

Date 23 January 2023

Agenda Item:

THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES IN NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

Purpose of the Report

1. To share with the SEND Accountability Board the voices of 280 children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in Nottinghamshire.

Information

2. The Nottinghamshire local area is committed to hearing the voices of children and young people. The aim is to develop a sustainable and consistent model of engagement with children and young people with SEND, based around educational settings. This is one of the priority areas for the Directors of Children's Services in the East Midlands is to 'share good practice in gaining and responding to the voices of children and families with SEND'.
3. To support this area of work 280 children and young people who access specialist, mainstream or alternative provision have been visited to understand their experiences through listening activities. The listening activity sessions have provided the opportunity to build relationships with schools, children and young people and assess the best methods to elicit the views of children and young people.
4. This piece of work has been supported and developed by colleagues across the Educational, Learning and Inclusion Division and Nottinghamshire educational settings.

Methodology

5. A set of questions was developed to gather the views of children and young people collaboratively alongside District SENCOs, taking into consideration their expertise from early years, autism, sensory and cognition and learning. The questions focused on the following areas: education, personal activities, life after school, life changes and the best way for children and young people to share their views. Alongside the questions, a pro-forma was designed to Analyse of these meetings using a standard template provided for this report.
6. The Local Authority reached out to schools who have already well-developed Pupil Voice within their own settings to learn from their practice as well as those who have a passion to develop the voice of pupils within their own settings. There have been over 40 visits to different establishments including early years, primary, secondary, specialist

schools, alternative provision, and post 16 colleges across all the districts in Nottinghamshire.

7. The plan of the sessions was shared with the teaching staff who know the children best, ensuring tailored resources to support the children who were asked if they'd like to share their views.

Education

8. To ensure the true voices of children and young people with SEND are reflected in this report, an emphasis has been put on capturing the authentic voice.
9. To understand the experiences of education for children and young people with SEND we asked, 'What is the best thing about your school?' and 'What could be even better for you?'.
 - ***'My autism doesn't affect my actions and I don't need to be treated differently' (mainstream secondary)***
 - ***'Get to meet new people – lots of nice children and adults' (mainstream primary)***
 - ***'I don't like schools. Not just this one, I don't like any. I was expelled from my last school, but I don't know why. Then I came here and there aren't any bullies here so that's good, but I still don't like being at school' (specialist education)***
 - ***Form time is a nice relaxing start to the day (mainstream secondary)***
 - ***'I didn't feel I got support during primary. When I got here during covid I had someone call every day to check in. Your problem is not small in the grand scheme of things. They listen take it on and help' (mainstream secondary)***
 - ***'I know the SENCO at the secondary school is really good she will help me with my dyslexia' (mainstream primary)***
 - ***'My teaching assistant doesn't understand me' (early years, mainstream primary)***
 - ***'This school makes me feel welcome – like I belong somewhere' (specialist education)***
 - ***'Really kind teachers' (mainstream primary)***
 - ***'My teachers don't listen to me' (specialist education)***
 - ***'You're still a person. You can do what normal people do' (Mainstream secondary)***
 - ***One pupil drew the following picture (to describe his dislike of bullying - mainstream primary)***



Experiences for Children and Young People with SEND in Mainstream Primary and Secondary settings – what’s important to them

10. Key themes begin to emerge when asking children and young people their views on their education. For the large majority, children and young people enjoyed their time at school, there were some however who felt unsure or who really didn't enjoy the environment.
11. Children in primary school value friendships, their teachers, play times and school dinners. Most frequently, children comment that they enjoy play times to meet and make new friends.
12. In contrast, students in Secondary settings rarely discuss friendships but they did recognise and value the adjustments that schools put in place for them to engage in their education. Secondary school aged pupils drew our attention to wide and varied approaches schools have developed to support them in their education. These included: having a sensory room to go to calm down and reset, ELSA sessions, concentration aids (often referred to as fidget toys), motivational techniques, a time out card, timetabled lessons away from other students, iPad, being able to have a toy that comforts them.
13. Children and young people in mainstream settings acknowledge key teachers and teaching assistants who support and advocate for them during their education.
14. Young people in both primary and secondary schools really value having a 'safe space' to go to in difficult times and when they need peace and time to reset. However, it should be noted that children in primary schools referenced this opportunity far less. Children and young people in mainstream schools shared some of the following comments:
 - ***I really like 'The Haven', timetabled lessons in there. More time to do homework and revision in there. If I'm tired, I can read in there or draw. I have a time out card, but never used it as sacred.***
 - ***The PLC – a quiet learning space within the SEND dept to regulate/calm***
 - ***The sensory room***
 - ***The Learning Centre – I like to be in here, I like to calm down***
 - ***Having a sensory room to go to***
 - ***Blackbirds alternative provision room, where we can calm down, talk about things, play with playdough***
 - ***I like the cabin, it's quiet and there are more breaks in between.***
15. Overwhelmingly children and young people with SEND across primary and secondary settings value extra activities which are provided during their curriculum. These areas were mostly highlighted by primary schools' students. Children shared that they enjoyed: cooking and baking sessions, movie afternoon as a class reward, the animal unit, stomping in puddles in wellies at playtime, activities week, forest schools and swimming.
16. It was clear during direct conversations with children and young people that these practical sessions were key to ensuring that were able to focus on the core curriculum of Maths, English and Science. Children and young people shared the likes and dislikes in certain subject areas. Students in secondary schools commonly noted the wide range of

