Tameside Special Educational Needs Team (SEN) Business Process Review - July 22

Report to; Tim Bowman –Director of Education

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Following OFSTED's Local Area SEND report published in January 2022, a written statement of action was developed to respond to weaknesses in the service's practices, identified by inspectors. The service has commissioned a business process review to be undertaken by the Council's Transformation team, in recognition of the fact that robust effective processes, systems and digital enablers contribute to the service's overall effectiveness. The service highlighted concerns around volumes of work and associated backlogs, performance against statutory targets, management oversight and capacity and requested a clear process improvement action plan to be developed as an outcome to this review.

This report details this improvement action plan with recommendations around SEND operating systems, team structure and processes in order to provide a list of priority actions to ensure that statutory responsibilities can be met to improve the customer and service provided.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the service and be able to provide detailed recommendations, the following actions were undertaken:

- 12 members of staff were met with representing each role within the service.
- 9 hours were spent in workshops and meetings gathering data.
- Internal teams including finance and commissioning have also been involved in this review.
- Access to Capita One and the Special Educational Needs shared drive were granted and processes viewed in the system.
- Service data analysed.
- Worked with Systems Lead to explore better use of system.
- Reviewed the Best One report, the strategic review outcome from Capita ONE provider to develop a systems action plan to work through the recommendations effectively.
- Met with Stockport MBC.

CURRENT PERFORMANCE & WORKLOAD

The SEN team are responsible for ensuring 2428 children from Tameside have their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) maintained and reviewed.

Statutory performance

EHCP Assessments are required to be completed within a 20 week deadline. As of June 22, 51.6% of assessments are completed within this timeframe, falling just below the national average of 58%

In 2020 there were 439 new EHCP's followed by 493 in 2021. In 2022 up to and including June there have been 294 requests for assessment. Projected for a full year this represents a 20% increase on 2021.

This increase is compounded due to significant delays in completing annual reviews. The delay in annual reviews means EHC plans are not being managed effectively therefore volume of workload is continuously increasing.

The statutory team use Capita One throughout the assessment process.

Review performance

Every child is required to have their EHCP reviewed annually and children under 5 are required to have an EHCP review every 6 months.

Due to the current processes and use of spreadsheets instead of utilising the One system, there is no way of monitoring or planning for the number of children due to have their EHCP reviewed. Therefore there is no way of assessing performance against the statutory requirement. However, by looking at the current backlog we know that a number of children have not had their last EHCP review finalised and are now due another review.

There is no accurate data available to confirm the number of plans that have been ceased due to how these are currently being recorded.

As of 1 June 2022 there are 800 emails dating back to July 2021 with post review paperwork that requires processing and responding to.

Each child has a due date for when their EHCP needs to be reviewed by but as it stands the schools currently carry out the review in their own timeframe and send the paperwork in to then be reviewed as necessary. This is a reactive way of working and instead should be led by data provided by the authority.

Interim reviews are held where concerns have been raised. Again there is no data available to quantify these reviews.

Customer Feedback

Complaints data is the main source of customer feedback data for the service.

In 2021, there were 18 stage 1 complaints and 6 stage 2 complaints.

Key themes in complaints included:

- Lack of response
- Length of time taken
- Failure to arrange provision

Team Feedback

Key themes that came out of meetings with team members were.

- Difficult to forecast workload
- Too many conflicting priorities
- Data is inconsistently recorded
- Inconsistent training across the team

We are working with Stockport to complete a benchmarking exercise and to share lessons learnt and best practices. This can be used to inform future update progress meetings.

STAFFING

The table below shows staffing resource in April 2019 and current staffing resource. It is clear there has been significant resource added to the service including the introduction of the EHC Writer position in 2021.

