

Port of call

One city council's commitment to early intervention for those with special educational needs is ensuring children get the support they need. *Nicole Weinstein* reports

Special educational needs in young children can often go undetected and unsupported. However, under-fives living in the Brighton and Hove area are more likely to have their special needs identified at an earlier age and be supported through their mainstream education, thanks to the city council's ongoing commitment to early intervention.

That commitment is now spelled out in *Brighton and Hove Special Educational Needs (SEN) Partnership Strategy 2013-2017* and is helping to inform the Children and Families Bill, which aims to improve support systems for children with SEN and is set to become law in September.

Brighton and Hove and six neighbouring authorities form South East Seven (SE7), one of 20 pathfinders trialling a range of key proposals for reform of SEN systems under the bill. One aspect of the pathfinder pilot is to develop parental confidence in SEN systems from the very beginning.

Ali Mayhew, quality assurance adviser (SEN) for Brighton and Hove City Council, explains, 'One of the focuses of our latest Special Educational Needs Partnership Strategy is early intervention and supporting mainstream educational environments to increase their skills and confidence in meeting the needs of children with SEN, in partnership with their families.'

'We have a team of dedicated special needs professionals, known as PRESENS – the Pre-School Special Educational Needs Service – which visits children in nursery settings across the city and provides ongoing support, training and advice for practitioners working with children with a diverse range of educational, physical and complex needs.'

SUPPORTING NEEDS

Initiatives to identify children with SEN in early years settings are not



new in Brighton and Hove. In fact, the PRESENS team has been operating for more than ten years.

The team of 15 professionals – nine specialist teachers and six specialist nursery nurses – supports between 150 and 200 children aged two to five years at 147 settings across the city, working in partnership with the parents.

Mary Porter, assistant head of PRESENS, says, 'We work with children from all social backgrounds. Some of them have physical disabilities, others are on the autistic spectrum, and some might have speech and language delay or disorder.'

'We work in partnership with the settings. If they have concerns about a child, they will call their allocated PRESENS teacher and – with parent permission – we do an observation of the child. We may suggest a referral to a speech and language therapist and possibly a paediatrician.'

'We ensure that all referrals go through the health visitor, who would visit the parents at home to get a holistic view of what is happening to

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the child. They might then do a Common Assessment Framework and discuss where the needs are.

ON THE GROUND

The PRESENS team makes contact with settings once a term, but when working with a child with complex difficulties the team will visit once a week or fortnightly, depending on the need of the child.

In agreement with the setting, PRESENS decides on a target to meet over the year. The team works with the children in small groups and models strategies for practitioners.

Ms Porter explains, 'If a child has a speech and language delay that is impacting on their learning, we would go into the setting and model a group working on their language, their cognitive ability, attention and listening, and play skills with a group of other children from a setting.'

The team also runs training for practitioners on special needs: how to identify them, how to include children with SEN in settings – which includes the code of practice and

special needs policies – and the role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) in the setting.

There is an on-site provision of PRESENS based at the Jeanne Saunders Centre, an early years specialist assessment centre where staff work with 18 children for two days a week in their final nursery year before starting school.

‘This is for children who need more in-depth multi-disciplinary assessment to inform how best to meet their special educational needs,’ explains Ms Mayhew. ‘Their needs are complex. Some may have autism or genetic disorders or significant medical needs like cerebral palsy, or it might not be clear what their needs are.’

‘They are assessed by a multi-disciplinary team comprising specialist teachers, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and paediatricians to identify their needs and to find out the best ways to support them.’

CHALLENGES

Funding, as for all local authorities, remains a challenge. Children’s services aims to ensure that there is a balance of support across universal, early help and specialist services, but

as financial resources become more limited nationally, Ms Mayhew says that the focus ‘needs to remain on ensuring that appropriate specialist services protect children, while earlier help reduces the number of children requiring such services in future’.

She continues, ‘We have an increased focus on ensuring that resources are used effectively and on the basis of evidence that the support and interventions lead to quantifiable, positive outcomes for children and young people.’