subjects available to them and enjoyed focusing on areas they can excel in.

17. School values and the school feeling like a community was often shared through discussions and students shared how this had a positive effect on students feeling part of the 'school family'. Young People shared the following comments:

- ***Posters around school to encourage you to be yourself***
- ***There's a feeling of belonging to a supportive community***
- ***I love the school policies I understand most of them.***
- ***This school makes me feel welcome – like I belong somewhere***
- ***I think because it's a small school everybody knows everyone so it's like a community, then teacher recognise you***
- ***The 10 core values in our school help stop any bullying***
- ***I would put up posters to stop ... bullying especially those with disabilities.***

18. Children and young people also regularly referenced that technology supported their learning and having access to a computer/iPad during lessons helped them to engage with their learning and lessons.

Experiences for Children and Young People with SEND in Mainstream Primary and Secondary settings – what could be better

19. Key trends begin to emerge from both primary and secondary students with SEND regarding what could be done improve their lives at school. Children in primary school settings regularly shared that they would value longer break times and shorter lessons to help them process and engage more meaningfully in their lessons. The idea of short bursts of work followed by a short break was frequently mentioned during conversations.

- ***Work for 20 minutes then has a break***
- ***Lessons are too long my brain can't process everything***
- ***Shorter days in school***
- ***Extra playtimes***
- ***Less times in classes or maybe if you could spend some time with your friends in their classes***
- ***It would be good to have more playtime***
- ***I need more processing time when working and sometimes a short break when I've already answered questions would help***
- ***We could have two lessons and then a break: two lessons then lunch. Then a lesson, a 15-minute break and the last lesson's a bit longer.***

20. These views are teamed with a desire to expand the social aspect of schools via more practical activities during lessons such as PE/cookery, enhanced playground equipment, providing more after school clubs and trips out.

21. Noise levels of the school environment were regularly commented by children and young people across both mainstream and secondary schools. They said:

- ***I don't like assembly, it's too noisy***
- ***I don't like the loud noises***

- ***More seating in the hall, it's too loud and too noisy***
- ***Smaller classes with less children in***
- ***More quiet time in class***
- ***It's too noisy. I want nice and calm***

22. What stood out the greatest is school aged students commenting on the lack of support and understanding for their need within schools. Students commented:

- ***I feel I haven't been supported as well as I could have been in school. I probably have dyslexia and I feel I am not reaching my full potential in lessons. I'm smart so I could be doing a lot better.***
- ***I get support in the wrong lessons - I get support in the lessons I can do but not in the ones I don't. I used to have mentoring, but I don't get it anymore.***
- ***Lack of TA support in lessons. Support round school is ok but not in the lessons.***
- ***Support is really bad in lessons - no TAs. I had to pretend I knew what I was doing.***
- ***If teachers helped me a bit more with my work***
- ***Consistency from teachers, e.g., not all teachers give me the blue paper I like because of my dyslexia***
- ***Some teachers are a bit snappy and rude sometimes. They move the slides on too quickly before I finish.***
- ***If teachers weren't so quick to assume and actually asked you what has happened***
- ***My teacher doesn't listen or have time for me***
- ***Give you work but doesn't really explain it.***
- ***Some staff don't get it.***

23. Young people in secondary school settings regularly commented on the busy environment, particularly lunchtimes, and how this was difficult for them.

24. Finally, children and young people with SEND very often struggle to conform with some of school policies that must be adhered to. This includes policies regarding uniforms, lack of breaks during lesson times and the compulsory curriculum e.g. having to learn a second language.

Specialist educational settings

25. Six of the Nottinghamshire Special Schools / Academies were visited to support this piece of work.

26. During conversations with young people in specialist education, the relationships students had with their teachers clearly stood out. Students noted that there was more teaching staff to support them, their teachers listened and understood, and they were supportive.