April 2019		Vacancies	July 2022		Vacancies
Position	**FTE**		**Position**	**FTE**	
Head of SEND	1		Head of SEND	1	
Inclusion Manager	1		Deputy Head of SEND	1	
Caseworker Manager	1	1	Caseworker Manager	1	
Business Manager	1		Business Manager	1	
SEN Caseworker	8		SEN Caseworker	6	3
			EHC Writer	5	1
Admin Assistant	3		Admin Assistant	4	
Admin Apprentice	1		Admin Apprentice		2
Total		**16**	**Total**		**25**

Across the service, staff are split into statutory and review teams.

Statutory

There are three caseworkers processing statutory assessments and two EHC Writers. Workload of statutory caseworkers depends on how many requests there are for assessments. Based on projected 2022 figures of 588 request, a caseworker would be expected to complete one assessment per day.

Review

There are four caseworkers responsible for reviewing and monitoring EHCP's annually and 3 EHC writers. With the current number of active EHCP's if they were split equally across the team they would have approximately 600 cases each – this is not a manageable workload. On current staffing and workload, one caseworker would be required to undertake 2.5 reviews per day.

For statutory and review teams this will be explored as a recommendation as to whether this is a reasonable workload.

Admin

The admin team is split into two admin assistants supporting the statutory side and two supporting the review team. Over the last 2 years the admin team have been operating with three admin assistants and one temporary vacancy. This absence has had an impact on the workload and has meant that post review paperwork has not been processed.

For admin it is recommended that focus should be made on system and process improvement rather than adding additional positions at this stage.

Performance data shows that after an initial investment in additional capacity, performance of the team improved. However, this improvement was not sustained in subsequent years. This suggests that processes and data must be resolved to direct capacity and work to enable a sustained improvement in performance.

IT SYSTEMS

The SEN team's case management system is Capita One. System use is minimal and inconsistent across the service which in turn leads to difficulties managing workloads and throughput.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings	Recommendation	Lead	Timeframe
Finding on Processes – Processes are not documented and inefficient resulting in delays and inconsistency in service.			
Required documentation is often received with incomplete or incorrect information leading to delays in assessments and reviews	Complete review and cleanse of letters and forms sent to parents and schools to ensure they are fit for purpose and understandable from the customers perspective. This should eliminate a number of queries and reduce the amount of incomplete/inaccurate forms currently being received		
There is inconsistent knowledge of correct processes across the team meaning some things that should be being completed aren't e.g. uploading of documents to One, next review being created on One	Review and revise all process notes and create a training matrix to ensure there is contingency across each team		
Team members gave examples where triage added unnecessary steps for complex cases.	Review the triage process to ensure this is effective in speeding up the assessment process.		
Preparation for panels is time consuming	Explore the use of Capita One and if documents can be populated from the system.		
Some EHCP reviews are now over 12 months overdue and this the main contributor to the team's work backlog (800 reviews). EHCP plans are not being ceased.	A recovery plan for overdue reviews needs to be established as a priority including ceasing EHCP plans where appropriate. Temporary resource to be provided by the Transformation team to clear backlog as a priority		
Finding on Management Oversight - Due to capacity issues managers are undertaking business as usual and unable to manage effectively. Lack of performance data makes oversight and workload planning difficult.			
Work is allocated using folders on the shared drive and management cannot forecast or plan effectively	Confirm reporting requirements and be able to report direct from the system to be able to monitor and plan workload effectively		
Members of the admin team shared frustrations regarding conflicting priorities and task allocation coming from multiple sources	Mentor SEN Business Manager to share good practice and explore different ways of allocating workload to gain		

