

Date: 4 June 2024

Dear Essex Family Forum,  
CC SEND Parent/Carer Support Groups,

I am writing to provide an update on the important SEND Improvement work in Essex. This includes the changes we are making to the Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment process to address the long waiting times, which I acknowledge are unacceptable.

As you know, the improvement work on quality has been underway for several years. Firstly, in response to the SEND inspection of 2019 and then the revisit of 2022. However, we have now reviewed and enhanced our plans to enable change to happen more quickly. This is in response to feedback received from families via the Essex Family Forum and parent/carers support groups. It also comes from the Courageous Conversation peer review process, which you took part in.

Although the improvement work already underway has resulted in a significant improvement in the quality of new Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), I apologise that it is still taking far too long for these to be issued. I understand the frustration and impact that this wait can cause for children, young people and their families. Please be reassured that I and the Education service remain as determined as ever to improve this process. This includes providing earlier support and a better overall service.

### **What changes are being made?**

We are in the process of recruiting a bank of additional independent Educational Psychologists (EPs) through an agency. These EPs will focus on addressing the current backlog of assessment requests. All assessments will continue to be quality assured through the usual council process, to ensure they meet our high expectations.

We have also made some changes to the assessment process itself. This will mean it is more efficient, family-focused and collaborative. Changes include:

- A swifter move to a draft EHCP, replacing the current two-step process.
- A change to the timing of the 'Outcomes Meeting'. Instead, we will offer a Proposed Plan Meeting (PPM) once a decision has been made and the draft EHCP has been shared. A PPM will still be an opportunity for families and professionals to discuss the content of the draft plan.
- Resources for families, which will be available via the Essex Local Offer (<https://send.essex.gov.uk/>) will come online before the end of the academic year. This will include the information that should and should not be included within an EHCP.
- To reduce overall wait times, we will be using the limited EP resource available in the most effective way possible. This means that assessments may be undertaken out of

strict chronological order, for example, an EP could observe more than one child in a single school visit.

- Sharing EP advice with families and the school or setting (if a child is on roll) as soon as it is available. This is instead of it being shared as part of the draft plan.
- Where a decision is made not to assess a child or young person, a Way Forward Meeting (WFM) will still be offered. The staff member who delivers the WFM will be determined on a case-by-case basis. This may include an Inclusion Partner, where the child or young person is in a setting or school.
- Improving communication throughout the assessment process so families are informed of the progress and next steps – which is absolutely key for greater clarity, transparency, and for delivering the improvements necessary.

These changes will enable us to reduce the average time it takes to issue an EHCP and to issue more plans within the 20-week timescale set out in the SEND Code of Practice. They will also enable us to make progress to reduce the current backlog and undertake new assessments without families having to wait as long as they have been.

I hope this information goes some way in reassuring you that this is a situation the council is taking extremely seriously. I would like to also take this opportunity to thank the young people and families that engage with us through the Essex Family Forum, parent/carer support groups and Multi-Schools Council. We very much value the constructive feedback and ongoing dialogue.

We remain as committed as ever to improving delivery against our important responsibilities and providing support to children and young people as early as possible. We would encourage families to use the well-established Graffiti Wall should they wish to provide any further feedback after reading these updates: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/S2XLSZD>. We will review all feedback and continue to provide updates on our progress via the Essex Local Offer. In the meantime, please find enclosed with this letter some Frequently Asked Questions. These are being included following feedback from some parents and carers.

In acknowledgement that not all families of children and young people with SEND are currently engaged with or aware of the Essex Family Forum, we are also sending this letter to active SEND parent support groups and uploading to the Essex Local Offer website and the Essex County Council Website.

Kind regards,

*Clare Kershaw*

**Clare Kershaw**

**Director of Education  
Essex County Council**

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is the assessment process?**

An Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) is the process the local authority uses to determine whether a child needs an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). If a plan is deemed necessary, it will outline the support a child requires within it. An EHCNA is a legal process and should be completed within 20 weeks, according to the SEND Code of Practice.

All EHCNAs are considered on a case-by-case basis, according to a consistent criteria and process. They are carried out in line with the SEND Code of Practice.

Information on EHCPs and the assessment process is available on the Essex Local Offer: <https://send.essex.gov.uk/help-learning/education-health-and-care-plans-ehcps>.

### **Why have there been delays?**

The delays in the assessment process are due to a significant increase in requests for assessment following the Covid-19 pandemic. This demand outweighs the current capacity of Educational Psychologists (EP) to complete assessments. The availability of EPs is a national problem, but one which we are developing an Essex solution to.

### **Are EP assessments carried out in person or virtually?**

Most assessments undertaken by an EP will be completed virtually. However, if the professionals involved feel that face-to-face engagement is necessary, this can be arranged.

There has been some research conducted on the effectiveness of virtual EP assessments. This resulted in the development of regional Best Practice Guidance. You can read about this on the Essex Family Forum website: <https://essexfamilyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/EP-guidance-Eastern-Region-SEND-final.pdf>

### **If I pay for an independent EP report for my child, will this speed up the process?**

This will not speed up the process as a matter of course. Every case is considered in its own context. By making the changes outlined in this letter, we hope families will feel reassured that they don't need to source an independent EP report.

### **What is a Courageous Conversation peer review process?**

A Courageous Conversation (CC) is a themed review of a specific topic across a SEND Local Area. A small team of peers including representatives from parent/carer forums, local authorities and health services, complete a series of analysis and field work interviews. A report with findings and recommendations is then compiled and fed back to the Local Area having the CC.

The intention is for all local authorities in the Eastern region to have completed a CC by April/July 2025, Essex was the second to volunteer to have a CC.

### **What is an 'Outcomes Meeting'?**

An Outcomes Meeting was the previous name for the collaborative meeting between families and professionals working on the EHC Needs Assessment and subsequent report.

Once the local authority had agreed to an EHC Needs Assessment, and gathered the necessary evidence, they would compile a Needs Assessment Report. This would be discussed at an Outcomes Meeting with parents and professionals.

Outcomes meetings have now been replaced by Proposed Plan Meetings.

### **What is a 'Proposed Plan Meeting' (PPM)?**

A Proposed Plan Meeting (PPM) is the new name for a collaborative meeting between families and the professionals contributing to the draft EHCP. This meeting is to discuss the content of the draft EHCP, including the outcomes for the child/young person. Families will be able to discuss the content and put forward their suggestions for amendments and/or additions to the plan.

The difference between the Outcomes Meeting and the PPM is that the PPM is scheduled after the decision is made to issue an EHCP. This is in response to feedback from families, that this would be more useful.

### **What is a Way Forward Meeting?**

A Way Forward meeting is an opportunity to meet with the Local Authority and education setting to discuss the decision made not to undertake an EHC Needs Assessment, if that decision has been made for your child/ young person. You will be able to share any additional information you may have and to discuss the options for support going forward.

### **What is an Inclusion Partner?**

Inclusion Partners (IPs) are ECC staff who work with and support early years' settings, schools and colleges to better support the inclusion of all children and young people, including those who have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). All educational settings in Essex have a link Inclusion Partner.

They work in collaboration with Educational Psychologists (EPs), Engagement Facilitators (EFs) and other professionals to promote and put in place inclusive practice and improve outcomes for children and young people.

Parents and carers cannot refer themselves to the service, but IPs do work with families in collaboration with settings and schools. Speak to your SENCO if you think a conversation with an IP could be useful for your child's school.