

North Somerset SENDIASS and PCF: SENDIASS and the PCF - building trust and partnership

Context

In North Somerset, North Somerset Parent Carers Working Together (NSPCWT) and SEND And You SENDIAS service (SAY SENDIAS) each serve vital but distinct roles in supporting families, advocating for rights, and delivering support and information services.

However, despite shared goals, the relationship between the PCF and SENDIAS service hasn't always been an easy one. In 2018 an opportunity to "start again" was presented and, in an ever-evolving landscape with increasing funding restrictions, rising parental expectations, and mounting complexity in SEND provision, it became essential to align efforts more intentionally.

Recognising the need for stronger relationships

Initial conversations between NSPCWT and SAY highlighted recurring challenges between the services. Boundaries between roles were unclear, leading to duplication and occasional friction; families were receiving conflicting messages about support pathways and different working styles and there were misunderstandings around expectations.

However, what became apparent was a shared commitment to improving outcomes for SEND families.

This recognition led us to set up regular discussion to raise concerns, understand each other's challenges and begin to map out our joint goals and vision.

"We all had the same aims but were approaching them from different angles. It was time to have honest conversations."

Laying the foundations of trust

The process of building trust unfolded over a period of 12–18 months, marked by key activities.

a) Regular face to face meetings (with cake) for honest discussion, agreeing our mission, priorities and challenges. The focus of meetings was on understanding each organisations' strengths and challenges rather than being defensive about our own remit.

b) Co-designing principles of working. An old version of a Memorandum of Understanding type Agreement which had once been circulated as an example framework for joint working was re-visited. The principles included open, solution focussed communication, mutual respect for each other's professional expertise and recognition of time and capacity available to achieve shared goals.

c) Event Organisation. Together with a third local voluntary SEND group BtGT!, an *Autism and communication information* event was piloted, testing our ability to plan and deliver something collaboratively. This turned out to be a huge success, fuelling determination and laying the professional groundwork for further co-production.

Building the agreement

With trust in place and relationships firmly developing work began in earnest, finalising the [Together is Better Agreement](#). Drafts went back and forth with a real sense of equal ownership, keeping language plain and inclusive, deliberately avoiding legalistic jargon.

Key components were structured under two parts:

Part one: shared principles and working practices

Clear values, such as respect, honest communication, and a commitment to seeking solution.

Agreement to resolve disagreements early and plan activities jointly.

Setting regular meetings to maintain communication and conversation.

Part two: organisation-specific roles and responsibilities

Clear boundaries and responsibilities for NSPCWT, SAY (and BtGT!) were defined.

Acknowledgement of each organisation's unique legal and operational roles, such as the SENDIAS service's statutory function and NSPCWT's role as the collective voice of parent carers.

Ongoing commitment

With the agreement in place, the remaining priority was to ensure continued commitment, even as staff and organisational priorities change and as the local and national SEND system evolves. This commitment has been embedded into practice, so the agreement continues to serve its purpose and strong relationships between parties continue.

Outcomes

Open and mutually respectful conversations have been key to laying the foundations for the collaborative ways of working we have developed. Creating the agreement provided space for us to strengthen the support offered to families by reducing duplication in events, delivering more consistent messaging about roles and services, resolving misunderstandings quickly, raising the profile of SEND issues at strategic meetings, and building greater trust with parent carers.

As a result of our collaboration, we have not only built strong and trusted relationships with each other but also enhanced the support available to families. This includes jointly organised training events, school coffee mornings, general and focused drop-in sessions, improved awareness of the issues families face among local authority and health partners, and timely, clear information, advice, and support—delivered by whichever of us is best placed to provide it.