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START AUDIO

**Interviewer: Just for the recording are you okay to quickly introduce yourself and say a little bit about what you do?**

Respondent: My name is [anon.], my background is as a teacher and a teacher of children with special educational needs. I worked in schools as a special needs coordinator and then I worked for the local authority as a specialist teacher before I came into this role which was then a Parent Partnership officer. My duty was to provide information, advice and support to parents and carers of children and young people with special educational needs. Since the Children and Families Act it has now become [anon.] Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information, Advice and Support Service with a remit extended to a separate service for young people and for children.

**Interviewer: It is still within the council even though you are not physically…?**

Respondent: It is a council funded post. It is supposed to be run at arm’s length, in order to do that we are located at [anon.] fully accessible building and it is within the community. I always tell parents, “The local authority pay me to work for you.” I also say if they are not ringing me I am sitting at my desk drinking coffee and eating cream cakes.

**Interviewer: Excellent.**

Respondent: Most of them believe that.

**Interviewer**: **I imagine every day is quite different, but what sorts of things do you do in your daily work, what does that it involve?**

Respondent: There is a lot of time spent accompanying parents to meetings where that meeting is difficult either with the school or the local authority. The key part of the job really is to answer the phone, to try and distil from what people are saying to me what has happened, what their options are, to put their options to them and to enable them to be empowered enough to make an appropriate decision about how they choose to move forward.

**Interviewer: Is that to do with specific incidents or could it be about, I am just interested in trying to make sense of this, planning as well or is it about transitions in certain periods?**

Respondent: It is a balance of both really. Some of it is, “This has happened at school and I am really unhappy about it.” That would be relating to the child’s special needs and the delivery of that rather than an incident that might be slightly different. Some of it is structural, “I don’t think my child is doing very well at this school. They have got a diagnosis of this, that and the other what other provisions are there for them and what is the pathway that we would follow to go through that?” Then we would just be on the end of the phone at any point that people wanted to come back to us for that.

We take every phone call as a separate piece of work. Once the call has been recorded it will either give an action which will be something I will do. Or it will say, ‘None’. There is never any ambiguity about whether that case is… We don’t run cases, we couldn’t run cases there are far too many callers for that to be the case, so we run everything as an activity and a response.

**Interviewer: Are you working with a team of other people as well who are doing the same role?**

Respondent: Across the region?

**Interviewer: Yes.**

Respondent: Every local authority has to have this type of service, so I have regional colleagues, I have some admin support and I have a team of volunteers. Those volunteers are retired people, so I don’t have four people nine to five. I have people who I may call who may or may not be having coffee with their friends in Fenwick’s. That is about the size of it.

At the moment unfortunately two of them are unwell and undergoing treatment. One of them has just given up volunteering to concentrate on his lecturing and the other one is now working almost full-time for Northumberland delivering education as an outreach to excluded pupils, so the capacity of the service is very limited. The extent of the service is to address the needs of any parent or child who comes to us with a need or with a perceived need.

**Interviewer: Wow, it sounds like you have got a lot on your plate all the time.**

Respondent: But nothing is more stimulating than a job like this. It is like a time TARDIS, you come in and before you know it you think, “Gosh, I haven’t had lunch yet and it is three o’clock.”

**Interviewer: So the Local Offer, how did you initially get involved in that bit of work? I know it sounds like it could seem quite obvious why you would be.**

Respondent: I would have been involved right from the start but the trouble is when they set up the working groups obviously there were a number of working groups and you can’t be on everything. The whole of the reform is about my world and my work. I was very keen that [anon.] became involved from…

**Interviewer: From [anon.].**

Respondent: Yes, from the same sort of perspectives that I would really, protecting the interests of families. For me the Local Offer is all there is for those families of children and young people who don’t have a plan. The plans were only ever destined to be for 2% or 3% at the most in [anon.]. You never had 2% statements, so that threshold is really quite high.

Then you have got all of those young people who won’t meet that criteria with a significant level of need. Unless the Local Offer is there and services are coming in and agencies are looking at the Local Offer and thinking, “We could deliver something here or we could deliver something there.” There will be no services for these children who have significant levels of need.

**Interviewer: It is kind of like where there are shades of grey supporting those people that are in a middle zone.**

Respondent: I think it is difficult isn’t it. If you think about a young person who has got a diagnosis of Asperger’s, they wouldn’t diagnose Asperger’s now but has that type of characteristic. An autism spectrum disorder very able, but those other things don’t come with it necessarily. So they may be very able but they may have extreme difficulty in terms of accessing life socially. They may have extreme difficulty in terms of displaying their intellect in a way that suits our education system. But they would never have a statement of special educational needs. They would never have an education, health and care plan because there isn’t that perceived level of need. Yet they have a 24/7 level of need, so we have to have services.

