leading to burnout and despondency.

## 5. Organisational culture

- SEND services needed to be integrated within other teams in the local area in order to prevent a 'culture of separateness', which risks SEND teams being routinely overlooked in meetings.

- SEND integration into Social Care departments was seen as a positive, raising the visibility of SEND and encouraging partnership working.

- A 'strength-based culture', based on values that centred the human rights of young people alongside an ethos of aspiration and cooperation alongside coherent and collective data gathering was key to facilitating effective planning and targeting of need.

- DBOT was more likely to create long-lasting change in areas which demonstrated this kind of strong, values-driven agenda.

- The drive to support young people with SEND into work was hampered by employers' lack of understanding of their needs, reflecting a lack of policy focus to extend this 'culture of inclusion' into the workplace.

- Listening to each other about challenges, weaknesses and frustrations to find a practical way forward was found to be helpful for overcoming 'defensive' institutional cultures and risk aversion.

## 6. Accountability

While responsibility for SEND is legally held by multiple agencies, in practice this often fell on SEND teams in local authorities, with difficulties holding other partners – particularly in health – to account for their role in the system. While all partners were legally required to engage in the ECHP process, SEND teams often found it challenging to enforce these obligations. Suggestions to overcome this included:

- Joined up commissioning arrangements and Key Performance Indicators to individual outcomes for all agencies involved in the EHCP process.

- All schools should be actively incentivised to engender inclusion in their practice, with a stronger focus on indicators of inclusion in Ofsted inspections.

- National policy to acknowledge the complexity of a SEND system legally obliged to support children and young people with send from 0-25 years, enabling a shared

approach between various sectors and services. This could be achieved by writing all policy documents to reflect the core principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion under the Equality Act, 2010.

## Recommendations for the Department for Education

1. DfE programmes (such as DBOT) should be sufficiently funded to assess readiness for change prior to intervention so that support can be targeted, effective and bespoke.

2. DfE programmes should provide a 'menu' of both short and long-term support packages with a number of progress 'check-ins' to ensure momentum is maintained.

3. Develop good practice guidance for local areas working together for SEND improvement.

4. Provide meaningful time and space for strategic overview of the SEND system with a focus on improvement.

5. Address the need for shared language, understanding and agency alignment through better local training (this made mandatory for new SEND staff).

6. Increase the capacity of the SEND workforce, both by increasing the funding and raising the status of SEND caseworkers, supporting staff well-being and providing flexible working options.

7. Address ambiguities around 'inclusion' by co-producing a definition, with contributions from all SEND agency partners. This definition should be embedded as an integral part of Governmental Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy.