

Special Educational Needs Group (SENG) Service Statement

The processes surrounding Special Educational Needs can be very fraught for a parent and can seem unnecessarily bureaucratic. The LEA is bound by the 1996 Education Act and the SEN Code of Practice (Nov. 2001) so there are many procedures that are prescribed. The SEN Group is based in County Hall and the team comprises of clerical, administration, statement officers and also Special Educational Needs Officers who are qualified teachers with experience of working in mainstream and special schools, within the primary and secondary continuum.

Most children with SEN will be educated in mainstream schools without a statutory assessment or statement. The Code recommends that schools and LEAs should provide a graduated response to children with SEN. It suggests gradually increasing interventions into teaching and curriculum. Pupils will be supported at school action or school action plus, with advice or guidance from professionals from external agencies. The early stages of assessing and meeting SEN should be based within the school setting. For a very few pupils the help given by schools through School Action Plus may not be sufficient to enable the pupil to make significant progress. It will then be necessary for the school, in consultation with the parents and any external agencies already involved, to consider whether to ask the LEA to initiate a statutory assessment. (Special Educational Needs Code of Practice, (C of P) DfES Nov 2001, 6:70)

Where a request for a statutory assessment is made, the pupil will have demonstrated significant cause for concern. Regular liaison between the LEA and schools should ensure that there is clarity about the information required by the Authority when an assessment is requested. The description of the pupil's difficulties, together with information about the special educational provision made, will form the basis on which the LEA can consider whether a statutory assessment is necessary. (C of P, 6:71-73).

Children with the most serious special educational needs receive statements of education. These outline their needs, how they should be met and any additional resources that

should be provided. The process of assessing these children's needs and producing the statement is governed by statutory requirements and timescales. Schools and LEAs must have regard to the 2001 Code of Practice to plan how they will meet children's special needs.

Local Education Authorities (LEAs) are required to produce proposed statements of educational need within 18 weeks of the request for a Statutory Assessment being made. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) monitors the LEA's performance in this area through Best Value Performance Indicators.

The first six weeks of the 18week timescale is taken in gathering together the evidence necessary to decide whether or not to begin a full assessment of the child's needs. At the end of this time parents and the school are informed of the outcome of the decision. (Code of Practice 8:134)

If the Statutory Assessment is agreed, there are a further ten weeks during which parents, the child and a range of professionals will make assessments and give advice about what they consider the child needs, both in terms of resources and environment, in order to make progress.

Officers in SEN Group collate this evidence and from it draft a summary of all the information into a Statement of Special Educational Needs. They have two weeks in which to undertake this work and ensure that copies of the proposed statement are sent out to the parents or carers and any relevant professionals involved with the child. There are a few occasions when it is reasonable to exceed the 18 weeks time limit. These are strictly defined and are considered to be exceptions to the timescale.

The processes and timescales are set in the SEN Code of Practice. This is a guidance document but the time that is required to gather information and the timescales in

which the process must be undertaken are laid down in Government Regulations.

From this brief description it is clear that there is a great deal of activity required by a wide range of contributors. Bringing all that information together within a strict timetable requires careful attention to detail, patience, organisational skills and determination.

Since Sept '03 and following extensive re-organisation of Education and Cultural Services and subsequently SEN Group, members of the team have received extensive training and have followed a substantial induction programme that has included close liaison with a wide range of services that work in support of children with special educational needs. The aim of the training has been to broaden the team's knowledge and improve efficiency and consistency so that the systems and processes within the statutory framework and LEA policy become ever more efficient.

The service provided within the LEA is of excellent quality and the effect of achieving such robust figures makes a difference in terms of practice. Being able to produce statements within the 18 weeks limit means that schools and parents are receiving good quality advice and recommendations in a timely fashion. More importantly, the children to whom the statements apply are receiving appropriate levels of support and are better able to make progress. The SEN Group team members are prepared to talk all the details through with the parents and school staff patiently and with understanding. This clearly results in better relationships between schools, parents and the LEA and may avoid the necessity of recourse to SEN Tribunal.

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