

Key points in the green paper: a secondary SENCO's point of view

Gareth D Morewood, director of curriculum support in a large mainstream secondary school in Stockport, considers some of the implications of the green paper from a SENCO's perspective

The SEN and disability green paper sets out the government's case for change; a vision to 'support better life outcomes for young people'. While I might dispute their wholesale view that 'disabled children and children with SEN... can feel frustrated by a lack of the right help at school or from other services' (I can provide several case studies that show very positive outcomes from my nine years as a secondary SENCO) I think few would argue against the fact that 'the system is bureaucratic, bewildering and adversarial...'

It is difficult to argue against the need for an overhaul of the evolved systems of assessment, provision and collaborative working across health, social care and education. How many hours have SENCOs spent writing to local authorities (LAs) explaining that speech and language provision, for example, is as important an educational need as being able to read/write and should be part of the provision in the Statement of SEN? Perhaps proposals to introduce a new 'single plan' for some students will ensure that these issues are addressed and that all relevant interventions are incorporated into a more inclusive provision?

I do fear, however, that the green paper's stance on 'removing the bias towards inclusion' is extremely harmful. A key part of our success at Priestnall School has been taking a strong community stance towards inclusion, stemming from the Salamanca Statement (1994) and current statutory guidance on inclusive education. This does not preclude partnership working; we have a number of students on dual roll with a special school; this practice is seen as a model of good practice by neighbouring LAs who have asked us to support their development of similar provision.

Support staff

For me, it is straightforward: good inclusive practice incorporates teaching, support staff and high quality training (see Morewood, 2009a, 2009b), a view supported in the green paper. We deliver weekly training for all staff (see box, right) and regard this as an essential part of our whole-school inclusive support model.

Restructuring to provide more effective support for young people is a priority for schools, especially in light of recent budget reductions (see Morewood, 2011). Increasing the use of technology, coupled with whole-school training and skill development, reduces the need to have large numbers of support staff and teaching assistants 'velcroed' to students. We don't need a green paper to tell us that preparing all students for adulthood by giving them greater independence has to be a priority.

It is essential we all respond to the consultation, and tell the government what works for us, to try to ensure a well developed and cohesive revision of policy that benefits children with disabilities and SEN

Meeting the challenges

As SENCOs we have never faced such challenges, or had to prepare for such change. Rather than mull over negative aspects of existing provision and engage in spurious debate about what 'might be', I consider this as an opportunity to position ourselves as strongly as possible, as systems and provision face the most radical changes for 30 years.

The green paper states that 'a lack of effective support can undermine family life' and that 'the system needs radical reform'. We as SENCOs need to take the lead with fronting up these challenges. I

am, however, concerned about the inference that lack of support threatens family life. Many of our most challenging young people have difficult family existences anyway, irrespective of the support provided or offered from school.

Single assessment and the new 'plan'

I would agree that a new approach to identifying SEN, the new single assessment process and 'Education, Health and Care Plan', may provide the fresh look at the complex, evolved Statement model; however, with limited specific detail outlined in the green paper it is going to be through the trialling of possible systems from September that we see how this may work in reality.

With a wider role for charities commissioning and coordinating these assessments, I watch with interest to see if these organisations have the capacity and expertise to undertake this role. I also find that some colleagues in the health service and social care do not understand the reality of delivering services in mainstream schools. Perhaps there will be a wider role for the SENCO in advising these 'commissioning agents' as plans develop?

While the green paper suggests that these changes will 'strip away unnecessary bureaucracy so that professionals can innovate and use their judgement; [and] that professionals from different services and the voluntary and community sector can work together and give parents and

Weekly training sessions for all staff

Our weekly training sessions for all staff include:

- Supporting students with autistic spectrum conditions (ASC) in mainstream classrooms.
- Specific guidance and support for students with sensory impairments - strategies for the classroom.
- Supporting students with ADHD - understanding need and developing strategies for support.
- An introduction to specific learning difficulties - identification and strategies for the classroom.
- Understanding attachment - strategies for supporting students in your classroom.
- Developing the inclusive classroom - making your lessons accessible for all.

communities much more influence over local services', I think the need for increased understanding and training across voluntary groups is going to be an area of rapid growth.

