

PaCC Connect Report



Inclusion in Mainstream Schools – Working Together to Help Our Children Succeed

All the quotes are from parent carers at the PaCCConnect, unless stated otherwise. The term “Parents” refers to both Parents and Carers

Following the Parent carer forum (PaCCConnect) “Inclusion in Mainstream Schools”, this report presents and summarises parent carers views on how best we can work together to help include children with SEND on mainstream schools.

This report will be shared with heads and SENCOs across the city, and presented to the SEND Partnership Board.

Introduction

“Inclusion is others adapting to include, rather than the young person having to adapt to the ‘norm’”

“Exclusion is not inclusion in any form” whether that be after school activities, school trips or being in the playground with your peers.

When it comes to the school experience, parents of children with special needs and disabilities want much the same as any parent. In broad terms, they want their child to be happy, to have their needs met, and to learn and progress in an environment where they feel valued and part of their school community.

However, a DfE survey found that only 1/3 of parent carers felt their child was receiving the support they need in school. For many children with SEND, there are barriers to achieving these seemingly simple aspirations.

Schools are under financial and academic pressure which can conflict with inclusion. The squeeze on school and local authority budgets risks direct impacts on children with SEND. The Local Governors Association says: “If councils do not receive sufficient funding to cover high cost SEND, they will not have the resources to allocate extra funds to highly inclusive schools that take higher than average numbers of pupils with additional needs. Equally, mainstream schools may find it difficult to accept or keep pupils with SEND because they cannot afford to subsidise the provision from their own budgets, as they are already under significant pressure.”

We are already seeing schools in Brighton and Hove closing their doors to new applications from children with SEND, and a number of schools losing both teachers and teaching assistants due to budget pressures. School exclusions are on the rise nationally, of which half are for children with SEND, and this is reflected in an increase in exclusions locally (check).

The other, perhaps more hidden, pressure comes from a culture – beyond schools themselves - of mistrusting difference, and seeing children with SEND as “outliers”, rather than as an integral part of our rich and varied society.

These pressures make inclusion more of a challenge for schools.

PaCC has identified working more strategically with schools as a priority area for parent carer involvement, in order to improve outcomes for children with SEND in mainstream schools. We now attend the SENCo forums, in order to work more strategically with schools.

Feedback from parents of children with SEND in mainstream schools, indicates that there is a lot of variability in inclusive practice across Brighton and Hove. The aim of the PaCConnect was to capture the views of parents and carers across the city about what is and isn't working around inclusion in mainstream. We were particularly keen to gather examples of good practice which are included in this report, so that these can be shared with schools across the city with a view to improving inclusion in all schools.

Attendees

Parent-carers, including mASCot reps and PaCC reps

LA: Anna Czepil, Mo Bahm;

Councillor: Vanessa Brown;

Amaze: Emma Parker and Liam

SENcos: Lindsay McGill (Patcham High School), Daniel Reeve (Blatchington Mill School).

Primary SENcos were invited, but were unable to attend.

Extratime: Sam Price

Format

In the first half, parents and Local Authority representatives formed groups to gather views and discuss ideas around inclusive practice. These discussions were fed back and discussed in the second half of the session, when parent carers were joined by SENcos and Councillor Vanessa Brown.



Themes and discussion

This section provides a summary of the views of parent carers on good practice and areas for improvement, based around the following broad themes:

- Communication and involvement of parents
- Behaviour and how it's managed
- After school activities and school trips
- Accessing your local school and school admissions
- In school – what works and what doesn't work

Below is a summary of the ideas raised and discussed under these themes at the PaCConnect.

Communication and Involvement of parents

In times of stress, when resources and time are limited, communication is often the first thing to suffer. Ironically, this is when effective communication becomes most important. Communication is a theme which repeatedly emerges when parents are having difficulties with school.

The SEND code of Practice (2014) puts the child and their parent carers at the centre of decisions about their education. However, according to the recent DfE survey, only 28% of parents felt they were fully involved in decisions, and locally parent carers report a very mixed picture between schools.

Discussion at PaCC connect fell into four broad categories:

1. Being accessible

Schools can feel impenetrable, particularly if your child does not have an EHCP. Parents often don't know who to talk to about their child. Schools need to be explicit about how parent carers should communicate with the school, and ask parents how they would like to be communicated with, e.g, home school book, email or telephone. This is particularly important at transition when the systems of communication often change. "We don't approach a young person in one set way – this should be the same for parents" (SENCo, Blatchington Mill)

2. Parents as partners

National data shows that most parents of children and young people with SEND don't feel fully involved in decisions about their child. "Parents can feel like a nuisance". A few simple ideas were highlighted at our PaCC Connect which can help involve parents.

