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START AUDIO

P7: P7and my title is: [anon. ]and I think quite a lot of my job is supporting leadership with schools with the implementation of SEN. So, it’s not particularly about individual children, it’s about in a school, there’s a key person called a SENCO you’re probably aware of, a special needs coordinator and they are responsible, in schools for ensuring the best outcomes for people with SEN. So, a lot of my work is working with the SENCOs and making sure they’re up to date from a LA point of view, tracking outcome reviews across [anon.]. We’re part of meetings at a strategic level, decision making around SEN, unlike some colleauges that are just focused on the statutory end of special educational needs, mine’s much more generic about the needs of all children with SEN, so someone even with a low level of SEN in a mainstream school, it’s about ensuring that we’re putting the support into schools to help them.

**Interviewer: And SENCOs, are they linked to specific schools?**

P7: [7:09] … they need a direct person that links directly into every school, that tends to be why I’m asked to be part of that group and that’s why the local offer, because I’ve got easy contact and networks and facilities for getting all the SENCOs together and disseminating things to them.

Interviewer: On the local offer note then, I started getting involved about a year ago, it was the day after I got a new job, so how did you end up going to those meetings?

P7: I wasn’t involved in the beginning, I wasn’t part of the original group. I think it was when they were starting to see how could they get much more involved with the schools and I was the person to have that obvious link with the SENCOs, I think it was around about the time they realised we were working very closely with the SENCOs for their own school SEN reports and that was when I started coming in really. I was tasked to get schools involved doing that

Interviewer: And did you know like [anon. ] and everyone before that?

P7: Yeah. Well I certainly knew [anon. ] and [anon.], most of them. [anon.] I knew from her work. But, yeah I was just asked to join it because they felt I would be a useful addition to the group.

Interviewer: Do you remember when you first heard about the Local Offer as a notion?

P7: Quite a while ago. Yeah it would be through, as all the SEN reforms were evolving, because there was some confusion for schools because they were calling, going back probably two or three years ago, they were calling it a schools local offer.

Interviewer: Oh really, oh wow

P7: And a local offer, and that caused huge confusion because then they called it, they changed in the final legislation that came out, code of practice, the school SEN information report, but originally that was called the schools local offer.

Interviewer: Okay and what was the difference between, obviously one is specifically focused on school but did they have different remits?

P7: Well I think the school one is very much what are we doing in school, what is our offer to parents, to families? What’s unique that we are doing for children with SEN above and beyond what they would do with any teacher. So it’s really sort of promoting what so we do for SEN in our school and that has to be on their website. So that’s vey much at a school level but that had to link in to the local offer…

Interviewer: The local offer word it’s a bit ambiguous

P7: It doesn’t mean a lot

Interviewer: So, when you first started getting involved in the group, were there certain responsibilities that you had over others?

P7: How honest do you want be to be?

Interviewer: You can be as honest as you want, I’m sharing people’s interviews back with them, so you can say that bit I said there…

P7: No, it’s fine, I think, I don’t know if you can remember but I had a bit of a battle when I first started that group, because I think there a perception, maybe of the parents and a couple of other people in the group that schools weren’t really doing what they should be doing and I sort of felt I was standing fighting the corner for SENCOs and schools. It changed and it evolved, it’s perceptions and understanding, but I almost felt I was there representing the SENCOs and the school as much as I was a local authority representative.

Interviewer: So you kind of often defended the schools? I remember, maybe I think I must have come in a little while after you. And I remember there was things around some schools, they were seen to, if they had engaged it would be quite generic text.

P7: But, again that was part of my bugbear and now this probably answers your previous question, the local offer workgroup had wanted, there was a big regional meeting and as a region they decided they wanted a particular pro forma used for schools SEN information reports and set out in a certain way

Interviewer: Was this across the region?

P7: Across the region, everybody agreed to it but that was a working group, that was [anon. ] that was part of that group, so [anon. ] had met with myself and my colleague [anon.]who was the SEN consultant to say, ‘Can you just take this to schools and ask them to fill it in and delete things that they didn’t do?’ So, it was almost like a menu of, ‘We do this, this and this, delete highlight.’ And we looked at it and said, ‘You can’t just hand that to schools like that.’ So we agreed that we would do some work with schools, taking that pro forma to actually make it a bit more fit for purpose. And that’s what we did, we brought it back to the group, the group agreed that, that was the right thing to do because what they wanted was some standardisation. So, if a parent went into one primary school and then another primary school the format would be similar, so they knew where to find things. So we actually took that remit and worked with the schools to produce example ones and then the group didn’t like it because it was too uniform and it was too the same and I kept saying, ‘But I took that from what you’d asked me to do.’ So there was a bit of conflict there. So, it was if we had just given the original tick list and just sort of crossed things out, it would have looked even worse.

Interviewer: That’s interesting isn’t it, because the local offer is intending to be this space where people, there seems to be an issue of how legible is the information or how comparable versus making sure that places can be specified

P7: And the other thing is, like anything, it probably will look very different in two or three years time. This was a first go, schools had never had to do SEN information reports. The local authority had never had to do a local offer. So, everybody was learning, so I think some of it might just have been personalities in the group as well. But, you know, we had deadlines to hit. Every school had to have their SEN information report by September 14th and linked to the local offer, so there’s also a bit of pressure of deadlines as well isn’t there? To get it up, get it running and then revise it and look at it again.

