NPFS ASN Focus Group – 5 September 2013

Introduction

This note records an NPFS focus group facilitated by Rocket Science, held in Hazelwood School for Children and Young People with Sensory Impairment, Glasgow on 5 September 2013. The focus group was for parents from the Glasgow area with at least one child with Additional Support Needs (ASN). The aim was to discuss the particular needs of parents with ASN children and specifically the scope to improve Chapter 7 of the Supporting Children's Learning Code of Practice (Revised edition, April 2011) in terms of parental engagement.

There were 10 parents present, two NPFS office holders and a representative from the Scottish Government. The additional support needs of the children of the participating parents varied – most children were on the autism spectrum.

Key points from discussion

1. General points: The titles of the proposed five areas in Section 7 of the Guidance – 1 Assessment, 2 Planning, 3 Delivery, 4 Review, 5 Dispute Resolution – are thought appropriate to use. Parents felt that many parents were unclear about their rights and found it very hard to find out what these were. They needed to be clearly set out and promoted. There should also be a clear statement about what parents could expect teachers to do.

2. Assessment: Section 7 of the current Guidance focuses on making sure that the voice of children is heard and acted upon. The proposed guidance should give much more weight to parent's voices in decision making around their child's support needs. In particular the Guidance appears to make the assumption that most children will be capable of articulating their own needs. A distinction should be drawn between children with developmental conditions such as Autism and those with physical disabilities. Children on the autism spectrum will often not be able to identify their needs though they may articulate them. These articulated needs are likely to be at best inaccurate and will vary significantly from day to day – and acting on them could be dangerous.

> *"Concerned that emphasis [of the Guidance] is on education authorities talking with child. Very few children will be incapable of doing this… it gives more rights to child compared with parents… [my son] is just becoming aware that he has different needs."*

> *Example: under current system, the secondary school asked [parent's] child what he needed – he said he didn't want to go to school.* "*If you ask him what he needs he wouldn't know.*"
>
> *"I know a child…with a physical disability… he would be well able to identify his needs."*
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> *"We can't lump everyone in together – developmental issues are different from physical disability."*

Parents want to be in control of communicating with their child about their condition, and when and how this is done. Teachers need to ensure that they communicate clearly and frequently with parents about how this critical insight is introduced to the child.

> *"My daughter was not aware of her condition [until S1], this was our choice. At that point the child doesn't know what they want."*

There was a real issue about transition between teachers at the start of each year – and about the transition between primary and secondary. Many of the parents felt that this was likely starting all over again in terms of assessment and planning and they wanted much better hand over procedures so that learning about the child, their needs and how to manage their behaviour was passed on effectively.

> *"The school is the one with learning difficulties ... each year you have to start again"*

3. Planning: Parents reported that their children had individual plans of different sorts. The key to their effectiveness lay in teacher and parents working together closely to put the plan into practice. Parents were keen to see a requirement to produce longer term strategies for each child and shorter term plans within this. There was some concern that Teachers and schools did not seem to draw on any particular national guidance from specialists about what support might be offered to children with different disabilities and seemed to be 're-inventing the wheel' with each child. In the best schools, teachers would pass on what had worked with an autistic child to other teachers.

> *"A more consistent approach would make it easier for parents to understand whether they are being let down."*
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> *"Should be a strategy off the shelf that you can use [as a basis] for a specialised plan ... there needs to be long term planning."*
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> *"…in my school there was a longer term strategy [above] short term… [it took] a phenomenal amount of work by one teacher who made a plan that was subsequently drawn on for all children with similar needs."*
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> *"I tried to figure out what I was meant to get [based on legislation and guidance] but the school disagreed with me on the interpretation of the requirements [on the school]."*

4. Delivery: Some individual teachers don't manage some children's additional needs and related behaviours well and there seem to be significant issues about not taking on board the implications of conditions and related behavioural traits. Effective delivery of the plan and

management of a child’s behaviour needed to involve close and frequent communication between teacher and parents.

> *“You want teachers to tell [parents] on a daily basis about little things… my school refused to do this”*
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> *“My daughter is very good at hiding [her condition] at school, and school doesn’t notice. You have to play detective [as a parent]: parents feed back to school, but don’t get anything back.”*
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> *“”Each year teachers say they want [my child] to put hand up more. If they read the learning plan they would know he has a communication disorder …. Wish teachers would share notes and try to understand the needs.”*
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> *“It feels like a tick box exercise.”*
>
> *“When you go to secondary school it all becomes very dependent on which teachers you get.”*
>
> *“Need good communication [of the child’s plan] across the school with by-in from all teachers.”*
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> *“There needs to be national [support] to ensure teachers have skills to identify signs [of needs related to Autism].”*

5. Review: Review should be a constant process rather than ‘one size fits all’ annual reviews. They need to be frequent and only draw on other specialist staff as needed. A multi-service review should be arranged when a clear need for this is identified by teacher and parents. The review process needs to be completely transparent and involve the parent at every stage. Parents complained that they felt excluded from annual reviews until the last stage, by which time the services has agreed what they were going to do.

   “If you have a child who is sent home quite a lot you have to be strong to keep going back to the school”

   Example: [Parent] found that in primary school there was constant opportunity to review the learning plan. This kept the plan realistic and gave opportunities to “swap notes” between parent and teacher. This has not been maintained in secondary school.

   “Can’t have a set plan ... it needs to keep changing”

   “Review should be almost continual ... if a once-a-year review is the expectation that is really the wrong way to do it.”

   “My [negative] experience of CSP [annual reviews] is that there is a private meeting between teachers and specialists before the planning meeting so when the parent goes in there is a united front.”

6. Dispute resolution: The need for dispute resolution means that a parent has already been let down by the system. At this stage it would be helpful for parents to have access to an independent person to advise them; this should be someone independent of the school with specialist knowledge of the conditions/disabilities related to the child’s condition/disability.

   Example: one of the parents had supported a friend through CSP dispute resolution

   “By the time families get involved [in dispute resolution] ... they are very frazzled…it is almost like these parents are being abused by the system.”

7. Provision of a Named Person. This was agreed as desirable and the definition of the roles as set out in the Bill is what parents would like, but it was agreed that these roles needed to be carried out actively and that a Head teacher, Assistant Head or Teacher would not have the time or knowledge of the wider support network to carry out this role. So while the role was desirable, the practical implementation needed to be very different from that planned. It needed to be someone independent of the school (and independent of social work or health services) with specialist knowledge of the conditions/disabilities related to the child's condition/disability and of the needs and support that may be appropriate for the child. This individual would be able to act as: an information source for parents and the child; a supporter for the school in planning and delivering for the child's needs; and an advocate in the school for the child and parents.

> *"Named Individual is very important... if there was one person or one organisation you could go to that would really help...it shouldn't be an Educational Psychologist... it could be specialist in that condition."*
> *"There is no one in the school [to go to] who will know what they are talking about."*
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> *"Consistency is important."*
>
> *"The named individual needs to be someone independent of health, social work and education"*