27. Like those in mainstream settings, students regularly referred to creative subjects that they enjoy and have the option of regularly accessing, such as drama, photography, singing and dancing, as well as core subjects such as maths, science, and P.E. Many

young people attending these settings didn't enjoy English.

28. In comparison to those in a mainstream setting, young people in specialist education often refer to the aesthetics of the building. Young people comment on the quieter environment and the smaller class sizes. They also note the buildings are easier to access and have specialised areas such as sensory and soft playrooms. Some young people in some settings valued not having to move from classroom to classroom and having a main base.
29. Young people in specialist settings also referred to friendships more frequently than those in mainstream secondary settings, using school as an opportunity to spend time with their peers and build relationships. Although some students still referred to the difficult relationships that they had with their peers.
30. Generally, across the board, children and young people in specialist settings had many of the same requirements when asked what could be better for their education. They often referred to needing more breaks, more play-based equipment, and additional practical-based lessons.
31. Transport was additionally raised by this cohort of students. The significant length of time to travel to school was discussed as well as drop off and pick up schedules, both leading to anxieties for young people. Transport arrangements also impact what children and young people can attend and access in terms of after school activities.

Alternative Provision settings

32. Children and young people who attend alternative provision settings shared their views as to what is working well for them: The main themes highlighted are below:

- Interest led lessons
- The additional support
- Learners are inspired by staff who faced similar educational obstacles in their past
- Flexibility and a relaxed atmosphere are key
- 1:1 time
- Teaching staff are supportive, and positive relationships with staff of the highest importance for this cohort of young people to successfully engage.

33. Young people also voiced their views on where improvements can be made and what they would like from their provision in the future:

- Further emphasis and support from providers on preparation for adulthood giving them the essential life skills needed for their next steps in and outside of education
- Young people would like more communication regarding transition. Whether this be more notice of when they plan to return to mainstream education or planning their next educational setting
- Additional staff to support more 1-1 sessions
- Many young people in alternative provision settings have experienced bullying during their time in mainstream education

- Often shared was the lack of variety available in courses if students were not accessing the usual GCSE pathway. Students often shared that the courses available in their Alternative Provision setting wasn't what they wanted to do such as mechanics and animal care
- Higher quality or quantity of equipment and access to the internet at their provision
- Reduce the stigma and negative connotations that come with alternative provision.

Post 16 Education settings

34. To meet with young adults in post-16 education, two of Nottinghamshire Specialist Colleges were visited to understand the experiences of this cohort.
35. Students regularly commented how much happier they were in college rather than at their previous school placements.
36. Young people frequently shared the respect that staff have for them, more than in their experience during their pre-16 education. The comment on the positive relationships they have with staff as well as staff having a greater understanding of their needs, very similar to young people's views in alternative provision.
37. Many of the students noted the flexibility in college suiting their needs i.e., only attending a certain amount of the week and not having large amounts of homework.
38. Some of the young people who took part shared that they have made friends much easier at college, however other students shared they'd had so many difficult relationships with peers during their time in education including bullying, that this now impacted their ability to make friends and even more so, trust their peers. Regularly, students commented on the need for more staff within these settings.
39. Discussions around work and preparing for adulthood were at the centre of conversations. Some young people were already on a work experience placements via provision within the college, such farms and working within the catering environment. Young people shared they would like to within their current provision, providing support to young people like themselves.
40. We asked young people, 'what does prepare for adulthood mean to you' students shared a range of ideas mainly around living independently, getting a job, and having the skills and information to budget their own finances.
41. To further gather the views of children and young people, at a recent Preparing for Adulthood event held by Nottinghamshire County Council we asked young people their views regarding finding work. From the 23 survey responses received 94% of young people shared that they would like to work in the future, however, 41% of these young people said that they have some worries about working. Their main worries included:
- ***They will do poorly in their GCSEs, meaning they will not be able to get a job***
 - ***Working in new environments***
 - ***Making friends at work and getting along with co-workers***
 - ***The timings of shifts and their working patterns***

- ***Whether they would receive support at work***
- ***Whether they would be paid.***