I would say those young people are the young people who could grow up and have massively unsuccessful lives. Who could be victimised within their communities, who could possibly never attain independence from their parents. Whatever scenario you create there is a chance for that to go really badly wrong. There are ways of us protecting that by enabling them to access those things that are out there and discovering how normal it is not to be quite like everybody else.

**Interviewer: In that case in terms of what would be contained in a Local Offer what type of themes would you be envisaging? It sounds like it is not just specific services for particular groups of people but a wide range of things.**

Respondent: I think it is a combination of a wide range of things. I would like to see ordinary things publicised on there where you are looking at something that it may be an interest. So say again you have got that young person they might be really interested in the Scouting movement. The Scouting movement should be on there because it is accessible and it sets out to be accessible. I don’t know if we still have the Access Fund, are you aware of the Access Fund?

**Interviewer: I was a few years ago, I don’t know whether…**

Respondent: I am not sure it is still there, but it was money set aside to enable community resources to be available to groups who may not otherwise access. It is about that whole inclusion thing and that is what the Local Offer is about for me. It is about everything from the specialist end of service right down. Also opening up those specialist end services so that instead of somebody saying, “If you had one more point you could qualify for this service, but actually that service is restricted to people who qualify.” If you have got enough money yourself to fund that why shouldn’t that be open to you? It is about opening everything up and providing the maximum amount of choice and the maximum amount of availability to as many people as possible.

**Interviewer: So you were very engaged with the idea of what the Local Offer could actually provide.**

Respondent: Yes.

**Interviewer: You said it was a bit later than the actual group being set together, how did you come about getting involved?**

Respondent: It was just because I got to the point where I felt it is time I was involved in this now. It is like that. There wasn’t time for me to be involved in all of the groups on top of the day to day job. There still isn’t time for me to be involved in anything on top of the day to day job. There are certain things you have to do or you can’t guarantee. It was just before you guys became involved and I think it was becoming apparent that the missing link was schools. I have been very in touch with the process through [anon.] even when I wasn’t involved. I began to feel do you know what schools is where we are not quite getting it right and we have still got a problem with that.

**Interviewer: Do you want to say what you mean by not getting it right a little bit more, as much as you want to anyway.**

Respondent: Schools are very good at telling you what makes sense to them in the way that it makes sense to them. They are less good at telling you what you might want to know in a way that enables you to make choices about whether they are the right place for your child or not. I know it is something that [anon. ]has talked about quite passionately at the meetings is that when you are looking for a school it shouldn’t be any more difficult than looking for a washing machine. You ought to be able to say, “This is the size and shape I want. These are the attributes I want, I can find them here and I can find them here, let’s have a look at these. This is local to me, this is less local to me. This is smaller and this is larger.” You know and make appropriate choices.

Whereas the way that information from schools is currently presented it is almost impossible to make an informed choice because you are bombarded by each individual with a whole heap of very useful information. But it has no correlation to the very useful information the school down the road is providing, very difficult to weigh up the two. It is because of the perspectives, the schools’ perspective is, “This is how we do it. We are going to tell the world about how we do it.” Not looking at themselves potentially as a consumer.

 There is a weight in numbers thing that makes it difficult for larger organisations to look at the needs of the few, because we are talking about a few, 20% of children are perceived to have throughout their school career. Already we have got 80% who are just going to come in because they live down the road or the child-minder lives there or whatever and drift on the way through. Then of that 20% another 15% are probably going to be fine almost all the time about everything. We are talking about a really small number.

Then the top 2% will have statements or education health care plans so their placement is guaranteed and considered elsewhere, so that is not a problem. If we are just looking at 3% of our population who need to look more closely at what we offer that is an awful lot of work for us to arrange all of our information so that those 3% can compare us with other people. If they don’t want us they can go somewhere else. It is a large organisation mentality isn’t it?

**Interviewer: Yes, it is interesting because they were having similar conversations with others around what is the responsibility of an organisation to put out that information. It is also releasing some control as well because giving up information is allowing other people to make decisions rather than telling them this is the option. It is a very tricky thing to negotiate.**

Respondent: You are right it is very subtle isn’t it. I suppose right from the word go this has always been an empowering organisation. There isn’t the capacity to have cases, look after them and run them and be nice to people and arrive at decisions about their child with them and support them in that. That is the sort of social work type role, so that is not what this about. This about real empowerment and it is very subtle.

Once or twice we have had people quite upset that we didn’t tell people who they felt weren’t in positions to make decisions what decisions they should be making. I am yet to meet a person who can’t make a decision. All you require is an appropriate framework and the appropriate information as you say to be able to make that decision.

