



MAPS and Parental Engagement Practice Notes

September 2024



About this resource

What is the purpose of this document?

These practice notes are short, easy to read summaries of key findings and actionable insights about using multi-agency panels to improve decision-making and build parental confidence in the EHC process, with supporting examples and data.

This product has been created by the REACH consortium in partnership with the Department for Education. This product contains emerging insights and learning from the Change Programme and should not be regarded as official government policy or guidance. You can read more about the Change Programme [here](#).



Introduction: Overview

What does this document include?

This series of practice notes include:



Using multi-agency panels to improve decision-making and build parental confidence in EHC processes



Practice Note 1: Panel membership is a major commitment and flexibility is required to maximise input from professionals



What do we know? Making the most of the Designated Social Care Officer role (DSCO) in decision making



Practice Note 2: Panels need to be well-managed, with clarity between all members on the scope and purpose of input to decisions



Practice Note 3: Parent involvement in panels needs to be clearly scoped and well supported, ideally in partnership with the PCF



Practice Note 4: Communication with parents and ensuring access to non-statutory support needs as much attention as decisions themselves



What do we know? Importance of partnering with parents and carers at all levels of SEND decision-making

Using Multi-Agency Panels (MAPs) to improve decision-making and build parental confidence in EHC processes

Why this reform?

The Department for Education (DfE) want to improve the quality and consistency of decision making on the EHC process and build the confidence and understanding of parents/carers and education settings in the decisions, as well as next steps regarding support.

What are we testing?

This reform covered:

- Setting up/revising, to provide the local authority (LA) with advice to inform decision to assess, issue, or cease
- Consistent approaches to the minimum membership and ways of working for a MAP
- Discussions with parents/carers and education settings to explain the outcome of the decision & ongoing support

Evidence of early impact:

LAs valued the positive effects MAPs have on the quality and consistency of decision-making in the following ways:



Multi-agency partners allowed for a clearer interpretation of the evidence provided, enabling richer discussion, and ensuring a holistic consideration of children and young people, such as needs beyond school or impact of health on education



Professionals provided access to their own different information and data systems, mitigating professional blind spots and ensuring decisions are based on up-to-date information



Close, regular working built strong professional relationships and fostered shared accountability



Where evidence suggests a graduated response has not been followed, different professionals recommended ways children and young peoples' needs can be met without statutory assessment, providing a clear rationale for decisions not to assess

Implementation challenges:

Change Programme Partnerships (CPPs) have identified the following significant challenges to overcome when implementing the proposed approach to Multi-Agency Panels:



Panel membership is a major commitment and flexibility is required to maximise professional input



Panels need to be well-managed, with clarity between all members on the scope and purpose of input to decisions



Parent involvement in panels needs to be clearly scoped and well supported, ideally in partnership with the Parent Carer Forum (PCF)



Communication with parents and ensuring access to non-statutory support needs as much attention as decisions themselves

These key insights have been expanded upon in the below Practice Notes from experiences and examples shared by the Change Programme Partnerships.

Practice Note 1: Panel membership is a major commitment and flexibility is required to maximise input from professionals

Multi-agency panel membership varies among LAs based on local context, professional capacity and relationships, demographic factors, and level of EHCP demand. To ensure the quality of decisions via multi-agency input, LAs employ different methods of overcoming barriers to including key partners, such as rotas, delegation, and cross-specialism communication channels.



Flexibility in MAP membership

Local areas shared that they encountered barriers to achieving multi-agency input from all partners as proposed in the reforms, relating to time, capacity and resource implications. LAs have expressed a need for local flexibility, to account for differing levels of demand in EHCP requests, size of local authorities, and the capacity of key roles.

In **Swindon** SENCo membership is managed on a rolling basis to broaden the opportunity for SENCos from across the local area to become more engaged in the local system, how decisions are made and see good practice elsewhere.

Manchester involve an Early Years specialist as a regular MAP attendee due to an increase in very young children presenting need over recent years in the city.



Managing MAP member workloads

Local areas valued bringing a range of professional expertise and shared accountability into decision-making around support but have highlighted that using panels for all decisions to assess and decisions to issue significantly increases the time commitments required from already-stretched professionals. A large majority of LAs in the programme used MAPs at decision to assess and around half said they also used MAPs at the decision to issue stage. Around a third indicated that they triaged which decisions are discussed at the panel, enabling swifter progression on straightforward cases. Some LAs also use MAPs to support other decisions such as joint funding decisions, specialist placement decisions, and decisions around education other than at school (EOTAS).

