



Department
for Education

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Pathfinder Programme Evaluation

Final Impact Research Report

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Background

SQW was commissioned by the Department for Education in September 2011 to lead a consortium of organisations to undertake the evaluation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEN&D) Pathfinder Programme. The evaluation has been on-going since 2011 and has described and analysed the work done to develop new approaches to deliver Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans across 31 local authority areas, and the resultant impact on families. The report considers:

- Families' experiences of the new system
- The impact that the new system has had on perceptions of satisfaction, fairness and outcomes
- The cost effectiveness of the new approach.

The SEN&D reforms: policy context

In March 2011, the UK government published a Green Paper entitled *Support and Aspiration: A new approach to SEN and disability*¹. This was followed in May 2012 by the *Support and Aspiration: A new approach to SEN and disability: Progress and Next Steps*² document, and the draft SEN&D provisions. The SEN&D provisions included a number of duties for local areas, including to:

- Draw up EHC plans, which were to replace SEN Statements
- Set out a Local Offer of services available to parents and young people
- Put in place provisions to enable joint commissioning between local authorities and clinical commissioning groups (CCGs).

¹ <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/CM%208027>.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/support-and-aspiration-a-new-approach-to-special-educational-needs-and-disability-progress-and-next-steps>

Key findings

The data suggest that the process has improved for families, often in ways that are incremental but still statistically significant. The family survey found improvement across a wide range of variables relating to the process of getting an EHC plan. This was in line with the feedback from the qualitative research. Families who had received an EHC plan were statistically more likely to report that their views had been taken in to account and their views had been sought and listened to. **This suggests a more family-centred approach, as was intended.** There is also evidence to indicate that the **process was more joined up and integrated, and that the plan was delivered in a more acceptable timescale.** These types of improvement feed in to **higher overall satisfaction with the process.**

Despite the improvement around the process, there was no statistical change in the extent to which families thought the decisions reached were fair. Around 20 per cent remain dissatisfied. While too early to tell, this might indicate that it will be difficult to achieve the hoped-for reduction in Tribunal cases without further improvements around the process.

Moreover, on some issues even **where there has been improvement, there remain a significant percentage of families who are not satisfied.** There is scope for further improvement around: the Local Offer; the process being more straightforward and joined up; and the engagement of children and young people in the process.

Similarly, while the study found some positive improvement in relation to choice and the sufficiency of provision there is further work to do. Forty three per cent said that there was not enough choice of provider and 39 per cent were receiving only some of support that they thought they were entitled to.

The family survey found little evidence of significant improvements in parental outcomes or in either children's health or quality of life. The qualitative work did find families reported outcomes, but they often expressed these in terms of access to services rather than a change in receipt of services leading to improved wellbeing. The lack of positive findings around outcomes may reflect:

- Timing – it will take time for these changes to lead to outcomes
- That changing the system to get support may not change outcomes if much of the support delivered (both quality and quantity) remains the same
- That it is much harder to shift outcomes, and the changes made through the Pathfinders may not have been sufficiently different for enough families to show up at an aggregate level.

The findings are very much in line with those reported by the evaluation in 2013 and 2014. This may indicate that while the initial progress has been sustained it is questionable how far it has been built on to deliver further improvements. This therefore **emphasises the on-going job that DfE, local authorities and others have in taking the reforms forward and further refining and improving local delivery.**

Methods

This report contains data gathered through:

- A survey of 698 Pathfinder families who had received a completed EHC plan between August 2013 and April 2014, and a comparison group made up of 1,000 families that were in receipt of either an SEN Statement or the post-16 equivalent and had not yet received an EHC plan
- Feedback from the initial and follow-up qualitative interviews conducted with families from a sub-set of 13 Pathfinder areas
- Detailed thematic case study work by SQW in a selection of locations, including an assessment of the costs of the old and new systems.

Families' experience of the process

Overall, Pathfinder parents were significantly more satisfied with the assessment and planning processes that they had participated in, than comparison parents - 33 versus 26 per cent of Pathfinder and comparator families reported being very satisfied. They were **more likely than comparison families to state that their views had been taken into consideration** in assessment and reviews (84 per cent Pathfinder families; 73 per cent comparison).

They were also **more likely to agree that the process to get support had been straightforward** – 52 versus 40 per cent of Pathfinder and comparator families agreed that it had been straightforward. While the difference in Pathfinder and comparison families' understanding of the process was not statistically significant, it was for their understanding of the decisions made (up from 60 per cent to 65 per cent).

Pathfinder parents were more likely than comparison families to report that they: were encouraged to think about goals; felt their suggestions were listened to; and believed the decisions about their child's support reflected the family's views. **The competency, consistency and knowledge of a 'key worker' (or those providing key working support) was seen as critical to the process feeling family- and child-centred.**

Although Pathfinder families were significantly more likely than comparison families to report that planning had been undertaken jointly across services (45 per cent versus 33 per cent), substantial proportions (38 per cent) reported it being undertaken separately. In addition, the Pathfinder did not seem to have impacted on parents having to explain their child's needs on multiple occasions.

That said, Pathfinder parents were statistically **more likely than comparison group parents to feel that the various professionals involved in their child's**

assessment had shared information well - 71 per cent of Pathfinder parents said this had been done well or very well compared to 63 per cent of comparison group families.

Families' perception of change

Many Pathfinder families reported an improvement in the quality of the support received compared to what they had experienced before. Four in ten (42 per cent) Pathfinder families felt that the quality of the support services they were now receiving was better than it was before, compared with a quarter (25 per cent) of comparison group families (a statistically significant finding).

Both Pathfinder and comparator families most commonly stated that their child was entitled to the same amount of support as had been the case in the 12 months previous. However, **Pathfinder families were more likely to report that they were now entitled to more support**, whereas comparison group families were more likely to perceive that they were entitled to less support than before.

Impact on sub-groups

On the whole, the Pathfinder had similar, often positive impacts across all families, regardless of demographic profile and needs. However, for some outcomes there were differences between sub-groups. For example, families with young people aged 11+ were most likely to state greater satisfaction with processes than comparison families; and similarly families with male children reported more positive experiences across outcomes such as the suitability of support provided and the degree to which services had worked together.

In terms of variations in experience among different Pathfinder families, those who had received support from a key worker were significantly more likely to be positive than those who did not recognise having a key worker. Similarly, those who had received more services through their EHC plans were more likely to be positive about their experiences than those who had received the same or less.

Having access to a personal budget did not appear to have had a significant influence on Pathfinder families' experience, even though direct payments did. However, this contrasted with the findings gathered through the qualitative research, suggesting that further research is required in this area before it can be considered conclusive.

Assessment of costs and benefits

Drawing on the thematic research, it is expected that delivery of the EHC plan will on average be more expensive than the old Statement of SEN. The **average net additional cost per case is calculated at £254**. However, the limited data available means that there are a number of underpinning assumptions around this finding and uncertainty about how far it is representative for all areas and age groups, or whether costs of delivery will change as the system becomes more embedded.

The survey of Pathfinder families found that around 8 per cent reported that their experience of the process had improved. Setting this against the additional costs of delivery suggests a **cost per additional satisfied family of £3,175**.



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