



## BETTER COMMISSIONING FOR AUTISM EDUCATION LOCAL AUTHORITY FOCUS

In 2009 the Autism Education Trust provided a consultant to link with the government funded Commissioning Support programme. The aim was to influence practice and increase the attention given by local authorities to effective commissioning for the education of children and young people on the autism spectrum.

The AET was particularly concerned to explore how far those involved in this commissioning activity understood the unique issues associated with providing for children and young people with an autism spectrum. There was some confidence amongst the AET and senior DCSF (now DfE) officers that better commissioning for autism education would be a priority for local authorities, and an area in which they may indicate a need for support.

For some time local authorities have worked to reduce their reliance on non-maintained and independent special schools. In 2007 the Audit Commission reported<sup>4</sup> :

*"...although councils and their partners are beginning to plan more effectively to control their costs by reducing their use of out of authority provision for SEN, this is not based on a systematic analysis of the whole costs and the quality of outcomes of different types of SEN provision. Councils simply do not currently bring together the information to help them decide which types of provision offer the best value for money."*

At the time the two most prevalent needs being supported by local authorities in these settings were autism and behaviour. The Audit Commission stresses the need to take a systematic approach to develop in-authority provision. Working systematically, using a sound evidence base of data to start, monitor and judge effectiveness, and aiming for value for money is fundamental to this project.

### Survey to Local Authorities

In early 2010 a letter and quick questionnaire<sup>5</sup> was sent to every Head of SEN Services and Head of Commissioning for Children's Services in each of the 150 Local Authorities in England.

The aim of the questionnaire was to identify the extent to which key LA officers were aware of:

- key data and information to inform effective commissioning for autism education,
- how far the individual officer was aware of the needs of children on the autism spectrum, and
- the inter-related roles of different services / agencies.

The letter introducing the questionnaire suggested that those professional staff involved in effective commissioning services for children with autism, their families, young people approaching adulthood, and those adults who continue to need support, should:

- Be clear about the group of individuals they are considering
- Have started to engage at an early stage with these individuals and their advocates
- Understand the range of needs associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Be able to tailor-make / adapt / reinforce / replicate provision that is effective
- Be able to articulate indicators and measures of effective commissioning
- Be able to ensure that unique issues associated with ASD are understood and that they inform decision making.

### **15 Local Authorities responded from the following regions:**

- 4 - London
- 1 - East Midlands
- 1 - West Midlands
- 2 - South Central region
- 2 - North East
- 4 - Yorkshire and Humberside
- 1 - South Eastern region

Most of the responses were completed by officers or professionals who led SEN or autism services, rather than officers who may have a more generic commissioning role.

### **Most respondents:**

- knew how many children and young people in their area have an ASD
- had a clear picture of the general trend of numbers over the last 3 years
- gathered their data from the annual schools census<sup>6</sup> and the SEN2<sup>7</sup> Survey
- were confident about their knowledge of what provision and support is available
- felt they understood the needs of a person with autism
- knew about costs of out of authority provision
- had structured training and support programmes in place for families
- had links with adult services in relation to transition

### **A minority of respondents:**

- obtained data from the PCT and/or the disabled children's team
- did not know much about the work of the transitions team
- knew about the costs of providing for adults with an ASD (only 1)

### **Half of the respondents:**

- knew about the costs of providing for children and young people with an ASD in the Local Authority
- had systems in place for gathering the views of children, young people and their families about the effectiveness of provision
- had innovative programmes in place to reduce dependency on out of authority placements
- referred explicitly to ASD in their Children and Young Peoples' Strategic Plan

Five of the 15 authorities (or one third) said they would like to receive some future support to help them improve their commissioning in this area.

## The Invitation Seminar

The AET decided that there should be a follow seminar to the survey. In addition to invitations being sent to those who responded to the survey, a number of other individuals who had expressed an interest in this important area of work joined the seminar in July 2010. Those who attended included officers and professional leads from:

- 10 local authority areas
- the National Autistic Society
- the Autism Education Trust
- the Department for Education
- the Autism centre for Educational Research at Birmingham University.

A presentation<sup>8</sup> was made and this is available at <http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/~media/AET2/Main%20site%20images/Case%20studies/North%20Yorkshire/Local%20Authority%20focus%20presentation%20slides%20link%208.ashx>. The presentation summarises the key findings from the local authority survey, and raises issues that were discussed throughout the day.

## Seminar Aims

The aims of the seminar included the development of a “*crisper portfolio*” of outcome indicators as well as supporting discussion on the connections between SEN strategic management, school funding approaches, education planning systems and commissioning arrangements.

## Value for Money

Demonstrating effectiveness and sustainability of educational provision for children with an autism spectrum condition, requires clarity on inputs (eg: funding, staff levels, staff expertise, range of different settings) and precision on required outcomes and outputs. Most of those present could explain how services and educational provision were arranged, and what service users had said about their quality, but there was less confidence and detail about measureable outcomes and impact.

The analysis of the survey responses showed a range of responses to the question, “*What outcomes do you use to judge the effectiveness of your provision?*”. The following list (a slide in the presentation) lists responses:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- attendance</li><li>- Family stability</li><li>- written feedback on training sessions</li><li>- young people accessing academic and social demands of school</li><li>- pupils who stay at home (EHE?)</li><li>- attainment levels</li><li>- educational progress, including Pivats</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- exclusion rates</li><li>- NEET</li><li>- pupil / parent feedback</li><li>- increased capacity of schools</li><li>- Ofsted outcomes</li><li>- what staff say</li><li>- good question – not strong in this area</li><li>- ECM outcomes</li></ul> |
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None of those present at the Seminar felt that a single outcome indicator was sufficient to judge effectiveness. Examples of outcome indicators that were thought to be directly relevant to securing effective education for children with an ASD would include:

- exclusions of pupils with an ASD, by type and by time in school career, compared to all other exclusions
- cost of placement
- sustainability of school placement
- exclusions of pupils with an ASD, by year on year increase or reduction, compared to all exclusions
- % of students with an ASD in the NEET group
- % of expensive legal cases / SEN appeals
- % of electively home educated pupils with an ASD, compared with % of ASD across all pupils

From this discussion, the day developed into a close examination of what data was available for each local authority present. For some there was no surprise. For more than half, there was data provided that did not match the understandings and existing knowledge of those present.

