

Specialist solutions for complex needs: a roundtable debate on the future of children's services

Meeting summary

1. Introduction

The Children's Services Development Group (CSDG) is a policy forum consisting of leading independent providers of specialist education, residential care and foster care services. The members of CSDG are at the forefront of delivering the government's reforms to children's services. The group was established to provide a platform for constructive debate on the future of children's services policy and to enable greater dialogue between providers and commissioners of services.

On 24th June 2008, CSDG hosted a roundtable discussion forum involving 24 senior stakeholders from the children's services sector, including government officials, local authority heads of children's services, campaigning charities and independent and third sector providers. The discussion was a wide ranging debate around the theme of '*Specialist services for complex needs*'. It was chaired by Alexandra Frean, Education Editor of The Times and received presentations from Hardip Begol, Deputy Director of SEN and Disability at DCSF; and Brian Jones, Chief Executive of the SENAD Group and a founding member of CSDG.

Below is a summary of the event's main discussion points. Specific comments have not been attributed to individuals as the discussion was held under Chatham House rules. A full list of attendees can be found below.

2. Attendees

First name	Surname	Organisation
Joan	Baxter	Audit Commission
Virginia	Beardshaw	ICAN
Hardip	Begol	Department for Children, Schools and Families
Phil	Champion	Hesley Group
Dominic	Church	Westminster Advisers
Tony	Crouch	Essex County Council
Alexandra	Frean	The Times
Christine	Grice	London Borough of Lewisham
John	Heron	Foster Care Associates
Jennifer	Izekor	Government Office for London
Brian	Jones	SENAD Group
Linda	Lascelles	AFASIC
Michael	Lovett	National Fostering Agency
Chris	McSharry	Hesley Group
Carol	Payne	Wandsworth Council
Colin	Pettigrew	Government Office for the North-East
Dennis	Rigg	Cambian Group
Steve	Roe	National Children's Homes
David	Savage	Castlecare Group
Marijana	Sevic	Westminster Advisers
Peter	Weston	Government Office for the South-East
Lucy	Wilkins	CentreForum
Kate	Williams	National Children's Bureau
Howard	Woolfenden	NorthernCare
Marc	Woolfson	Westminster Advisers

3. Key discussion points

Turning policy into real change for children

- A great deal of momentum has been created in children's services policy since Ed Balls became the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families. He is clearly committed to improving services for children with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN).
- Parents of children with SEN are often frustrated and under-funding for services in this area is a major problem. The Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda has had a greater effect in other areas of children's services.
- Significant government investment through the Aiming High for Disabled Children programme is to be welcomed, as are the wide range of other pilots and initiatives currently in development.
- There are concerns though, that reports may simply 'line the bookshelves' and that the 'tsunami of pilots' will not result in real change for children.
- Pilots can take too long to carry out and assess before they are rolled out nationally, which means that current cohorts of children cannot benefit.

Working in partnership to develop innovative solutions

- Better dialogue between commissioners and providers is essential. But this must apply to more than issues of cost and pricing, and should address quality, value and outcomes.
- The economic circumstances are challenging for all parties involved in the commissioning process. Providers and commissioners need to understand and appreciate each others' positions in order to develop effective partnerships.
- Local authorities must demonstrate leadership. The new settlement between central and local government means that local authorities must assess their local needs and secure appropriate services to meet them. This requires tracking, planning and monitoring the needs of their local populations.
- Headteachers are also now very important, using their increased autonomy to make independent decisions. Specialist providers should seek opportunities to work with mainstream schools, either individually or in clusters.
- The independent sector has a key role to play, as it is able to react quickly to respond to local authorities' needs. Independent providers should seek to develop close partnerships with local authorities – who are now commissioners of services rather than direct providers of them.

Developing child-centred outcomes

- Concern that debate has become too focussed around process and supply-side issues. Children's needs and outcomes should be the main focus of policy.
- Outcomes based commissioning and planning is a welcome development, but the outcomes must be meaningful to children and parents rather than simply reflecting local authorities' needs.

Managing the transition to adulthood

- Questions are unanswered over how plans to extend the school leaving age will relate to children with SEN.
- This will be partly addressed through the government's 'Transition Support Programme', but the inequality between adults and children's services is a major problem. Additional investment in children's services over the past decade has created significant improvements but this is unmatched in adults' services – creating a 'cliff edge' of funding.
- Restrictive eligibility criteria for adult social services too often mean that young adults with mild to moderate SEN or learning difficulties are left without support.
- However, the transfer of funding for 14-19 education to local authorities coupled with joint commissioning through Children's Trusts should make a real difference in this area.
- ICAN – a charity focussed on children with speech, language and communication difficulties (SLC) – have conducted research that shows how outcomes for their former pupils deteriorate after they have left specialist settings.
- Children with moderate SLC are now likely to be educated in mainstream schools. This can be problematic when they move onto Further Education without an SEN Statement and struggle because additional support can be difficult to access.
- For children with very severe needs, the transition process is particularly important. Their needs do not change at the point at which funding drops off (whether that is at 16, 19 or 21), they need lifelong care.

This is very hard to access through social services, as there are very poor resources for young adults with very severe needs.