	an improved management oversight of the admin teams tasks. Establish suite of reports to manage work throughput.		
Also see actions in staffing and culture re capacity review			
Finding on Data and Systems - The ONE system is significantly under-utilised and data is either inaccurate or missing.			
Schools carry out EHCP reviews according to their own timelines which may mean reviews are outside of statutory timeframes. There is no process in place for the team to drive timely EHCP reviews to ensure they have been carried out when they are due.	All data relating to reviews is inputted onto ONE. This data will enable a process to be put in place to proactively manage when schools undertake reviews.		
Data is recorded outside of the Capita One system on spreadsheets and the shared drive causing duplication of work	A data cleanse is required to ensure that all data saved on the shared drive is mirrored in Capita One in order to move forward with the following recommendations.		
Each child has a file on the shared drive with all of their paperwork, supporting documents and plans stored	Amend share drive settings to read-only and do not save any further documents		
There are a number of spreadsheets in use for various processes that are accessed by multiple people at any one time. There are some issues with inaccurate recording and difficult pulling information from the spreadsheets	All information to be recorded on Capita One – remove spreadsheets with effect from 1st September 2022		
Not all staff have had training for Capita One	A training plan needs to be developed to ensure all staff have the same knowledge of the system for consistency		
It is difficult to collate data due to the system not being used to its full potential and information stored outside of Capita One	All data should be input onto Capita One and not duplicated on spreadsheets.		
SEN portal has been procured but currently hasn't been developed enough to be able to use	SEN portal needs to be prioritised as this will bring significant benefits to the service and generate capacity		
The SEN team don't have oversight of school places and there is no accurate record of which school children have been named at	Explore access and correct use of the system with admissions team.		

	Update One system as soon as a place has been confirmed – a report can then be generated at any point in time to assess allocated places		
It takes time waiting for internal Social Workers to respond to queries regarding looked after children	Explore read-only access to LCS		
Finding on Staffing & Culture – Staff are unable to cope with current service demand which impacts on morale, effectiveness and team culture.			
All staff are home based and most have not been back into the office since the pandemic started. There are a number of new staff that haven't met the team face to face	Develop rota of office working so that staff come together more frequently to improve team culture and productivity		
Following conversations with caseworkers and EHC writers it is clear that there is good practice that can be shared across the team	Utilise knowledge of caseworkers and establish a more efficient operating model by creating roles dedicated to relevant key stages, children looked after, transition into adulthood and in/out movers. This will lead to improved working relationships with internal teams. Book in a regular group session for colleagues to get together and share good practice or get advice from each other to improve staffs knowledge and reduce demand on managers to respond to queries where others may be able to help from previous experience		
Some staff feel that they are undermined when they have followed a process and customer complaints then lead to their decision being changed without understanding the background information	Where a statutory process has been followed correctly and a decision has been made, management should work with decision makers more closely to understand decisions before responding to customer complaints. Culture of continuous improvement involving the team on reflection of complaints to understand the customer experience		
It was evident that roles work too much in silos and that an understanding and empathy of other	Regular training, team meetings, shadowing and mentoring to ensure staff have an understanding of the		

team members and their contribution to the service needs to be embedded.	importance of their role and the impact what they do has on the children and families they support. This will assist in across the service the different roles understanding how their work effects the rest of the team and the importance of good communication.		
Staff have consistently shared concerns regarding workload and capacity.	An immediate review of capacity in the case worker teams is needed to understand if additional permanent or temporary capacity is required. Temporary capacity from the transformation team will assist admin in clearing backlogs. Weekly update on improvement work from Manager and Transformation team to engage and inform the workforce and provide a feedback loop throughout the process.		
Findings on Finance & Commissioning - Delays in communication with finance leads to inaccurate budget montitoring			
Some purchase orders are not being raised in advance of the invoice being received	Purchase Orders need to be raised in advance of each school term using the information from the finance spreadsheets		
When a decision has been made at panel and funding has been approved, the finance spreadsheet isn't updated in a timely manner	The finance spreadsheet needs updating as a priority after panel.		
No negotiation takes place when a provider increases their prices	Establish who is responsible for negotiating price increases with providers		
Contracts are not being issued to providers	A contract should be issued when a placement is agreed		

NEXT STEPS

- Seek agreement to implement recommendations
- Communicate recommendations to service
- Engage workforce to timeline, identify leads and deliver improvement plan
- Establish monthly feedback process
- Assess capacity with service after first quarter