Early identification and assessment

Over the last few years we have worked hard to re-engage a number of Year 7 students with complex, unidentified needs. I often wonder what these young people have been doing, let alone what they have been achieving, prior to arriving with us, as their needs are often significantly impairing their ability to access the curriculum. Early identification needs to be better, but it also needs to evolve as young people develop and grow. Not all SEN and/or disabilities are identifiable or even in existence from birth. Anything that reduces the number of Year 7 students with unassessed and complex needs arriving each September can only benefit their life chances; taking most of the first year of secondary schooling to gather evidence and undertake assessments that could have been carried earlier is always a frustration.

Giving parents control

While many SENCOs would agree that parents and carers have an important role in the support and development of those with SEN, some parents are unable to take the lead role the green paper suggests. Parents and carers with their own needs and/or finding it difficult to deal with those of their children may not be in the best position to take over greater responsibility and control over the educational and health provision for their children. The support for these parents and carers, from the voluntary organisations and parent support networks, will be vital if this is to work as part of new policy.

Learning and achieving

While we would all agree that learning and achieving has to be central to educational provision, I fear that the influence of the English Baccalaureate and a drive back to heavily literacy-based subjects for GCSE assessments may remove the well-placed focus on life-long learning skills that the Every Child Matters agenda promoted. The lack of flexibility this new focus provides would appear to increase rather reduce barriers to learning and participation for some of our students.

Preparing for adulthood

I have always placed a strong emphasis on

supporting our students to be as independent as possible; with a focus on skill development in Years 7 and 8; supported by language and communication groups and motor skill sessions, where appropriate. In developing skills early, the opportunity for students to become more independent in the secure setting of familiar surroundings, with the support of teaching and non-teaching staff who know them well, affords a richer model of personal development. This does need to be developed individually; some young people will also continue to need support throughout their secondary schooling and into adulthood.

Services working together for families

All services would say they want the best for the child and most people working within them would say so as well. However, there have been headline-grabbing stories where this simply hasn't been the case. Different systems and procedures were set up to prevent these tragedies happening (ContactPoint, for example). However, these have now been dismantled or will soon cease to exist. So, for services to really work together what needs to change?

My key points for consideration and debate are:

- **A new approach to identifying SEN** – young people have different needs now than 10 years ago (see Petersen, 2010); few could argue against the view that a new approach to 'joining-up' the identification of needs is long overdue. The removal of School Action and School Action Plus should allow for greater school flexibility and remove the 'perverse incentives' associated with numbers of students identified and school performance.
- **A new single assessment process and 'Education, Health and Care Plan'** – a good idea? Proof will be in the trials from September. I see a need for training and development in order to support voluntary organisations and ensure that this single assessment covers the range of needs for the 21st-century child, but also to ensure that developmental needs are assessed and revised.
- **The option of a personal budget by 2014** – this, for me, is one of the most contentious points. Some parents will no doubt be more than capable of finding and securing the best provision for their child; however, for those who are either unable to understand their child's specific needs or have motives that may not be in

the best interests of the young person, I have several reservations.

- **Introduce greater independence to the assessment of children's needs** – how the voluntary and community sector could coordinate assessment will require training and understanding of educational/learning needs. While a significant initial barrier, it could prove, in the long-term, incredibly helpful to parents/carers and to schools to have assessment and monitoring of needs and provision independent of the LA.

While it is important to reflect upon the green paper as a national issue, I feel it is equally important that we as SENCOs consider our own settings, and see how other schools develop provision and make connections between us. It is essential we all respond to the consultation, and tell the government what works for us, to try to ensure a well developed and cohesive revision of policy that benefits children with disabilities and SEN. What we don't need is a new 'blanket approach' that fails to recognise good practice. Although I see positives in the green paper, I regard it as a curate's egg – good in parts!

References

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Gareth D Morewood is director of curriculum support (SENCO) at Priestnall School, Stockport. Gareth works voluntarily supporting parents and carers with SEN legislation and is also a member of the 'senco-forum' advisory group. He has recently had his first eBook published – *The Role of the SENCO: An Insider's Guide* (for further information go to www.optimus-education.com/role-senco-insiders-guide-341).