**Interviewer: When you first came to be involved in the Local Offer group was there a feeling that schools were not being engaged or schools were struggling to make their information available?**

Respondent: Part of the problem wasn’t the schools themselves, part of the problem was the way the government handled the whole reforms bit. Initially they said, “It will be a Local Offer.” Then it wasn’t going to be a Local Offer it was going to be a schools information bit. So schools were a little bit confused, but they weren’t aware of the changes of law. They weren’t aware of how that change in law was going to affect them so they needed to be told. Schools are very autonomous places and they don’t like to be told.

**Interviewer: By central government anyway or by anyone?**

Respondent: I would say they don’t like to be told by anybody, central government they sort of know they have to do it. You will find a lot of people in schools who don’t understand… I would challenge you to find anyone in school who understood the Education Act and what it said in its entirety. I am sure those bits that relate to exclusions or possibly admissions or whatever schools would have a really good handle on. There will be other things in there that they are not aware of at all and they may well be non-compliant.

**Interviewer: Do you think part of the issue with the Local Offer was an issue to do with compliance then?**

Respondent: I think there is an issue to do with compliance and people understanding what that is. But again it is something this role has taught me that a lot of the time I will know something, I will know what the law says. It is not really my job to tell people and if I want them to implement what they are not implementing I have got to think about the best way for them to discover that as a reality. It is about firing shots across people’s bows and that is where [anon.] came in really was to fire a shot across the bows of schools just to say, “I don’t know if you are aware but this is… Can we all look at how to do it and we will put a group together to give you some recommendations to make it feel a little bit more comfortable about moving forward.”

**Interviewer: Was [anon.] involved before you came along or did you bring [anon.] in?**

Respondent: I think she came as a recommendation from the group two or three meetings in. We felt that we needed her because nobody else was in a position where they could actually have those conversations with schools to start to say, “How are you getting on with this?”

**Interviewer: In the group meetings but also in-between meetings when you are going off and I imagine having conversations with people about the Local Offer anyway. First of all how did you feel as though it would impact people’s lives, how you talked about it and how people responded? Also what was it you were trying to do? Were you helping gain awareness or what did you see your role being?**

Respondent: For me it was very much awareness raising on every level. I want awareness in the community of what is out there and what is on offer so that people can avail themselves of everything that is on offer. We have done quite a lot of talking with organisations about, “You might want to consider…” As a regional group we get quite a lot of people want to come and talk to us about this new school life setup that whatever, whatever, whatever from the private sector voluntary organisations.

It is very much saying to them it is going to be very interesting to look at the Local Offer and see where the gaps are in services provided in order that people will then identify those gaps and start to provide the services that are missing. Particularly in the current climate where in our area there is a lot of contraction of services. I suppose naively I had sort of felt that was more reflected country-wide than it has been. I was quite surprised with the election result that the region seems to be so much out of step with everywhere else. If you then look again at how the cuts have implemented on major cities you interpret those results in a completely different way.

**Interviewer: Is [anon.] and the North East significantly different then in terms of third parties taking on board formal services, is that right?**

Respondent: I think what has happened is our core funding for local authorities has been hit for so many years. I think it is seven years now going back that we have taken major hits to that budget year on year on year. The local authority looks nothing like the local authority used to look. It has had to think very carefully about those services it continues to provide and will continue to provide. Part of what has happened is there has obviously been a contraction.

Some things that continue to have to be provided they have looked to source from other organisations. Particularly services like this where capacity-wise I don’t know what today will bring. I could have three phone calls or I could have 30, I never know. For services like that if somebody else is taking that risk so the capacity is always there you don’t have to worry about it because you have bought a level of capacity. That is quite different to running an organisation where you have got to employ those people, pay them sick pay and think about what you do when they are on maternity leave.

Yes, we have seen a growth in services being provided but there is still a tangible link between those services and local authority money. It will be interesting to see what happens over the next three years when we continue to have cuts and that possibly ceases to be the case. Whether part of the new government philosophy will be that monies are available but only available to voluntary organisations in order to provide.

The other thing is I think there is very little understanding of the third sector. There is very little understanding of voluntary organisations. I am housed in a voluntary organisation. Over the last couple of years it is a much healthier organisation than it was previously.

**Interviewer: Oh really?**

Respondent: Three years ago we were that close to the charity not running. You need to understand that vulnerability, [anon.] lives with that vulnerability. But if those are our service providers once you are gone you are gone. If you have got big lottery money for three years to do something they are not going to fund you for year four. So where is your funding for year four going to be if it is something that is core?

**Interviewer: What changed in the context of [anon.] then?**

Respondent: It has been very effective management. We currently have a chief exec who is very proactive and has looked at all of the areas to secure the charity and secure the work.

**Interviewer: It is amazing though because I never thought about the idea that with voluntary organisations, which might be the organisations you want to be running certain types of services.**

Respondent: Absolutely.