Relationships and Bullying

42. Bullying unfortunately is an experience a high number of SEND children and young people have encountered during their time at school. It was relayed and discussed frequently in discussion with students across mainstream and specialist settings.
43. When meeting students in Nottinghamshire, across all settings, some students were comfortable enough to share some of their views regarding their experiences of bullying:
- ***(It would be better) if some people weren't mean to me. I tell the teacher and she just says to keep away from them.***
 - ***The bullying at this school... they pick on me. Nothing changes***
 - ***Sometimes my friends make me sad***
 - ***I've got friends at home but not here***
 - ***An individual in class has been unkind to me***
 - ***I would put up posters to stop ...bullying especially those with disabilities.***
 - ***The teachers at my old school used to pick on me***
 - ***There's less bullying here***
 - ***The bullying seems to be well managed at my new school***
 - ***Bullied at school so moved to a 'special school'***
 - ***Being mean to me***
 - ***I wish people would be more nice to each other, people should not judge other people just because they act differently. People should think more about what they say to others.***
 - ***My best friend is being bullied and he told the MDS but they didn't do anything***
 - ***I'd like to kick the boys out of school who are bullies***
 - ***No-one bullying me.***
44. Although children and young people in primary school's place friendships and time to spend with their friends high on the agenda, those in secondary settings discuss friendships much less, perhaps due to the complexities that young adult relationships bring.
45. Children and young people in specialist settings regularly refer to bullying at their previous mainstream schools rather than their current settings and some young people share bullying as one of the reasons they attend a specialist setting.
46. Children and young people in alternative provision focus much more on their relationships with teaching staff rather than their peers due the ranges in age and ability in provisions, making it more difficult to form friendships especially for female learners who attend these provisions far less than males.

47. Across all cohorts, successful relationships are rarely discussed as part of discussions regarding their futures, the focus is much more on careers and educational achievements.
48. For a national picture in relation to bullying, a recent National Office of Statistics report '*Educational experiences of young people with special education needs and disabilities in England: February to May 2022*' the young people who took part in the research commented on their experiences of bullying they shared it 'was damaging for their learning and wellbeing' They also shared 'that tackling it through mediation and raising awareness of the impact of bullying sometimes works better than telling students off, isolation or detention'

If you could change one thing about your life...

49. We asked children and young people 'if you could change one thing about your life, what would it be?' A wide and diverse range of answers were shared. Common themes included, having more money, not having to go to school, and not having to tackle difficult life experiences such as family divorces, deaths, and illnesses. Also regularly shared was that children and young people wouldn't choose to change anything about their lives.
50. One theme which did stand out, was children and young people noticing how their SEND needs affect their daily lives and thinking if this was not a part of who they are, what difference this would make to both their education and lives generally.

- ***How much I focus on academics, maybe I should have more of a social life***
- ***Swap my brain, I'd get a better brain that could do maths better and make me smarter. If I'm smarter I'd get a better job***
- ***Want to see the world differently, e.g. I wish I could see maths differently because it wears me down***
- ***Make it easier (to manage) being dyslexic***
- ***Less anxious and tired. Have counselling in school, miss pe to have my counselling.***
- ***Probably to not be so physical or retaliate so much***
- ***To make myself better so my Mum never has to shout at me***
- ***I want to go back in time and change my behaviour so I could go to mainstream***
- ***Not getting kicked out of my old house so I can stay at my old school***
- ***Maybe my school, would I be able to learn better at a different school***
- ***Have more fun and go out more, without being so aware of the world***

51. Children and young people in Post 16 education echoed the views above, but regularly shared if they could change one thing about their life, it would be to attend a different school as part of their pre-16 education.

Life after school

52. Undoubtedly, children and young people have high aspirations for their futures across mainstream and specialist settings. Several vocations were referred to, from an Egyptologist to becoming the Prime Minister. However, there are a large number of students who are unsure of what their futures look like and what routes to take to

achieve their goals.

53. Children in primary schools for the large part were able to share their views on their futures, but due to age struggled to comprehend how they were going to achieve this, and others struggled to access this question. Some children noted that this was too far away in the future to think about. Young people in mainstream secondary schools and alternative provision settings were much clearer on what they wanted to do in the future.
54. Those students in specialist schools were able to share their views for the future, but their goals were not as ambitious as those in mainstream settings, and many didn't know what their next steps would be once finishing school. This is perhaps due to many of the specialist schools in Nottinghamshire extending their provision until the age of 18.
55. Students who attended specialist colleges, some are already on work placements. However, they are unsure whether they are doing a placement, volunteering, or are being paid for the work they have doing. If they believe they are being paid, they don't know how much they receive and share families manage their finances. Most of the young people's work experience comes from retail shops, volunteering in charity shops, gardening, or working in schools in some capacity e.g., catering, or in the classroom.
56. Many students across all settings referred to being in a job role which could help other children like themselves along with an overwhelming response that young people would like to focus their career in social media and YouTube. Others regularly mentioned careers such as: caring for animals, mechanic, doctors/nursing and creative roles such as becoming an artist/singer/photographer.
57. When asking children and young people how they were going to achieve their future job aspirations some young people used language such as 'focus, work hard, practise lots, be motivated, behave well in school, listen, try your best and be good' rather than having a clear understanding of their next steps. Children and young people mainly in specialist settings referred to their families supporting them with decisions on their next educational phase.
58. However, some young people, mainly those in mainstream secondary settings shared in detail, the routes they would take to achieve their goals communicating ideas around work experience, college courses and degrees.
59. Two children referred to having a relationship as part of discussions about the future.