Some of this related to the differences in the way data was collected, and some to the source.

The seminar data was drawn from DFE sources that were constructed from annual schools census<sup>6</sup> returns and the local authority SEN<sup>7</sup> return. Discussion took place about the accuracy of schools census returns, particularly in how schools interpret the DFE guidance on assigning a type of SEN to a specific child. The consensus was that there was, and would be likely always to be, variability across all schools in the way that types of SEN are assigned. However, it was agreed that the data was probably the most reliable source of comparative data between and across local authorities about pupil level detail.

A part of the Seminar looked at specially constructed SEN data profiles<sup>10</sup> of local authorities. These are attached as exemplars and accessible through link 10 below. Following the SEN Information Act (2008), the DFE published "*Children with SEN: an analysis 2009*"<sup>11</sup>. It includes a presentation and analysis of data about pupils with SEN during 2008 and at January 2009. The 2010 version<sup>12</sup> is also available. Much of this data is drawn from the 2009 analysis, as well as from bespoke analyses from DFE statistical returns<sup>13</sup>.

There was insufficient time to then explore funding for SEN through a section 251 budget<sup>9</sup> statement analysis, and beyond that, identifiable spending on ASD. This is possible to do, but requires a greater examination of local authority SEN and school spending schemes, and there was insufficient time in the day and preparation period. It was agreed that this could be a valuable area to explore across a sample of local authorities and schools in the future. Comparative data about the s251 budget plans<sup>14</sup> and end of year out-turns can be found, and tailored to the comparator group required (eg: statistical neighbours; regional neighbours). (Further information and detail is available in the "Short Guide to web-based data" which is part 4 of the "Better Commissioning for Autism Education" series.

<http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/~ /media/AET2/Main%20site%20images/Case%20studies/North%20Yorkshire/Better%20Commissioning%20for%20Autism%20Education%20-%20guide%20to%20accessing%20web-based%20data.ashx>

## Scenario Testing

Participants were provided with a scenario – to convince the Director of Children’s Services that the specialist support service for pupils and students with an ASD should be retained and sold to schools, settings and academies, in the face of incrementally reducing central budgets.

This challenged those making their cases to consider financial inputs, planned outputs and outcomes, and the strategic relevance and importance of the service. The exercise was dynamic and enjoyable, and identified a number of themes for exploration:

- the difference between what is available for a child in school, and in various play schemes and respite settings – and what is subsequently available for that child when s/he becomes an adult – and the particular difficulties that this creates for those with an ASD;
- transition points where different funding approaches and rules apply – from children to adult services, and from pre-statutory school age to statutory school age;
- the adaptation of the 14-19 curriculum for learners with an ASD

## Evaluations

The seminar drew very positive reviews from those attending – with all responses saying that the learning from the seminar would help them to make a more effective contribution to service planning and improvement.

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## Links

North Yorkshire Communication and Interaction team planned a day’s training with the AET consultant, and took further steps to planning measureable improvement. This is the part 3 of this series of reports and can be found at <http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/good-practice/case%20studies/north%20yorkshire%20better%20commissioning%20seminar.aspx>

Many of those who have engaged with the AET “Better Commissioning” workstream have commented on the need for a short guide to support their access to and use of available data. This is part 4 of the series and is available at <http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/good-practice/case%20studies/north%20yorkshire%20better%20commissioning%20seminar.aspx>

References and links, referred to above, are listed below.

3 <http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/Resources/Research.aspx>

4 <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/nationalstudies/localgov/Pages/placementssen.aspx>

5 <http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/sitecore/content/AET2/Global/News/CSP-questionnaire.aspx>

6 <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/adminandfinance/schooladmin/ims/datacollections/schoolcensus/a0064400/school-census-2011>

7 **SEN 2 survey** - This collects information on children with statements on the census date in January and new statements made in the previous calendar year. It also reports on the placement of these children. This is a Local Authority (LA) level survey and records those children for whom the LA is responsible (regardless of whether they are educated in the LA.s own maintained

schools, in another LA.s schools, in the non-maintained or independent sectors or educated other than at school). (source [www.education.gov.uk](http://www.education.gov.uk) Feb 2011)

- 8 Presentation slides to the Invitation Seminar – July 2010.  
<http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/~media/AET2/Main%20site%20images/Case%20studies/North%20Yorkshire/Local%20Authority%20focus%20presentation%20slides%20link%208.ashx> The presentation
- 9 <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/strategy/financeandfunding/section251/a0068030/la-section-251-website-addresses>
- 10 Data sheets prepared for the seminar – July 2010  
<http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/~media/AET2/Main%20site%20images/Case%20studies/North%20Yorkshire/Local%20authority%20focus%20data%20sheets%20link%2010.ashx>
- 11 <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STA/t000851/index.shtml>
- 12 <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STA/t000965/index.shtml>
- 13 <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000939/index.shtml> - SEN characteristics  
<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000977/index.shtml> - pupil level outcomes, and other pupil characteristics, including SEN
- 14 <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/adminandfinance/financialmanagement/schoolsrevenuefunding/Copy%20of%20section251/a0069747/benchmarking-2010-11>