**Interviewer: But they are always in this uncertain moment. Three years might be a very long time for some voluntary organisations, some are working on days, weeks, months. They are actually supplying core services, so that is a massive issue.**

Respondent: It is a massive issue. You have got to be able to earn your own wage before you do anything else. At [anon.] next door there is an informations officer next door at Contact a Family and a development worker. The development worker is down to four days a week now because they are in-between bits of funding, they have only got enough to do that. Some of that time she is commissioned to do this piece of work with this organisation and this piece of work with that council, this piece of work for her part of the organisation which is funded through a different stream. The money for the informations officer comes through a different thread and that will be up in another year’s time.

That is the world they are living in. You can’t just do the day job you have to make sure you have got that resilience there, so huge challenges to being part of that. I think the local authority is quite blasé because local authorities live with the thought it is a job for life and this work is just not like that.

**Interviewer: Thinking about the Local Offer then what do you think the relationship is between supporting these sorts of organisations and the Local Offer, what is its role in that?**

Respondent: I think the difficulty is that to people looking at the Local Offer they might assume that these things are out there and will always be. I think without upsetting people it would nice to be able to reflect in some way that these are shifting sands. Somebody might be running a project for raising self-esteem for 12 year olds because they have got some money to do that, but that money will be time limited and once it is gone it is not a gap. So it might disappear for a while and then three years down the line there will be another targeted bit of funding. As money becomes available the charities are right there looking at what is the money being funded for. We are not actually being user driven and it is about using that facility within the Local Offer and the requirement to respond to what the user requires.

An organisation like [anon.] has always been successful because they have always looked at what their user requirement is and they have always reflected their user requirement. You have got to make sure the Local Offer is the mechanism we use to capture that voice and to persuade those people who are funding where that funding should go to. If we don’t we will have an absolute patchwork of nonsense. The trouble is you might not be able to get a service you require because you live two doors down or you are one year too old. There is no rationale behind that which is acceptable really.

**Interviewer: I guess that is an interesting point because one of the biggest requirements is this idea that the Local Offer will support the identification of gaps you mentioned earlier and seeing where new services need to be provided. But how can it be user led? How would users feed into the service, have you had any sense of how that might happen or how it has happened so far?**

Respondent: It is possible on the Local Offer to send anything you like at the moment in terms of feedback. It was a bit like you were saying before Andy that you have got to know what it is that would help you before you can ask for it. If you already know it doesn’t exist do you ask for it? Part of it is about engagement. I think in one respect we have really got it right with moving forward with Local Offer champions. Local Offer champions is a fantastic way forward because you can say to people, “Not only is this out there and you can interrogate it yourself but you might get more out of that experience if you work with…”

That is another way in which schools really need to be encouraged to take up the baton. Within each school you should have a Local Offer champion, someone you can spend a little bit of time with to get a really good experience. We all know what it is like trawling the net, how many of us trawl the net every night just for fun? How purposeful is that? But if you are looking for something with somebody who is skilled, 20 minutes and you have got your answers. You might not have made your decisions but you have got your answers.

I think actually getting people to become far more ownership driven with it that is probably the way forward for me so we have communities of people who have had a positive experience because there are still issues with locating things. If you look for my service it is very difficult to find it by putting in information, advice and support. When you go into the area which says information, advice and support we are not on the same page every time. Often we are on page seven and I have lost the will to live before I get there. I know I exist, what if you were looking for me and you didn’t know I existed?

**Interviewer: We are here now. (Laughter)**

Respondent: You should be able to land on information providers whose job it is to do that thing. Then you should be able to pick and dissect from within. Going back to what I was saying before about getting a good experience out of it, it is about those Local Offer champions working to do that. It is also about looking at another stage which is how we are going to address what is missing and what do we want? Do we do that through focus groups? Do we do that through user groups? Do we do that through people working with Local Offer champions? Do Local Offer champions meet together and say, “I was really frustrated because we were looking for this.” We need to beef up that feedback sense. It is one step further and nobody has got enough time to do it, but if we don’t do it we won’t have good service.

**Interviewer: It is interesting because you are picking up a point there about how the Local Offer is more than a website, which sometimes can be forgotten. Actually there is a lot of people involved and there is a lot of stuff to do around the website, it is a mentality. I don’t know if you have any specific thoughts about that? [Phone rings 0:29:03] Do you want to…?**

Respondent: We will just let ring.

**Interviewer: Are you sure?**

Respondent: I can’t take it because I could be here an hour.

**Interviewer: The idea that this is something which requires groups to meet, to talk about and to define topics going forward or to define changes. I have felt a few times not within the group but certainly how other people have interpreted Local Offer that is a list of things and it is a website that people can go to and the website will be there. We talked with [anon.] yesterday how it was seen to be a task and finish sort of activity by the council and how it won’t be finished because the idea it is meant to be feeding and dynamic. I don’t know whether you have come across similar challenges in the conversation you have had with people?**

Respondent: I think we are going to have to fight that corner. Clearly from the local authority’s perspective it is a list of jobs to do. They are signed up to the ethos but the actual working out happens somewhere between grass roots and the hierarchy. It is something we are going to have to fight. When we first talked about the Local Offer and how it had to be interactive and more than a database I sort of thought, “That is never going to work.” But then when you change your perspective and think, “Who are these people?” There are so many people who are providing information, advice and support out there all across the city in a variety of different ways. If all of those people were Local Offer champions then that is a door open to everybody.