Gloucestershire have attendance rotas for health, social care, early help and schools panel members. This reduces the workload for each professional and means the panel is always well represented, taking into account annual leave and school holidays.



Securing input from DCOs & DSCOs

Whilst some LAs have Designated Clinical Officers (DCOs) and Designated Social Care Officers (DSCOs) as standing members on panels to drive senior buy-in across the partnership, a number shared that it is often not feasible for these officers to commit to attend all MAPs, given other areas of work they cover in their agencies. In a minority of areas, DSCO panel attendance has been mandated, whereas others have clear arrangements in place to share the panel role across managers in the service with DSCO oversight. It is critical that where regular attendance in the panel is not possible, all agencies remain confident in the oversight and information sharing arrangements.

Rochdale's DCO cannot always attend every panel, but she ensures any risks are mitigated by making herself available to the EHC team and feeds into any cases that require additional oversight, while also keeping consistent channels of communication open with social care and education colleagues to support each other with quality assurance across their specialist areas.

What do we know? Making the most of the Designated Social Care Officer role (DSCO) in decision making

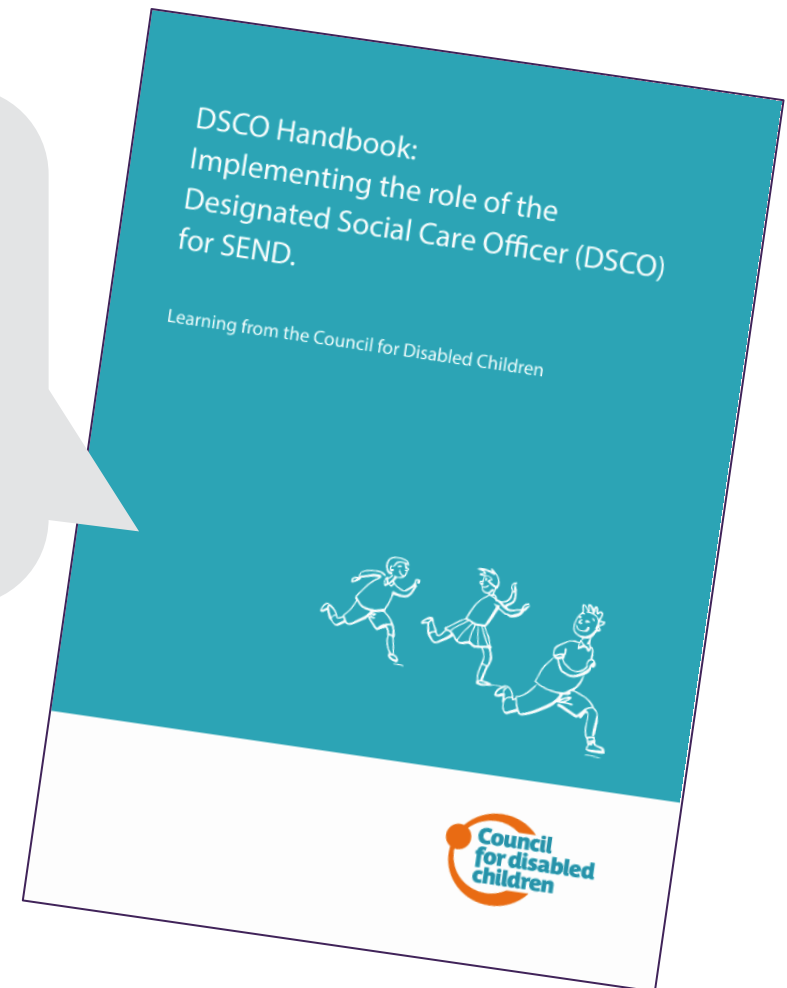
There is existing evidence for the impact of practices aiming to improve the quality and consistency of local authority decision-making around education, health, and care:

Shropshire's DSCO has built leadership and partnership capacity across health, education, social care, is embedded as a core member of the SEND Partnership and Strategic Board, the Statutory Assessment Panel, and involved in SEND Tribunals, to ensure consistent social care involvement in EHC decision-making. They also led on workforce development and training to upskill and increase quality, including SEND and EHCP training for advice givers. The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the 'strength of evidence' and 'breadth of impact' of this work is good. The work has been evaluated internally and externally, sustained for more than 12 months with clear plans for future extension, and is demonstrably replicable. There is evidence of impact on the lived experience of children and young people with SEND and their families, education, health, and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people, and positive feedback from professionals.

[See full case study here.](#)

The Council for Disabled Children has published guidance on how to implement the role of the DSCO in local authorities. The role of the DSCO on Multi-Agency Panels can support their critical role in linking strategic decisions to practice and provision in the local area to best meet social care needs of children and young people.

