

# Wakefield Parent Partnership Service

Parents hold key information and have a critical role to play in their children's education. This is particularly so when a child has special educational needs. All parents of children with SEN should be treated as partners. They should be supported to be able and empowered to recognise their responsibilities, have knowledge of their child's entitlement, make their views known and have access to information, advice and support during assessment and decision-making processes about special educational provision.

SEN Code of Practice 2001 Paragraph 2:2

Parent partnership services were born out of the realisation that parents of children with SEN in particular may require additional support. The provision of parent partnership services is set out in Education Law and the responsibilities of each LEA towards the service are set out in the SEN Code of Practice 2001.

There is now a statutory requirement placed upon LEAs to make arrangements for the provision of services to provide support to parents of children with SEN.

The purpose of this paper is to outline how Wakefield Parent Partnership Service meets the requirements of the SEN Code of Practice and provides independent advice, information and support for parents of children with SEN. As a service we strongly believe that the way forward is to help parents, schools and the LEA to work together to develop partnerships. We will always strive to seek viewpoints of schools and other LEA officers to enable us to form a balanced opinion and thus provide the advice that is the most appropriate.

A local education authority must arrange for the parent of any child in their area with special educational needs to be provided with advice and information relating to those needs.

See section 332A Education Act 1996

A local education authority must make arrangements with a view to avoiding or resolving disagreements between authorities (on the one hand) and parents of children in their area (on the other) about the way LEAs and maintained schools carry out their responsibilities towards children with special educational needs.

A local education authority must also make arrangements with a view to avoiding or resolving disagreements between parents and certain schools about the special educational provision made for their child.

See Sections 332B (1) and (2), Education Act 1996

The arrangements that LEAs make to provide information and advice on SEN matters to the parents of children with SEN in their area are generally known as parent partnership services. It is for individual LEAs to decide how to plan and deliver parent partnership services locally. Some provide an entirely LEA based service, others 'buy in' the service from another provider eg Barnardos and others have a mix of the two.

In Wakefield the parent partnership service is LEA based but it has an 'arm's length' agreement with the authority. It is important that parents have confidence in the neutrality of the service, its accessibility and its ability to deliver neutral information and advice.

## **Wakefield Parent Partnership Service – an 'Arms Length' Agreement**

Wakefield LEA recognises the important contribution made by the Parent Partnership Service to Education and Cultural Services. The LEA believes that independent advice and support to families is an important dimension of its strategy to ensure all children have the opportunity to reach their potential in an inclusive educational setting.

It is understood that, in order for the Parent Partnership Service to be seen to be independent, neutral and impartial, it must operate at 'arms length' from the LEA.

It is agreed that the Parent Partnership Service has ownership of all information specifically communicated to them (either orally or in writing) by parents or pertaining to parents and families. Access to such information by other departments within the LEA (eg line managers) will only be granted with the consent of parents/carers. Given that the needs of children are central to the delivery of all services to children and families, an exception to this policy may be made if children protection concerns are apparent.

In Wakefield, the Parent Partnership Service will be managed within the Parent Advice and Mediation Service, which will operate at a distance from other branches of Education and Cultural Services.

Wakefield Parent Partnership Service manages its own budget, has independent computer systems and has its own logo and headed stationery.

The role of the parent partnership service is to provide a menu of flexible services for parents tailored to meet their needs. Their aim should be to empower parents to play an informed and active part in their child's education.

SEN Toolkit Section 2, paragraph 14

The SEN Toolkit also defines the core activity areas in which parent partnership services operate. These core activities are:

- working with parents;
- information and publicity;
- training, advice and support;
- networking and collaboration; and
- helping to inform local policy and practice.

### **1. Working with parents**

The aim of Wakefield Parent Partnership Service is to ensure that parents and carers of children with special educational needs have access to neutral, impartial information and guidance on SEN procedures and how children's needs are met in early years settings, schools and the LEA. We provide:

- advice to all parents of children with SEN, not only those with a statement;
- information on the SEN processes and procedures;
- support during meetings;
- help in preparing letters or reports if needed;
- help in resolving disputes;
- access to an Independent Parental Supporter;
- Links with voluntary or self-help organisations; and
- Access to a mediation service.

### **2. Information and publicity**

Within this core activity the parent partnership service provides a range of information for parents and carers and professionals alike.