The knowledge that we have because of our interactions with the public, it is immense, so we could make best use. We could drive and we could use all of that information to feed back in an appropriate way. If we do we will have a quality product and if we don’t we will not have a quality product because it cannot survive without that feedback. The minute it ceases to be good it will be poorly used and poorly rated. The less well used and the less well rated it is it will diminish, it is not going to develop. It is about pushing that agenda now and looking at those things.

It does sit very comfortably with what we are doing. As an organisation rather than just rebranding Parent Partnership as SND Information, Advice and Support what we have tried to do is enable the city council their appropriate ownership of it as a service and the over reach and over arch of the service. The service is not just for education it is also for social care, for health and for other related issues related to those special educational needs.

We now have another group meeting on a task and finish basis, which clearly it won’t be. To set up how existing successful organisations who have always worked together in an informal way can formalise those links in order to be this defined service that the act is requiring us to be. In line with that we are now extending to a whole family of people who are signing up in a sense to some sort of agreement as to how we will function and how we will deliver and local Offer championing has got to be part of that. I would like to see it to be part of the feedback process as well.

**Interviewer: In a sense one of the biggest challenges is how do you capture that feedback and how do you present it back. There has always been this assumption that people would post feedback at some point. I know when I first started in the group there was an idea around rating review services like a Trip Advisor and people got a bit uncomfortable with that idea. But actually a champion acting as an intermediary might be a sensible way forward.**

Respondent: It provides that level of moderation. Focus groups are always really useful for things like that and there will always be people who are very interested in more. When you talk to people on the phone depending on where they are in the process and how empowered they feel sometimes they do want to change things and want to say, “Well I don’t think that is fair.” It is enabling people to have that voice to say, “I quite agree it is right that you should have a voice, why don’t you?” If you catch people at that moment they will.

**Interviewer: Local Offer champions, you brought those up. We haven’t talked about them much with the other people I have met, were you quite involved with establishing the Local Offer champions idea?**

Respondent: I haven’t done anything about that, no. I think we had all agreed right from the word go that it was the way forward.

**Interviewer: Who are the champions, do you know?**

Respondent: There are loads and loads, [anon.] will tell you how many she has trained now. She has held loads of sessions and they are open to people. She is encouraging more and more people to benefit from that. It is quite interesting because [anon.] who does the admin here she does all of my research stuff behind the phone calls. I will be on the phone waving to her, throwing notes at her and sending her emails. She will be finding bits of information for me while I am having a conversation with somebody.

She felt because of her knowledge, this is our world, because of her knowledge it would be a waste of time. When I said to her, “Oh go along.” “I won’t learn anything.” I said, “That is fine, it doesn’t matter if you don’t learn anything the person sitting next to you is going to learn loads aren’t they.” She went and she came back and said, “I learned loads.” That is fab isn’t it? It is a really good experience. I don’t think there is anyone who couldn’t learn something by doing it. We do still have in the city we had a massive amount of parent support advisors in school. We were really well sorted and then of course it was only funded for a limited period and you are supposed to embed that but it didn’t really happen. Some people have retained those roles and those people most definitely ought to have this information at their fingertips.

I get phone calls from people asking me the simplest of questions about those sorts of things, professionals asking me the simplest things, “What is there out there for…?” Now I have decided I will bite my tongue, try not to tell them and try to say, “Actually you will find that information on the Local Offer.” Then I will give them little hints of things that I want them to look for but just enough to whet their appetite. I think unless we encourage people to do things they won’t do them. If we do encourage them like Sue they will go, “Oh wow.”

**Interviewer: Do you ever think the Local Offer could replace people in that regard?**

Respondent: Absolutely not. I think that is another thing we are struggling with, wrestling with rather than struggling with. In terms of looking at the information, advice and support is we are trying to map and categorise. [anon.] will tell you she has developed a nice matrix for us. Within each area I think she has given it one to four on what it is you are doing with people in terms of giving information, advice and support. In some areas I might give information, so about health I can give some very basic information about health particularly about mental health services that because that is the bit that my client base interface with the most. When it comes to support and mediation and those type of things where I am very involved within education I do none of that within health because there are other people who do that in health.

We have talked in that group about some people need a little piece a little of information and they go away. Some people need a little bit of information and a little bit of support and then they feel empowered and they then carry on. Other people need to know they will never have to go somewhere like that on their own, “I never want to go to a meeting in the Civic Centre on my own. I never want to go to a meeting at that school on my own.” That is fine, you can’t replace people with good information. Information and support are completely different things.