[See full handbook here](#)



Practice Note 2: Panels need to be well-managed, with clarity between all members on the scope and purpose of input to decisions

To ensure decision-making at multi-agency panels is as effective as possible, LAs took proactive measures encompassing administrative processes, training and guidance for members, and ongoing quality assurance. Done well, smaller things that are easier to achieve outside of panels can make a cumulative difference to the quality and consistency of decision-making.



Clear and robust administrative processes

Administrative processes to make panels more efficient and effective include clear protocols for EHC coordinators around information-gathering to ensure applications are complete, reminders for panel members to read papers and guidance, and recruitment of roles dedicated to including specific information from partners e.g. health.

In **Rochdale**, getting administrative processes right, such as having a staff member send reminders about upcoming panels, completing MAP training, reading papers, and ensuring they understand the importance of confidentiality, has “solidified expectations” of panel members and made panels run more smoothly.



Training and guidance for panel members

LAs have developed specific training and guidance materials around confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and ensuring panel members understand whether the graduated response has been followed to make more consistent decisions around EHC.

Swindon provided training to panel members. Compliance with training is recorded by a training officer and annual updates based on requirements are made. The training pack includes material on nature of decisions and confidentiality agreements.



Quality assurance processes

LAs have quality assurance processes in place to inform ongoing improvement in the quality and consistency of decisions. Some LAs involve parent carers in these processes. Data is regularly reviewed at leadership and/or board level.

Quality assurance forms the core of **Rochdale's** recently rewritten MAP policy. This was based on ensuring the LA had a “quality marker” for requests coming in, beyond the legal test set out in statute, with criteria assessing the quality of information provided, evidence of the graduated response, and the extent of professional engagement. Rochdale developed training and guidance for panel members, in the form of a series of short videos covering the policy, the SEN code of practice, the legal test, and funding bands. Panel members who have not recently attended can also use these training materials as a refresher.



“There is documentation to support that decision-making process...is this really a child who needs a very high level of specialist support or is this a child who perhaps hasn't had the opportunity, and with a little bit more time with a variety of interventions, could actually make progress? That's particularly pertinent for our early years children who are within a significant developmental phase.”

- Nuala Finegan, Senior School Quality Assurance Officer, Manchester City Council

Practice Note 3: Parent involvement in panels needs to be clearly scoped and well supported, ideally in partnership with the PCF

Parental involvement in EHC processes varied across the Change Programme. LAs and PCFs had different viewpoints and approaches, encompassing decisions to involve parent carers as full panel members, as anonymous moderators, or choosing not to involve at all. Whatever form parental engagement in the process takes, it is undertaken with the aim of building confidence that there is a consistent and robust approach to decision making.



Managing confidentiality and conflicts of interest for parent carer members

Local areas have told us that PCF members are uncomfortable about sitting on a panel involved in decision-making about other parents' children. Similarly, there are challenges around managing privacy notices to ensure information can be shared in a panel that includes parent carers. To overcome this, local authorities provide training around confidentiality and declaring conflicts of interest and trust parent members to declare these at the start of panel meetings.

Barnet have been involving parent carers in MAPs since 2021 and see their inclusion as critical to the quality of decision-making. Initially there were concerns, from Barnet and parent carers, about how it would work in practice. However, building on a strong relationship with Barnet Parent Carer Forum (BPCF), Barnet's co-produced approach to involving parent carers as full panel members has not led to major barriers.



Working with PCFs to facilitate parent involvement

LAs have worked with PCFs to find varying ways for parent carers to contribute to the consistency and quality of decision-making, enabled by:

- Remunerating parent carers
- Treating parent carers like any other professional
- Removing unnecessary obstacles (e.g. accreditation)
- Establishing a flexible, wide pool of parent carers

In 2019, **Manchester** developed an EHCP Quality Assurance Framework. Once the framework had been implemented, Manchester recognised the need for parent carer involvement as part of this process. With the local PCF, Manchester introduced the parent carer moderation role to assist with quality assurance of EHCPs, co-producing a role description, standards, and training for parent carers. This was the preferred role of parent carers rather than sitting on panels making individual decisions.



Testing and reviewing the different ways that parents are involved

Most LAs increased parent carer involvement on panels, but there are significant variations. LAs and PCFs described the “journey” of building good communication, relationships and rapport, which can increase ambition around how parents can be involved. Across our sample, we saw LAs where:

- Parent carers were full members on panels
- Parent carers were panel observers
- Parent carers were invited to participate in a mock panel to better understand panel processes
- There were no plans to include parent carers in EHC processes or where this is still under review



“We’re very conscious of the fact that we don’t have a perfect system yet, but parents are involved and they do feel like their voice is valued. They’ve told me that they feel like they’re sitting at the table as equal partners.”