- Our comprehensive pack provides accurate information in an easy to read format. It is extensively distributed through schools, is used widely by other support services

Parent partnership services therefore, have a role that is set out under the Education Act of 1996 and the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice 2001 and are now statutory bodies, funded by LEAs.

However, some parent partnership schemes were established as early as 1994 when the Education Act of 1993 and the resulting Code of Practice first outlined their role. These schemes were for the most part funded through central government until September, 2002. In Wakefield the parent partnership in its present format has been operating for four years.

The work that parent partnerships services undertake varies from service to service. This reflects local need, the funding commitment of the LEA, the commitment of the LEA to develop parent service and also the background and interests of the parent partnership personnel. However, the categories of work that each service must undertake are outlined in the SEN Toolkit, and the SEN Code of Practice 2001, in paragraph 2:21, identifies minimum standards that each service is expected to meet.

within the LEA and also by Social and Health Service personnel;

- We have a limited but developing range of leaflets available in community languages;
- A video/DVD will shortly be available that outlines our core activities and is aimed at parents who may not be able to access information through more conventional means;
- We are currently developing an independent web-site where information on SEN issues will be available;
- A recent development has also been the introduction of a periodic newsletter that is distributed through schools and libraries.

### **3. Training, advice and support**

We recognise the difficulties and stresses involved in bringing up a child with SEN. We know that parents want to take an active part in their children's education but that it can sometimes seem like an uphill struggle.

The key means of providing advice and support for parents contacting our service is through our telephone help-line. Often a call and discussion with the staff in our office are enough to allay the anxiety that parents feel. Sometimes follow up work such as calling schools for further information or meeting with SEN Officers is required. Occasionally home visits or attendance at meetings at school with parents may be requested.

The help-line is manned normally from 8.30 am to 4.30 pm on Monday to Friday. At other times the service answering machine is operational. The contact number is 01924 303662. We are also available to provide advice and support to schools and other services through the help-line number.

The parent partnership also must use its "best endeavours" to recruit and provide regularly updated training for Independent Parental Supporters.

Training on communication and relationships with parents and other areas is available for school staff and governors.

### **4. Networking and collaboration**

The SEN Toolkit Part 2, paragraph 17 states that the purpose of parent partnership services is to encourage the development of better relationships between parents,

schools, LEAs and voluntary bodies. Wakefield Parent Partnership Service actively seeks to work with schools to develop and maintain positive relationships between themselves and parents. We encourage schools to develop parent friendly policies and practices and support school staff developing awareness of parents' needs.

Through our Parent/LEA/Voluntary Sector Forum, we have established and are maintaining strong links with local voluntary agencies and support groups. The forum allows parents and representatives to have direct access to senior LEA and SEN managers.

### **5. Helping to inform and influence local policy and practice**

Parental views heard through the Forum and through discussions with our team are regularly fed back to the LEA through regular contact with senior management.

As an organisation we have contributed to the 'Achievement for All' five year strategy for SEN in Wakefield and also to the Education Development Plan.

We have, over the last few years, organised questionnaires relating to SEN provision in Wakefield, producing reports which have been forwarded to senior LEA management. One recent questionnaire on Speech and Language Therapy provision is now the subject of a Task and Finish Group investigating ways of improving the ways in which Speech and Language Therapy can be improved in local schools.

The Parent Partnership has representation on a range of planning and strategic groups including the Admissions Forum, the Inclusion Inset Planning Group and the Anti-Bullying Group and strongly encourages parent representation on such committees.

### **Independent Parental Supporters**

An independent Parental Supporter (IPS) is a person, who is independent of the decision making process and the professionals involved in the SEN procedures. They could be a family member, another parent or a representative from a self-help group or voluntary organisation. The parent

partnership service in Wakefield is also able to provide access to IPS volunteers. Those that are provided by the parent partnership service are trained having completed a comprehensive training course covering the SEN Code of Practice and the local policies and procedures of Wakefield LEA.

Parents can request an IPS at any time. The IPS is able to provide a range of services such as:

- Listening to parents concerns;
- Talking things through;
- Giving advice and information;
- Helping with letter and report writing;
- Explaining procedures;
- Discussing specialist advice;
- Helping explain procedures and statements;
- Supporting parents through disagreement resolution; and
- Explaining appeal procedures.

IPS volunteers will have undergone appropriate checks with the Criminal Record Bureau before being allowed to represent Wakefield Parent Partnership Service.