**Interviewer: That is interesting because that is another fear that I have. These questions some of them are very leading, but it is because we have been involved for so long. A fear that I have is you can see the technology as a replacement for the people. The information is out there and once the information is there then why do we need the wider support because people would be able to make decisions. I think it is always important to remind ourselves there is a lot of critical work in joining those dots and sometimes people do not feel empowered by information it is being with someone.**

Respondent: It is providing a framework within which people can arrive at a decision. We do quite a lot of work with people who need to look at what school their child should go to. Not just secondary transfer but should it be an additionally resourced centre, should it be a special school, what should it be? People can go and gather an awful lot of information, but if they don’t have a mechanism for recording it then making those comparisons can be very difficult, coming up with any conclusion and then communicating that to somebody else.

What we try to do is provide a framework for people to think. Even in terms of writing things about your child we always say to people, “If you are going to write something that you want other people to read about what you think your child’s needs are and what your experience to date has been.” We suggest they go away and they write it in isolation on their own in a quiet time and they put it down and they don’t look at it for a week. Then they come back to it and fiddle about with it and then they show it somebody else who knows the child, then they work on it. Then they let somebody who doesn’t really have that level of understanding read it because they will say, “I am not sure what you mean, what do you mean bedtimes are a nightmare? What does that mean? It means something different to everybody give me an example, show me.”

You are taking something which is like throwing a net around a cloud and then you are saying you can slice it up and you can do this bit and you can do this bit. It is about providing mechanisms whereby people can. You are not doing anything for them you are just providing a mechanism whereby they can do things for themselves in a really effective and empowering way. You never replace that with a piece of information.

**Interviewer: It seems almost like a process that people can go through.**

Respondent: Yes, but I think there are processes and I think if you have a disabled child some people go through a process and other people get stuck at various points in the process. There is always a level of acceptance or [railing 0:40:51] or whatever and we are all entitled to do that. Enabling you to engage with those people who are expecting decisions from you that is really important.

**Interviewer: Going forward a little bit then and we touched on this before another key aspect of the Local Offer is it is meant to be feeding into the commissioning of new services, we talked about gaps before. It was an interesting idea you talked around how the champions might actually be helping that. What do you think** **about the realities of that in terms of commissioning new services provided by the council or the reality of voluntary [epi-sector 0:41:35] organisations using the Local Offer as a way of going, “Actually no one is doing this here.” What do you think how possible that is?**

Respondent: It is a bit of a missing link. The government have set up the Local Offer and they have set an expectation of how it would be used. Where is the opening to government for that feedback to go to? Ultimately it is government policy that determines where the money is going to go whether it is through a local authority, which I very much doubt would be the case or whether it is directly to voluntary organisations. The bodies of money that are set up very often are around things that are in line with government policy.

I don’t think we are in a powerful position at all in terms of doing that. If people want to say, “We need a different sort of respite and we need it more often.” The local authority would say, “We don’t have that service, we can’t commission that service, we haven’t got any money to do that. Anyway we don’t have a body of evidence that says that is what people want.” The Local Offer has the capacity to make your one voice part of many rather than everybody hearing that feedback in isolation and giving up. It does have the capacity to make a sound, but that sound has got to be heard and that is the bit I am not so very sure about.

**Interviewer: Do you think there are any strategies we could think about for moving that more positively forward or is it a little bit…?**

Respondent: I don’t know, I don’t give up easily but I haven’t been thinking about that. I do think there needs to be challenge to government. I think there needs to be feedback on the reforms. I think at the moment it is very much driven by… And I am not really critical of this because I think it is the first time they have really done it. The department have been out and looked at local authorities and said, “How are you getting on with your SND reforms? We are not very happy about this we are going to come back and see you again.” At the same time as they have asked people to reflect on their own practice they have asked the parent carer forums what the practice was like as well. So they have started to capture, but then it is very restricted to what we have asked you to do.

Whereas I think there is a point that those tables have to turn and we have to say, “Do you know what we have done these things and this is what we are finding. We have got nowhere to go with this, so what is your response because this is what you asked us to do?” We do have to reflect back. There is always a danger of becoming too much of a sponge. I am quite happy to be a sponge for the emotional things that go on with clients to take the emotion out of things and whatever. I am never going to be a sponge to soak up the issue and say, “Oh no we won’t ask about that because there isn’t anything.” We will always ask somebody and bat it up, don’t bat it down.

**Interviewer: It is almost like there is a lack of accountability.**

Respondent: Accountability is always a problem isn’t it?

**Interviewer: Yes, they frame it they are going to listen to these things but in reality what does that actually mean?**

Respondent: We have asked to reflect on and we have been asked to feedback on what people are saying and what people are wanting. Okay then, to what end? What are you going to do about it? Because otherwise it becomes meaningless doesn’t it.