- Nuala Finegan, Senior School Quality Assurance Officer, Manchester City Council

Practice Note 4: Communication with parents and ensuring access to non-statutory support needs as much attention as decisions themselves

Insights show that LAs recognised the role of effective communication of EHC decisions on parental confidence, particularly with relation to personalisation and timeliness of communication, whether communication is face to face or not, and providing a rationale and evidence for decisions.



Building capacity of case officers to work more relationally

Capacity constraints and a lack of training around having difficult conversations means case officers can sometimes struggle to have effective 'way forward' conversations with parent carers. There are often challenges with retention and support for case officers given the emotive nature of the decisions being communicated. To manage this, it is important to start early:

- A relational approach to parent carers needs to be developed from the start, not focusing too narrowly on the procedural and legal aspects of the case.
- Early discussions of potential outcomes and reassurance about support available



"Our case officers hold 'getting to know you' meetings with the parent and child or young person. That starts the communication really well because it's a positive meeting at the start of the assessment process and means we can support earlier on."

**- Lauren Wakefield, SEND Team Manager,
Rutland Council**



Clearer and more human communication of decisions & rationale

Some LAs recognised the need to improve communications with parent carers or made improvements to the way they communicate with parent carers to increase confidence.

Rutland council's SEND Team recently redeveloped their model of communication with parent carers, specifically around MAP decisions. Engagement with parent carers early in the EHC process was already focused on providing an "intimacy of care", but later stages around panel decisions, mediation and appeals did not reflect this positive approach. They now provide 'way forward' meetings to discuss 'no to assess' decisions and build trust and understanding with parent carers about the rationale behind the decision.



Need for a clear support pathway following a decision not to assess/issue

Some LAs felt the 'no to assess' pathway required further exploration, while others took measures to provide clearer support for parent carers, including:

- Reviewing the quality of advice in 'no to assess' letters, prioritising clarity of next steps
- Developing a consistent template for 'no to assess' letters and agreeing wording for different scenarios
- Ensuring that the letter is accompanied by the offer of a conversation in person or over the phone

Stockton have worked to reframe 'decline meetings' to 'SEN support meetings' with parent carers after 'no to assess' decisions, where appropriate. These meetings are held to share the rationale for why the LA feel an EHCP isn't needed, and to signpost to what's available/might be needed in terms of support and the local offer.

What do we know? Importance of partnering with parents and carers at all levels of SEND decision-making

Our findings on the Change Programme built on existing evidence for the impact of parent carer involvement in relation to multi-agency decision-making processes, and effective communication with parent carers:

A key element of **Wiltshire Parent Carer Council's (WPCC)** work was the inclusion of parent carers in 'Discussion and Decision' meetings as moderators, providing feedback on the quality of meetings, discussion, and decision-making about education, health, and care. The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the 'strength of evidence' and 'breadth of impact' of WPCC's work is **promising** – it has been sustained and has been evaluated and validated through internal evaluation routines and external peer reviews. There is also evidence of impact on the lived experiences of families, and from the feedback from professionals.

[See full case study here.](#)

Islington have developed a broad approach to parent carer participation and co-production, recognising that many parent carers may want some level of involvement with and communication about the local SEND system, but not all want the same level of involvement. Islington have successfully developed a parent charter and a 'pyramid of participation', with different levels of engagement for parent carers of children with SEN. The approach to participation and co-production has been commended by parents and in the local area SEND inspection, and both the 'strength of evidence' and 'breadth of impact' have been rated as **good**.

[See full case study here.](#)

Co-production with parent carers of children and young people with SEND has been highlighted as a 'key ingredient' of SEND service improvement, at both operational and strategic levels, drawn from research participants' reflections on the Delivering Better Outcomes Together (DBOT) intervention and experiences in SEND service delivery. Where there were successes, meaningful co-production required sensitive negotiation with emphasis on nurturing trusting relationships.

[See full report here.](#)

Qualitative insights from a 2016 study into **families' experiences of EHC processes** found that, among other things, the following factors were key in influencing familial satisfaction:

- **Clear and transparent information** where professionals are transparent with children/young people and their parents (for example, reasons for process delays or what decisions are based on).
- **Parents seen as equal partners** in the process and experts on their own child/young person and family's needs and a non-adversarial approach with families listened to, supported and their contributions valued

[See full report here.](#)