Interviewer: Were all the deadlines met?

P7: Virtually, there was one or two exceptions but there was a lot of work went on behind the scenes: phone calls to schools, emails. It wasn’t just about the SEN information it was actually about links to the local offer

Interviewer: And how did that play our then, was it a case that the pro forma happened in the end?

P7: What actually happened was we had a working group with about 8 schools, primary and secondary, who had a go with that pro forma, modified it, brought it back the group and we had a big conference in June 2014 and the whole focus was on the SEN reforms and local offer was part of that and the schools that had been part of the working group shared their model examples of SEN information reports at the conference with the caveat, ‘Well, this is just our go at it, take it, use it if it’s helpful.’ So, they were given to schools which that was quite helpful I think and then obviously it was a case of just keep checking, speaking to people like [anon.], ‘Have they sent the information through to you?’ And you know lots of emails back and forward.

[break 14:40]

P7: [16:57] If I’m being honest I worried that it would just become another directory, which it is probably in danger of becoming, it’s very hard to get something that’s live and interactive and I know there’s all the feedback bits to it. On my own real job it probably won’t impact that much other than I know to signpost people there. One good thing it has done for us, we had a virtual platform within the local authority and we had our own SEN platform and all paperwork, documentation, you know referrals, anything the schools wanted round SEN was in this one place and that is nor longer in existence from the end of March. So, the local offer is…

Interviewer: March just gone?

P7: Yeah. So we’re just working on something called a SENCO guide where we can put everything in one place and all linked together and so the guide itself is only 20 pages but it’s hyper linked to all sorts of documentation. Now that’s going to sit on the local offer from September which means that will help SENCOs find things in one place, but it will also help them use the local offer. So, from our point of view, in that respect, the local offer is really helpful, it’s replacing something tha’;s no longer there.

[break 18:10]

Interviewer: [22:03] What are your thoughts in the role of feedback in there so far?

P7: If I’m being honest, I probably don’t know that, I would say that would sit with somebody like [anon.]. I mean I’m aware that when I go on the local offer, and I don’t use it that much but I do use it, I do dip into it for things, I’m aware that there is a button and it’s quite clear, ‘Are there any comments, have you found what you are looking for,’ kind of thing. So I would imagine if people didn’t that they may well respond to that, but I don’t know what the uptake is. I know [anon.] probably got things like the number of hits and how man people are using it.

Interviewer: What would that feedback mean from the SENCO’s point of view? I know that some of the other local authorities have done a sort of rating and review type of approach, like a Trip Advisor sort of model?

P7: They were talking about that and that was discussed and it was decided not to do that

[break 23:33]

Interviewer: What would be useful for schools to know from parents or even young people in terms of their experiences of services? How could the local offer support that?

P7: This is just my thoughts, my perceptions. I think busy SENCOs in schools will be concerned about their own young people and the parents and they probably just deal with things on an individual basis rather than thinking big local offer. I’m not sure how significant the local offer probably is in the scale of thinking about the work we do with SENCOs. It’s a tool, I would say they would see it a tool there. I can’t speak for them but this is my perception, it is a tool there, it’s useful, everything is in one place, but in the scale and across their role as a SENCO it’s probably a very, very minor part of their role.

Interviewer: Is that because of the enormity?

P7: It’s the fact of everything else they’ve got to do and you know, they are so accountable for outcomes, progress, having review meetings involving parents and part of review meetings could well be to signpost the local offer, I’m not saying they wouldn’t refer to it. But as in getting beneath the surface of it and worrying about how it’s operating and feedback, I’d be surprised. But, I’d be very happy to bring that up at the network as a question.

[break 25:27]

P7: [26:37] I think it doesn’t sit on anybody’s area of responsibility, including myself, so we are all so busy doing everything else so that the people who are round the table who are in that group. You know, [anon. ]’s left, he’s gone to another authority, [anon. ]’s took on extra responsibility, all of the people around that group, it didn’t sit on anyone. [anon. ] was the chair of that group and then he left and [anon.]’s going, so it needs to be brought back to the focus and somebody named for keeping it going and keeping it moving forward.

Interviewer: It was interesting at the meeting when they put together the new hierarchy of the SEND groups and they had a local offer group and it was task and finish?

P7: I think the thinking was, setting it up, it was done, but it isn’t really is it, it’s got to be moving forward and evolving.

Interviewer: Is that a common issue with a LA?

P7: Yes

Interviewer: Is that like a budget thing?

P7: It’s probably like everywhere else, it’s capacity, it’s absolutely capacity, I think there’s people sat round the table at SEN managers last week and we did say, ‘local offer, there’s no group,’ so it is on our radar occasionally and then everything else gets on your agenda and on your radar

Interviewer: You only see as far as tomorrow, it’s a shame.

[break 28:38]

P7: There will be a framework for assessment, based on outcomes there’s a limited pot of money it’s about making the most effective use of resources and having a real attempt to improve those services, but I don’t know that in a way the local offer would have any impact on those reviews which are commissioning of big services.

 You would only be able to change commissioning on feedback if you generated enough for commissioning being involved, that wouldn’t trigger something major happening. It would only be if you had a significant number of hits. But who is looking at that to pass on to who?

 The aim of having commissioning you need a lot of people feeding back

 Not needed in schools because the parents would go straight to the school and talk about it

 There was a lack of engagement with young people from the start.