Outside of school activities

60. When asked what children and young people with SEND enjoyed outside of school, they reference a range of hobbies which include accessing clubs and activities, spending time with their friends and family and working.
61. Following suit with career aspirations, overwhelmingly, across all settings, technology features regularly through discussions as part of activities that children and young people enjoy outside of school. Gaming, playing on phones/iPads, socialising with friends online through social media, and watching television is raised at every meeting

with children and young people, it plays a huge part in their lives.

62. Children and young people in specialist settings however refer more frequently that they prefer to be at school than at home and that they often feel bored at home.

- ***I don't have fun at home – all I do is watch TV***
- ***I'm not doing much at the weekend, I get a bit depressed***
- ***It gets boring doing the same thing***
- ***I miss school when it's the school holidays, it's more fun at school, I've got my friends here'***
- ***I'd prefer to be at school***

63. Children and young people regularly discussed and shared the love they had for their pets and animals at home.

The Voice of Children and Young People

64. We asked children and young people with SEND 'Why do you think it's important that your views are heard about the services you use such as schools and health?' They shared:

- ***Yes, because kids have important issues to talk about***
- ***We're the people it's affecting, not just the people organising things.***
- ***I don't know. No one listens anyway... yes, I think they should know about what I like and things I hate but I don't think they want to know anyway***
- ***Adults sometimes don't understand or get it wrong***
- ***I don't think we should be ignored; I think we should let people say words out loud. I think people listen to me***
- ***Adults can learn from children***
- ***Then you will be able to understand us – understand how we think and feel***
- ***Then you can consider individual needs***
- ***Yes, but I don't always feel confident talking to people***
- ***Yes- because you might miss something, and it might be important***
- ***Because children in most of their life do not have the voice to project their voice out to everyone else.***
- ***View from adults cannot be truthful but students will give you a realistic view of the school***
- ***Is it to improve people's experience? You might have bad memories. You mostly want good memories***
- ***Children's voices should be heard, and we might have the answers***

65. Children and young people frequently mention that they do not feel that they are listened to, and they are not part of decisions that affect their lives. It's clear many young people would welcome the opportunity to be heard more consistently.

66. Children and young people share a range of ways they would like to share their views, often they share they like discussing their feelings with a family member or with a teacher. Across the board children and young people would like the opportunity to talk face to face in small groups or on a 1:1 basis rather than writing things down or using IT.

67. Anonymity was something raised by young people, noting they would feel more comfortable sharing their views knowing that their views would be confidential and not traceable to them.

Sustainability of the voice of children and young people

68. This report marks the start of ensuring a consistent and robust design is in place to regularly communicate with children and young people SEND and capture their voice to strategically influence and develop services they access.

69. This work has been the beginning of developing relationships with children and young people across the County, as well as creating a shared understanding of some of the best ways to create an accessible environment for young people to be able to communicate and share their views.

70. To ensure the longevity of this piece of work, it's key the views in this report are shared and discussed in further detail. We are therefore aiming to deliver a one-day event on the Voice of Children and Young People in Nottinghamshire to all key leaders and stakeholders via the Making Participation Work programme from the Department for Education.

71. KIDS organisation who delivers the Making Participation Count programme, will jointly develop, and deliver the session with the Local Area for key leaders and stakeholders.

72. The focus of the session will be as follows:

- Share analysis and discuss the key themes children and young people are telling us
- What promises should/can the local area make to young people?
- Develop actions to achieve delivering these promises
- Discuss the next steps to ensure consistency and sustainability. How can this happen? What can people / establishments practically commit to?

73. In the meantime, further visits will be carried out with children and young people to share the views captured in this report to demonstrate our commitment to following a full feedback cycle. It is imperative to continue to meet with students to continue to build trust and promote confidence to enable children and young people to share their views.

74. Most importantly, conversations to be developed with health and social care colleagues to gain a wider understanding of the experiences of children and young people with SEND and how their voices can be incorporated into the overall project.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the SEND Accountability Board:

- Notes the contents of this report and disseminates the views in this report to a wider audience.
- Attends a one-day event to prioritise and action the views found in the report.

- Supports the development and sharing of training and tools in relation to collecting the views of children and young people within individual organisations to ensure a robust and consistent structure.

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