- **Parents being seen as experts**, welcoming their input, expertise and knowledge. If schools fully believe in parents as partners, then a wealth of expertise becomes available to help provide the best help for the child. "Life is so much easier when we work in partnership" (SENCo Patcham High)
- **Copying parents in** to communication about their child. "We [parent carers] are the PAs, and we're left out of communication"
- **Informing parents** regularly about the support provided for their child
- School **reacting quickly** to issues raised by parents. A rapid response can avoid greater difficulties downstream.
- Be careful with **language**. Calling a parent "Mum" immediately affects the power balance. Words such as "Naughty" do not promote a culture of inclusion.

3. Being proactive

Even if a school has a good open door policy, some parents report a reluctance to contact the school, and some don't have the ability to do so. Schools need to proactively reach out to parents. Parent carers discussed examples of where this works well are:

- **Arranging meetings** with parent carers, ideally timetabled for the whole school year. "Meetings set up in advance meant flow of communication was good".
- **Parent-led support and working groups** have been set up in some schools, eg. Blatchington Mill and Goldstone. At BM this has raised issues about after school clubs and the needs of parents without an EHCP and discussions within the school community are taking place to help improve issues.
- Letting parents know in advance of any change which will affect their child.
- **Drop-ins for parents**. Patcham High has twice termly drop ins with the SENCo and a termly open door session with the head teacher. This is a shift in culture and pre-empts a conversation rather than just reacting.

4. Communication within the school

Some parents reported that communication within the school was poor. It is obviously essential that mechanisms are in place to ensure good communication between staff, particularly the SENCo and class teachers. And let parents know how this happens to ensure confidence in the school.

Behaviour and How it's Managed

Behaviour is often a key barrier to inclusion in mainstream schools. How behaviour for children with SEND is approached and managed in a school can make the difference between a successful or failed school placement, as well as affecting the child's ability to

learn and thrive at school. Anna Czepil pointed out that in mainstream schools, two conflicting factors must align for a successful behaviour policy – the need for a school to be “one size fits all”, and the need for all children to fit in.

It is now accepted that behaviour is an expression of need, and approaches to behaviour must include reasonable adjustments for children with SEND, eg. to address sensory needs. Parents - and of course the child themselves - often have unique insight into what those needs are, and working together is essential.

Discussion at PaCC connect fell into three broad categories:

1. Sanctions, school exclusions and part-time timetables.

- Not only are long-term reduced time-tables and informal exclusion **illegal**, but “reduced timetables are not a solution to behaviour issues. It just prolongs/normalises behaviour and puts more pressure on parents”.
- The **stress** of exclusions was highlighted, and one parent described the relief of accessing a special school where their child would only be excluded for H&S reasons
- **Sanctions** should aim to improve the behaviour of the child, and must support inclusion wherever possible. E.g., parents reported their child being excluded from out of school activities due to behaviour, even though out of class activities were an opportunity for real inclusion.
- Where **risk** is the reason for exclusion from an activity, this needs to be made clear to the CYP and their parents.

2. Behaviour policies and behaviour management strategies.

- Any behavioural strategy needs to have at its core “**What works**”. “All behaviour strategies must work for the child”.
- **Working with parents** is essential. Parents and school can together identifying triggers for negative behaviours, analyse what behaviour strategies work and make adjustments.
- **Flexibility** is key, both around behaviour policies and behaviour management. “No one size fits all”: One parent cited the Just Right programme as working well for their child, another described working closely with the school to develop a behaviour contract. A Senco said “Our school acknowledges that flexibility is needed, and we work towards helping the child meet the behaviour policy”.
- Parents also highlighted that not all behaviours come out as “bad behaviour”, and that just because a child is not having a melt-down, does not mean all is OK – anxiety can come out as quiet behaviours.

3. Attitudes towards parents

Attitudes towards parents around behaviour is a subject which comes up time again when talking to parent carers. Good practice could be summarised as:

1. Listen and support first, advise later.
2. Work together
3. Don't blame – parents are usually doing the best they can. Support will do more to help than implying that it is their fault.

Key points from the PaCConnect were:

- **Feeling blamed** for your child's behaviour, being "sent on parenting courses, interviewed and observed", and having the spotlight shone on their parenting in a way that other parents don't face (however bad their parenting strategies!). Feeling blamed increases stress and puts a strain on home-school relationships.
- Parents would like "**Respect and compassion** for difficulties at home. Don't blame the parent." "If parents feel supported it will help the child".
- **Attitudes of other parents**, "at the school gate". Schools need to lead the way to ensure parents don't feel blamed by their community. "Parent blaming culture feeds through from teachers to parents"
- **Communication**. A private meeting or phone call is generally better than a report in front of your child and other parents at the end of the day. Best practice is to ask the parent how they would like to be informed.
- **Positive feedback**. A parent described the positive impact of regular emails from school, highlighting and praising what had gone well that day.