**Interviewer: Yes, what do you think the biggest challenge is going to be going forward for Local Offer kind of might be related to this?**

Respondent: I think there are a number of challenges. I think what we have got to do is have Local Offer like an automatic response. “Check the Local Offer, have you checked the Local Offer?” One of the things I have mentioned in the groups is I thought that one of the things we all should do as group members is have a phrase that we carry in our heads that we churn out every time somebody says, “What is the Local Offer?” That it just trips off the tongue. Until you develop that automatic response the Local Offer won’t be properly used.

We need more and more people with that level of it is an automatic thing. I wouldn’t consider asking a question until I had checked the Local Offer. I wouldn’t consider running a parents’ group without enabling access to the Local Offer. I wouldn’t consider doing anything without that. It has got to be that automatic to start or it doesn’t exist. It is all very well several people and the odd convert but unless it is widely used and widely promoted it doesn’t exist at all.

It is always the same. This service has been around since 1994 and there are still people who have never heard of it, they have changed the name, but there are still people who have never heard of it who should have heard of it. The reason they don’t is the person they would have got that information from doesn’t bother, doesn’t think to or assumes that it is already known. We absolutely have to spell things out and make things clear, mention things even though we know we have mentioned them 100,000 times before. What if you are repetitive, if it saves one person from missing out on the thing they need it is the right thing to do.

**Interviewer: It is almost like sometimes there is too much information to remember maybe. So having that initial contact point like the Local Offer might be that starting point. I imagine a fear is, “I won’t mention that because they might already know it.” Also simply there is so much to remember in an area like this actually having that captured somewhere is quite useful.**

Respondent: It is about training. I don’t know if this is just personal how I do things but it is about training. Whenever I have a phone call with a new client I will always mention Contact a Family and the North East Special Needs Network because they are really good organisations. If nothing else they have got excellent mailing lists, so there is a purpose to each person who speaks to me knowing about those things.

The Local Offer is the same and you just have to train yourself that I am not now mentioning two things you are mentioning three things as well as trying to get the name of the service out in one breathe. It is about training and enabling that be part, it is my every day work. For other people it is more difficult because they are only being approached on certain occasions by people who might want to know those things. That is always a question for me, “Have you heard about the Local Offer? Are you aware of the North East Special Needs network? Have you been in touch with Contact a Family?” Those things trip off the tongue and the information follows them if necessarily and it is about learning to do that.

I suppose part of what we have got to get over is the fact that we are all information providers and to see ourselves in that light rather than be… I don’t know. There is lots of information that is given in such a way that it is not particularly helpful. A little bit of information doesn’t enable a choice. Doesn’t necessarily give the person listening to it enough to know. I might tell you about an organisation, I might tell you about [Jam 0:49:07] and Jam does one to one support for children who are risk takers within the ages of either 13 or 14 to 19. You might be 12 or you might be coming up 20 and so that information is not particularly useful to you. There is something out there you have probably just missed. That is not particularly useful, it is a way of me showing off that I know something that you don’t know and that doesn’t address your need.

I think a lot of information is given like that particularly by some schools. I am not picking on schools I work with schools and it is what I know. But schools often say, “I heard there was some project they were running, but I think that is only in Cumbria.” That is not good information providers. That is me showing off that I once heard about something. Unless I am going to find you that information, and I am not, I shouldn’t have mentioned it. We are not quite clear about what our role is in terms of information providing. For me there is a lot of things to do with clarity. What is the Local Offer? What does it mean? Why should we be using it?

It is not the words that are important. It is important that you have the words because then you don’t forget to say them, but it is the ethos that is important. If the words encapsulate the ethos then we spread that ethos and that is the thing. If people in schools understood how much work it would take off them in terms of people’s anxiety, people’s questioning if they enabled the Local Offer to be accessed effectively obviously you would do that wouldn’t you? So it is about ethos for me. If we can sell the ethos, if people see how it will benefit them then they are likely to promote it.

**Interviewer: Ending on a more positive note then what do you think the best opportunity for the Local Offer is? If that is the biggest challenge going forward what do you think is the thing that it might transform?**

Respondent: The most powerful thing is it is going to transform people’s lives and it is doing that already. It is opening up options and it is opening up choice. It is making things far more transparent and that transparency in itself is going to be really beneficial.

**Interviewer: Have you seen many examples of people actively using the resource now as it stands?**

Respondent: Only through conversation because I am not able to go through that process with people. Through conversation people are saying, “I saw that and I hadn’t realised...” The more we have those conversations the better, every conversation I have now mentions the Local Offer. There is opportunity either to introduce somebody or to enable them to reflect. I don’t currently have a mechanism for feeding back anything that somebody says to me about the Local Offer apart from encouraging them to make that call themselves and that is a gap. It is one thing being prepared to say to somebody, “I felt this.” Or, “I felt that.” It is quite another thing then going to the effort of logging back on and telling Jenny.