- A national debate has been recently initiated by the government that looks at the issue of adult social care funding. DCSF and DH are working together to look at transition issues. However, this must be seen within the overall context of social care funding reform.
- The personalisation agenda in adult social care offers great potential to improve outcomes for service users. Personal budgets and individual learning accounts - coupled improved workforce training - should help to ease the transition process.

Empowering parents to be decision makers

- Local authorities have a duty to provide information about what services for children with SEN are available in their area. Currently only 5% of councils are complying with this duty.
- The information must be made available in an accessible format, so that parents can find what they are looking for. This presents a challenge to local authorities' IT departments.
- John Bercow's current review of provision for children with SLC difficulties prompted a strong response from parents who feel that their wishes are not taken into account.
- Parents should be empowered to make decisions and be provided with the information they need to do so. This would require independent support and advice, especially in cases where parents also have SEN, or in 'hard to reach' groups. It is particularly important to intervene with 'hard to reach' families, as SEN may lead to criminal activities as children become adults. Provision for such young people must be about more than 'warehousing', requiring up-skilling of youth justice agencies.
- Parent Partnerships were intended to provide such support to parents, but are seen as being too close to the local authorities that fund them. This has meant that parents have not been certain that their cases will be dealt with in confidence, and that the Parent Partnership staff act in their best interests. Truly independent advocates are needed.
- In cases where SLC therapy has been provided through schools, rather than in separate facilities, parents' contact with specialists has been reduced, resulting in a over-reliance on the school to provide information about their child's needs.
- Parents should be able to participate in decision making, but often have no access to the process. For example, decisions about what services can be offered to children with SEN are made behind closed doors, with parents unaware of how they are made or what the criteria are.
- Parents understand that resources are scarce and must be shared, but should be empowered to make their own decisions within a transparent funding framework.
- Questions over whether an independent organisation is needed to regulate the availability of services for children with SEN. Something similar to NICE in health is required.

Commissioning issues

- Looked after children don't have parents to be their advocates and 'fight their corner'. It is essential that corporate parents provide the same standard of care and support that other children receive.
- Moves to extend care leaving age beyond 18 are welcome. Too many looked after children are forced out of the care system when they reach 16. Especially for those with complex needs, SEN or emotional and behavioural problems, local authorities must work with providers to create effective care plans that are focussed on each child's needs.
- The age profile of children in residential care has changed, as younger children are increasingly placed in foster care settings. This means that the children in residential care are often older and those with the most complex needs, this group will struggle the most with the transition into adulthood.
- Placement stability is essential. Too often specialist residential care is seen as a last resort, only after children have been through a series of failed foster care placements. Earlier identification and intervention with specialist support should be made possible. This would improve their long term outcomes, and help them to live independently in adulthood.
- Services for children with very complex needs are supposed to be commissioned on a regional basis, but there is very little evidence of this occurring.
- The commissioning process is too reactive, and does not create the right environment for providers and commissioners to work together strategically. Services are developed in response to tenders, which rely on local authorities understanding the needs of their local areas. This does not allow for independent and voluntary sector providers to develop innovative services in partnership with local authorities. More opportunities are also needed for providers to co-operate with each other, offering services in partnership.

- Providers should actively engage with the process, rather than waiting to be ‘invited in’, but it is very hard for smaller providers and charities to participate in the commissioning process.
- There is a culture of ‘distressed buying’, whereby decisions are made on a spot-purchasing basis with very little planning. This is inefficient for both providers and commissioners, and does not allow for a strategic approach.
- Spot purchasing is inefficient and should be replaced by greater use of block contracting.
- Preferred provider lists should include a measurement of quality, and should exclude providers who cannot meet quality standards.
- Funding from the Aiming High for Disabled Children programme is intended to be used for commissioning new short break services from independent and voluntary providers. This does not seem to be realised by some local authorities.
- In addition, the funding is not simply to provide short breaks just for respite care, but to develop a range of innovative services to give children with disabilities a wide selection of experiences.
- Children’s Trusts are supposed to ensure that commissioning brings together health, social care and education teams. The Bercow Review of SLC provision has shown that the system is still too fragmented.
- It is especially difficult to develop joint working arrangements between local authorities and health bodies. PCTs are short on expertise in children’s services commissioning.

Key conclusions and next steps

- ❖ Children’s services should be developed and commissioned to be focussed on outcomes for children, rather than being process driven and bureaucratic.
- ❖ Improved dialogue is the key to developing innovative new models of delivery in the children’s services sector.
- ❖ Local authorities and their partners - through Children’s Trusts – should seek to engage with high quality providers to ensure that specialist provision for children with complex needs, emotional and behavioural problems and learning difficulties is available to all children who require it.
- ❖ Providers too, must adopt a strategic approach and seek to build sustainable partnerships with their local authority clients.
- ❖ The current review of adult social care funding must address the cliff edge of funding between children’s and adults services and propose a means of easing this transition.
- ❖ A better balance between residential care and foster care should be sought for looked after children, so that those who would benefit from early specialist intervention are able to receive the care they need, and that foster care providers are able to provide safe, secure and stable placements for the children they look after.
- ❖ The Children’s Services Development Group will continue to seek opportunities for further engagement between independent providers, local authorities and third sector organisations to build awareness and understanding, and to encourage greater partnership working.

Contact

For more information about the Children’s Services Development Group, please visit www.csdg.org.uk.

Alternatively please contact the Group’s administrative secretariat – provided by Westminster Advisers Ltd.

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