After School Activities and school trips

"Excluding CYP from education/after school clubs is not inclusion"

Full inclusion goes beyond the classroom. Being part of your school community includes having access to the same broader activities as other children and young people. Schools have a big role to play in promoting this aspect of inclusion "

Discussion at PaCC connect fell into two broad categories:

1. After School Activities

Parents at the PaCConnect reported a number of barriers to inclusion in after school activities:

- **Home school transport**, which is not provided out of school hours
- Insufficient **support**, e.g children can't access the club if they need 1:1 support
- **Independent providers** who have variable inclusion policies
- Lack of **adjustments**, and blaming the child. Damage to self-esteem when a child "fails" at an after school club
- Parents don't feel **confident** the club will be inclusive

Suggestions on how to overcome these barriers:

- More **support**
- **Training** to after school clubs providers (e.g from BHISS)
- “**Mentoring**.” Older children help.
- Schools aware of **funding** for support and share with parents
- Build **parental confidence** by being proactive “What can we do to help your child be included in this club?”
- Staff to support children moving from school to after school activities (eg Extratime)

2. School trips

There was broad agreement among parents and SENCos that forward planning, working with parents and excellent communication were key to success.

Accessing your local school and school admissions

Most parents would like their child to be able to go to their local school, along with their peers. For children with SEND this can often be difficult. Some children attend special schools in order to meet their needs. However, many parents would like their child to attend mainstream school, ideally the school serving the rest of their community.

PaCC believes mainstream schools should all be equally able to meet the needs of most children. However, there is a disparity in numbers of EHCPs in different schools across the city. This not only affects the budgets of those schools admitting more children with SEND, but it prevents children accessing their local school, and consequently their community.

Parents report variable responses from schools around admissions “When I visited schools about my autistic son, one Head spent 20 minutes talking us through their provision; another SENCo looked sorry for me and wished me luck finding him a suitable place.” PaCC is aware of parents that have been told the school can’t meet the needs of their child, or that another school is better suited.

Parents report being met with unwelcoming language “We've never had a Downs’ before” “We have a SENCo but they’re very part-time” It might be that provision once in the school is good, but a negative response can leave parents unwilling to take the risk. Conversely, a positive welcome inspires confidence that the school will include and help your child.

Children with SEND are part of the community. Schools need to see them as part of their school community, not as a burden, and must show parents that their child is welcome.

In School – What Works and What Doesn't Work

All the themes discussed came out under this theme, and much has been covered above. Recurrent messages were “Listen to and work with the parents”, “communication” and “know the child”.

A few examples of what parents see as working for their child included:

- Consistency: staff continuity and shared approaches across all staff
 - Looking after a child's mental health: building self-esteem and making adjustments to help reduce anxiety. “Children need to feel comfortable and happy at school”
 - Flexibility: “being open to change the way things are done”
 - Training: including joint school/parent training
 - Mentoring and buddying. “Peer support is really important” and promotes genuine inclusion.
 - Playground support: e.g. adult-led games which will include other children.
 - Sibling support
 - Early intervention, even in the absence of an EHCP
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Recommendations

Summarising the wealth of contributions from parent carers at the PaCConnect, the following recommendations are made to schools.

- 1) Ensure a child-centred approach and be flexible.
- 2) Parents should be included as partners and experts. Listen to parents, and show understanding and compassion. Ask parents how they would like to be communicated with, and provide clear information to parents about how to contact school. Arrange regular meetings, set up in advance. Copy parents in to communications with external agencies.
- 3) Build positive relationships with parents and get rid of the blame culture around behaviour. Schools should take the lead on this. Listen and support first, advise later. The more supported a family feels, the better they can support their child.
- 4) Set up parent carer forums/working groups.
- 5) Changing whole-school culture. SENCo should be on the Senior Leadership team, and appoint a SEND governor with skills in this area
- 6) Share information and learn from other schools – there is always more to learn. Share this info with parents
- 7) Ensure after school activities are inclusive and share this with parents.
- 8) Use welcoming language around admissions. Aspire to include rather than exclude.
- 9) Offer early help for children without EHCPs. Be pre-emptive rather than reactive.
- 10) Use peers and older children to improve inclusion
- 11) An annual questionnaire to parents and carers of children on the SEND register, to find out parental views on the above recommendations, as well as other matters relevant to SEND provision in the school.

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Measurable strategic outcomes (for the Local Authority and PaCC)

1. Increased proportion of schools across the city with active parent carer support groups/forums
2. Increased proportion of schools across the city with SENCo/INCo on Senior Leadership Team
3. Improved feedback from parent carers (anecdotal, and via questionnaires)
4. Fewer children with SEND are excluded, and attendance levels improve.

PaCC will be using this report, along with other sources of information, to work with partners in the city to inform a strategic and city-wide approach to ensuring the very best chances for children with SEND in Brighton and Hove.