**Interviewer: Yes, it places a lot of pressure on already a very pressurised role for you to be doing that acting as a conduit.**

Respondent: Again you have got to consider is it worth it? Because if it is worth it you do it. You just make sure you provide yourself with a mechanism that enables you to do it. I am not going to have something to say every time I have a conversation with somebody, but I might have things that come up. On the recording sheets we use I already log certain things that I report in terms of the work to the local authority. So all I really need to do is squash my sheet and have a column down the side saying, ‘Is there a comment from the Local Offer?’ [anon.] will be able to tell you who has done it. I have just been widely promoting it and saying to everybody, “Why don’t you train as a Local Offer champion? It will be great.”

**Interviewer: It does sound like a good idea to get those guys talking to each other.**

Respondent: What we targeted initially was people in libraries, people in schools and people in places where people go for information, so people at the network and whatever. For me it is a way of tapping into what is already a strength that [anon.] has. You have to be really careful within the organisation because she is admin support so she is not supposed to be giving advice, but there is nothing to stop her giving information. There is nothing to stop her when I am not taking the call myself when she is taking a message saying, “Are you aware of the Local Offer you might find some interesting things.” There are things that she can say, she can say, “I know [anon.] would mention the Local Offer to you when you speak to her.” We are not trying to unpeople it we are trying to say, “Just be aware of what is out there.”

A lot of people say, “I wish I had heard about you six months ago.” When I talk to them they don’t know the network, they don’t know Contact a Family they don’t know anything. But once they find one of us they have got all of us, which is a bit more about where it comes under my information, advice and support umbrella. Once we have got the right arrangements, the right protocols and the right things going from there we then need to look at what our outreach is and why is it that we are missing, are there culprits who aren’t spreading the message?

It is really interesting because my job is to go into schools and remind them of things they ought to be doing. There are some schools who push parents at you right, left and centre where the special needs coordinator is so pleased that you are there, that you can give this information, that families feel supported and empowered and whatever. There are others where you think they would never mention you. I have got a new volunteer who is a retired head teacher and the first thing she said to me, “I feel a bit strange about this because I was always quite proud because we didn’t have you come in.”

**Interviewer: Really? Oh wow.**

Respondent: Yes and now you are volunteering for us are you? It is interesting. Some people feel we do such a good job, it is not about that. It is about how it feels to have somebody impartial. It is a bit this subtle difference between control and that sort of side of it. When I was a special needs coordinator I thought I was really good with parents, I thought I was approachable, I thought I was whatever. I would have been so much more powerful if those parents had been supported and I was saying the same thing as the person supporting them. That would have made them feel so safe because they were getting it from someday with no vested interested and they are getting it from me and I have got a huge vested interest because I was the provider, so it is about understanding that. You know Martin Donkin don’t you?

**Interviewer: Yes.**

Respondent: I had a big fall out with Martin upstairs once about control because he was talking about budgets and he was saying, “We are giving people as much control as we can over the budgets.” I said, “Are they allowed to determine how much the budget?” “No, \_\_\_[0:56:56] we are allowing them control over it.” I said, “No, you can’t use that word control because control means I have got the mouse. If you have got the mouse and I can tell you where to put it then it is a very different thing.”

I cannot fault the man, I think Martin does a phenomenal job but sometimes even the best of us get that bit wrong. If you are not going to give people control say, “You will be a strong negotiator.” Or, “You will have a strong part within this.” But don’t say, “You have got control.” if you are not going to give it to people. If you set up your expectation too high people will always feel hard done by. Whereas if you set your expectation right people will feel they are having a proper place in things. It is not always our place to be in control, we don’t want the backseat driver driving necessarily. It is just a thought.

**Interviewer: I really think the Local Offer champions, which I had forgotten about for a little while for some reason are hugely important in the Local Offer going forward. I think they are the critical component.**

Respondent: [anon.] will tell you she has trained more and more and more. She would be able to give you a breakdown of who they are and where they came from.

**Interviewer: Yes, we are meeting [anon.] next week I think.**

Respondent: I think that would be really interesting. There has been this gap, this is another control thing, they are in control we don’t know what they hell we will be allowed to do but we are expected to do it and do it right. We will continue to meet and we will continue to take it forward. I think there are people sitting around the table and [anon.]being very keen that we hung onto the same parents. Although we all provide our own challenges they have been really committed to the ethos and the process. It is so useful to have people who really understand what you are trying to achieve.

**Interviewer: Understand it and live with it in many respects.**

Respondent: Yes, because it doesn’t have the same meaning for me. It can never have the same meaning for me.

END AUDIO