

Sam Barron. Designated Clinical Officer and Head of SEND Strategy. Northumberland County Council & Northumberland CCG.

Introduction to Sam's profile

Sam is the Designated Clinical Officer and Head of SEND Strategy at Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group and Northumberland County Council with a background in speech and language therapy. She has occupied a shared position between the CCG and the County Council since 2017 and is funded at 8c level. Before starting in her current post, Sam was a part time DCO and clinical lead in learning difficulties within a speech and language therapy service.

The evolution of the DCO role

Sam has been a DCO in two areas with differing approaches to the role. The first had limited time available at half a day a week, which meant that the focus was largely on overseeing the operational health component to the EHCP pathway with little involvement at the strategic level. The second role, reflecting the desire of both Northumberland CCG and the County Council to have a system wide integrated approach to SEND, has been able to work both operationally and strategically to enable the key functions of the DCO role to be fulfilled.

Sam feels that the professional development journey of a DCO is heavily influenced by the individual's professional background and experience. Being a paediatric therapist, Sam was familiar with the Code of Practice, working within schools, the role of therapies within education and the EHCP process. To make a difference in the DCO role, Sam emphasises the importance of strong knowledge of the SEND Code of Practice alongside knowledge of national guidance and the wider health, social care and education sector across children and adults. Leadership skills are key as the post relies heavily on the ability to lead, influence, negotiate and work collaboratively with a range of partners at different levels, across a number of organisations.

Sam's work and responsibilities as a DCO

Strategically, Sam supports the development and delivery of SEND strategy across the Local Area. She is involved in the refresh of the local area strategy, joint commissioning framework and SEND joint strategic needs assessment. Sam is currently involved in initiatives such as developing the

local area SEND dashboard and working with Health and Safety within the Council to refresh guidance on supporting pupils with medical conditions in schools. Sam also sees herself as a translator of the different 'languages' in use around SEND: "The DCO role is a bridge joining the commissioners with the providers." says Sam.

Operationally in her current position, Sam monitors the EHCP pathway and has developed a governance framework and workforce development plan for health providers. She is actively involved in training and supporting health teams in their role and responsibilities around SEND and is a regular point of contact for professionals from across the sector as well as parents and carers.

For Sam, acting as a DCO and the Head of SEND Strategy enables her to have a more comprehensive overview and understanding of the whole system which encourages a joined up integrated approach. For example, the development of the governance framework for the EHCP process became a single integrated framework that included education, health and social care rather than separate frameworks across the sectors, with separate oversight and monitoring. At times, occupying both positions can be challenging in terms of managing workload, time pressures and conflicting priorities. Sam benefits from regular support from within the CCG and has a joint appraisal with the CCG and the Council on a yearly basis. This joined up approach to understanding and supporting the unique nature of Sam's post by strategic leaders has enabled the post to be successful and contribute to a period of rapid improvement within the local area.

The impact of the DCO role on children and young people

Sam emphasises the importance of involving children, young people with SEND and their families at the very beginning. Sam says that there can be a temptation to want to professionally 'put your house in order' before involving parents and carers but feels that true co-production starts with a blank piece of paper. This enables the voice of children, young people and their families to be an equal partner in defining the start point and successful outcomes that are to be achieved. This in turn encourages a greater understanding of the steps, and the time it will take to make them, to achieve success which is important given the length of time that some projects can take to show tangible results.

Sam works closely with the Parent Carer Forum in her local area. She ensures that there is Parent Carer representation on the SEND Health Group for providers so that parent carer views are considered in all development work. During a recent Health Group discussion about the provision of quality outcomes in EHCPs their views and support around what

makes a good health outcome was invaluable. Sam emphasises the importance of involving children, young people with disabilities or SEND and their families at the beginning of the journey. “Working with them has had a powerful impact” she says, “but if you wait to involve them, you’ve lost them”.

Example of good practice: a multi-agency approach

Sam is developing a project to implement a multi-agency graduated approach to working with children and young people with social emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs in schools. From a health perspective this work is important to support and manage the demand for CAMHS services. From the council perspective it has been timely, as increasing numbers of children and young people are being identified by schools as requiring support for SEMH needs.

The project aims to clearly identify the offer available from each service provider across education, health and care. A graduated approach detailing school best practice in identifying and meeting need from within existing resources is being developed. This sits alongside work to develop the role and remit of the Mental Health Lead in schools which will include when to step up from school based support to involve which external agencies. “This project is about aligning all available resources across the system to help support the needs of children and young people,” says Sam. Information for parents and carers will be placed on the Local Offer and shared through Parent Carer networks.

Sam’s advice for new starters

Sam feels the DCO role is a unique position which is being interpreted and understood in different ways across the country. There is increasing understanding of the strategic and operational elements of the role, however as a DCO or DMO you are likely to be the only one in your area, which can be isolating. This can lead to CCGs and Local Authorities having different understanding and expectations of the role from area to area.

Sam has greatly valued the support of her peers both regionally and nationally and strongly recommends joining local and regional networks for support. Sam has found the DMO/DCO Forum of the Council of Disabled Children particularly helpful. “Being able to find out about practice in other areas and the approaches that others have taken to successfully lead change has been invaluable,” she says.

