

October 2013

To whom it may concern

I am writing on behalf of Bromley Parent Voice in response to the recent Build a Better Bromley meetings. Before highlighting our concerns I would like to introduce our forum.

Bromley Parent Voice is a forum that informs service providers of the needs of children and young people with a disability or additional need and their families or carers. We believe that by working co-operatively with local service providers parents can contribute to improvements in the services delivered for children and young people with a disability.

Our current membership over 400 with many of these actively involved. This membership represents families from a wide cross section of society, cultures and religions. I have included a copy of our report and a parent journey book to give more information about our forum. We also produced a film during the parent journey project. This film has been very well received, with many LA professionals requesting permission to use it to help inform others.

For the past two years we have worked in co-production with the Local Authority as a partner on the Children's & Young Persons bill pathfinder project. We have built many successful relationships within the LA during this time and have proved that co-production can be beneficial to all parties.

The above leads me to the Children's & Young Persons bill. The whole ethos of this impending legislation is to have a family centred approach. There are statutory requirements for co-production with parents having involvement in planning, developing and reviewing the Local Offer. Furthermore the draft Code of Practice states: *Local authorities must keep under review the special educational and social care provision available in their area and outside their area for children and young people with SEN for whom they are responsible in consultation with: children and young people with SEN and their parents.*

Bromley Parent Voice has learnt that the council are in the early stages of considering commissioning out services. This development is of deep concern to us. As parents of children within a minority group, we are deeply concerned about the impact of any austerity measures Bromley Council might take to reduce and/or commission much valued services.

We understand the need to substantially reduce Local Authority spending and that such cuts will be far reaching. That being said, many of the services outlined to be commission only, are viewed by our families as front line support.

Bromley are currently celebrating ten years of Early Support intervention for families and young people with Special Educational needs and/or disability. Early Support is highly valued by SEND families and professionals alike. Indeed the Government are looking at using the Early Support model for SEND families from birth to 25.

Bromley have good reason to celebrate. The implementation and success of Early Support in Bromley is a key reason why Bromley achieved Path Finder status, and latterly Champion Pathfinder status working on the implementation of the Children's & Young Persons bill.

Early Support is currently targeted towards children with a high level of need but we should also provide for those with moderate or lower needs. There have been many studies undertaken^{*see refs below}, across the political parties, that have recommended early intervention and warn of the long term impact of inadequate support. If not supported early our families can face bleak outcomes. Such outcomes may result in many of our families requiring support from Health, Social and Adult services further down the line. This would see costs escalating and an increase in family breakdown.

We urge the council to consider the long term ramifications when looking at short/median term savings. It is not just the long term, we would also like you to consider the median term impact. Our SEND children and Young People may well be in the minority but just one, unsupported child with ADHD, can have a profound impact within a classroom, thus affecting the majority.

The Local Authority has invested in devising a framework of support for those children not in receipt of an Education Health & Care plan (EHC plan). This framework was developed with the advice and involvement of school professionals, parents and LA professionals. The framework is robust and clearly defined, however, the Pupil Resource Agreement (PRA) is not a statutory document.

Families with moderate or low level of needs are unlikely to be in receipt of a plan. Many of these families currently hold a statement of educational needs, which is statutory. The imminent legislation will see these families losing their statement so in order for the PRA model to work successfully parents will need to have faith in it. To achieve this, families will require ongoing support from the various services outlined. A lack of faith in this system will inevitably lead to more families seeking to draw down an EHC plan. Even if they are unsuccessful such action will be a drain on the Local Authority.

With most of Bromley schools taking up academy status the LA have very little influence on how schools meet the needs for their SEN children. This is a precarious position as ultimately the LA retain the statutory duty to provide appropriate education for its children.

The role of professionals such as Educational Psychologists and Advisory Teachers is vital for all parties. They help reassure parents that the schools are addressing needs, they provide schools with strategies for meeting those needs, and their intervention retains some presence for the LA within the school system.

Whilst on the face of it these services could be commissioned out there is a danger of loss of continuity. Much of the excellent support our families receive is due to professionals building a relationship and understanding of our children. It takes time for this to happen and many of our children need the stability, trust and continuity that comes with seeing the same professionals (consider the impact a string of different Speech & Language therapists would have upon an autistic child). Equally the professionals need to view children over time to build up an understanding of how best to support their needs.

Trust is a key element in ensuring successful partnerships. Trust can only be built over time and there is the fear that if services are commissioned expertise could be lost to the lowest bid. Cheaper is not necessarily value for money.

At one of the recent public meetings Councillor Wells suggested that professionals may well be TUPE transferred and could still be contracted to provide support. I would like to ask where there is a cost saving in this strategy, after all the process for commissioning contracts costs money and companies providing a service will want to see a profit. There is a risk that service providers will demand a high price where they have a monopoly and if there is competition we fear the LA will opt for the cheapest bid.

Commissioning out of services is in direct conflict with proposed model for Bromley delivering the SEN Reforms.

We need to ensure there is support and guidance in pre schools. Our excellent Early support covers those with high end needs but our mainstream nurseries will struggle if there is reduction in the Support in Preschool service (SIPs). Bromley's nurseries have struggled to continue ever since the Government brought in free places for three year olds. Nurseries are not allowed to charge a top up fee for these free spaces. Now the Government are extending this to offer free two year old places. The financial strain is huge and does not allow extra capacity to support children with additional needs.

By using SIP workers it allows the child to access nursery provision and gives staff a chance to assess that child's needs before they start school. This is a pro active approach and reaps rewards for when child reaches school age as it allows for the correct support to be put in place from the start in education.

Another area of major concern for parents is provision of Short Breaks. The Government recognise the importance of Short Break respite such that they have maintained the level of funding despite being in times of austerity. This money is not ring fenced and relies upon local authorities using it wisely.

Provision of Short Breaks in Bromley is highly valued by families. The provision of this service is somewhat patchy and not without issues but this is being addressed. We are aware of the Short Breaks consultation and will be providing a detailed response to it, however, we would also like to highlight some of our concerns to you.

We are concerned at the lack of choice available to our families. There are few providers for children with high level of need and we are worried that without block contract from the borough the few that exist may disappear.

The LA has a determination to provide for children within borough rather than give out of borough placements. Many out of borough placements are residential so if children are to be kept within borough there will be an increased number requiring Short Breaks. This will result in a greater demand upon the specialist provision as these children have high level needs.

This summer there was a lack of grant funding for an autistic provision. Many of the families using this service are not in receipt of direct payments and so faced a bleak six week school holiday with little or no respite.

I have only highlighted a few of the services vital to our SEND families. There are some areas that need addressing however, for the most part Bromley has provided excellent support for our families.

Please do not allow austerity measures to erode this support.

As parents we view Early Support as the jewel in Bromley's crown. We would welcome this model being rolled out from birth to 25. We urge you to consider maintaining all of the aforementioned services as a priority and to continue to aim high if not higher for our SEND children.

Yours Sincerely

Ros Luff

Rosalind Luff (Chair of Bromley Parent Voice)

Refs: 2007 Aiming high for disabled children: Better support for families
2008 The Bercow Report: A Review of Services for Children and Young People (0–19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs.
http://www.johnbercow.co.uk/pdf/Bercow_Report_Final.pdf
2011 Early intervention: Next steps Graham Allen MP
2012 Government research shows Early intervention is key in helping children with special needs [Increasing options and improving provision for children with special educational needs \(SEN\)](#)