However, Ms Porter says that compared with some other areas of the UK that have been forced to disband their area SENCOs, Brighton and Hove is fortunate to ‘still be in a position to offer a high level of support to our settings’.

She adds, ‘Over the years, due to financial constraints placed on local authorities, we have not been in a position to increase staffing.’

‘Therefore, given that we have extended our support to all settings, the number of settings that each teacher supports has increased per area SENCO.’

Another challenge that impacts on the work of PRESENS is the high turnover of staff in settings. Ms Porter says, ‘We may have built up a good level of practice with a practitioner,



MORE INFORMATION

- *Brighton and Hove Special Educational Needs (SEN) Partnership Strategy 2013-2017*, http://wastelocalplanesc.brighton-hove.gov.uk/downloads/bhcc/special_educational_needs/SEN_Partnership_Strategy_2013-2017.pdf
- *Children and Families Bill 2013*, www.education.gov.uk/a00221161/
- *Pathfinder programme*, www.sendpathfinder.co.uk/thepathfinderprogramme

but when they leave it can mean we have to retrain new staff.

‘The challenge is that practitioners with NVQ Level 2 or 3, or no training, are being asked to take on board the strategies that we as trained teachers use with children with SEN while they are on a lower pay level and work long hours.’

The PRESENS team also manages an Additional Support Funding and Inclusion Grant, provided by Brighton and Hove City Council for children who might need one-to-one support or a special piece of equipment.

Brighton and Hove City Council has used some of the Government funding for two-year-olds to increase PRESENS support to settings so that children who are eligible – those with the most complex of special educational needs – receive additional support within their mainstream setting. The SEN Partnership Strategy also identifies ‘early help’ as a key priority for all services in health, education and social care.

Ms Mayhew says, ‘While this does not refer to the early years per se, it seeks to identify where children and families might need support and interventions. Previously, some of these children without early identification would have gone on to need more costly support.’ ■

CASE STUDY: ONE WORLD NURSERY

Sue Boyle, nursery manager at One World Nursery, a 35-place nursery based at the University of Brighton, has worked with PRESENS since the late 1990s.

She says, ‘We have a named worker who helps us to support children with special educational needs at the setting. They will come in on a weekly or fortnightly basis, depending on the needs of the child. If we have any concerns about a child, this system provides a clear way forward for assessing their needs and seeking guidance from professionals, which is very reassuring. The first port of call is the parents or carers, and with their consent we can take things further and make referrals.’

‘The PRESENS team supports us in many ways.

It provides lots of general information about the provision for children with different needs and more specifically about how and why the assessments are made. In partnership with PRESENS, we are able to pass down the information to parents.

‘The team offers general training and in-house courses on areas such as autism and Makaton sign language, and during PRESENS visits we can review how we have been working with children and gain advice on the next steps. If the team is working with a child and doing small group activities it’s very useful, as we see first-hand how the specialist workers work.’

‘One of the things that impresses us the most is the

way they communicate with the children who may have difficulty in communicating and understanding language. It’s a challenge at times to do what we know we need to do – in terms of keeping our language simple in communicating with these children – because we are in a busy environment with lots going on. But when we watch them in small groups working with the children it is useful to see them in action and it’s a very effective reminder.

‘We are particularly lucky in Brighton and Hove because it’s a small authority and our children’s special educational needs can be responded to in positive, proactive ways. This can be anything from speech and language delay, autism, sensory problems, physical

delay due to underlying issues, and behavioural or attachment issues.

‘One of the main challenges can be getting the parents or carers on board. Raising concerns in the first place is one of the most difficult, sensitive issues to tackle. Very occasionally, we have felt a child could do with some help, but if the parents or carers don’t agree it becomes hard to put support in place.

‘We look at ways to eliminate this and PRESENS gives us strategies on how to go forward. It is great to have a team of professionals on hand for additional support on how to handle difficult situations and how to best integrate children with complex special needs into the mainstream nursery environment.’