

To whom it may concern

### 1.1

In response to the call for evidence for Educational Underachievement, I would like to draw the Education Committee's attention, to the *lack* of early intervention in our primary schools.

I hasten to add that this is not a lack of teacher and school action, but rather the response (or lack of) by other Education services.

Our teachers identify those children presenting with possible special educational needs and implement programmes which in their professional judgement will be of benefit to the children. They will also incorporate advice given to them by other services, when and if available. However there is a massive time delay when the school requests appraisal by 'external' agencies and in particular the Education Psychology service and other SEN services.

### 1.2

Everyone in the system puts this down to a 'stalling' process in order to meet targets or to delay the onset of additional assistance or resources being given to schools. Whilst there is little physical evidence to suggest that, the experience of the process is, to say the least, frustrating for both the school and the parents involved and extremely detrimental to the children involved also.

### 1.3

At Nursery level we are basically told that direct intervention is not available, but advice is – no matter what the issue. When we do eventually get an assessment it is generally a 'monitor the situation' or 'too early to be sure' type outcome.

Given the increasing numbers of children presenting with speech and language difficulties I believe that more action needs to be taken at this level of education where it has been identified as a problem by teachers. In other settings where it is not teacher led there will also be the problem of lack of expertise in diagnosing problems. The answer to this particular problem is to ensure we have teacher led pre-school education.

### 1.4

When we refer in Primary 1 the response is usually 'too early to make a judgement; monitor situation and re refer'. By now the child is going into P2 and more children's literacy problems are beginning to emerge. The children may need 'Literacy Screening' to ascertain the exact problem. Last year I referred children in February 2015 – they were assessed in October 2015 and

but for my insistence, would not have received the peripatetic support which they received at the end of January 2016 (almost a year later!), until March 2016. This year I referred children in June for Literacy Screening; I am still waiting for this to take place – 6 months after the initial referral. The chance of it happening before the New Year are minimal, which means that the support services for those children will not kick in until possibly after Easter. To me this is unacceptable. Yet we have a director of these services who, rather than streamline the system, has brought forward another layer of paperwork in the referral procedure, most of which is repetitive.

When we do re- refer, we are faced once more with the ever growing administration workload that accompanies SEN. Plus the retesting and updating of standardised scores. The duration of this process is unacceptable. In reality, those children requiring statutory assessment and an eventual statement are lucky to get it before P4 – 3 to 4 years after the concern was first raised with those agencies. Hardly effective ‘early’ intervention!

1.5

My suggestion is that Education Psychologists should be made self employed. They can then bid for work from schools, who would have the finance to pay for them provided by the DE. Market forces and contractual agreements before engagement would mean that reports would be produced quicker and referrals dealt with faster. It would also mean the eradication of a whole layer of bureaucracy within EA. Schools in Birmingham have been doing this – buying in services from self employed professionals. The key to this however is that it is *properly* funded by DE.

1.6 A question also arises over the validity of an assessment, at the moment, by an independent Psychologist on the child. For example, for ADHD or Dyslexia. Are these acceptable as evidence of the SEN and can the appropriate measures be put in place on the strength of these?

1.7

When one does get to the end of the process we are then faced with a ‘one size fits all’ approach to provision – usually on a take it or leave it basis, or as a diktat as to how the child’s needs are to be met; rather than letting the teaching professionals decide on what resources are deployed and how.

1.8

Running in tandem with this process is the understaffing of these services – currently reported to me as at 63%. No effort it seems is made to replace those who are off work, to cope with the workload. Caseloads seem to lie on the desks of those who are off, with no-one allocated them, or no-one employed to fill the

vacancy. Would this be acceptable in schools? We all know the answer to that. The knock-on effect is felt most acutely in schools, where teachers and classroom assistants are stretched to breaking point to cope with the failures of these services, and parents frustrated by the lack of movement in the process end up blaming schools for this.

### 1.9

This problem is not only an Education services problem it seems, as we have had similar problems with the Health services which we rely on also for Speech and Language, Occupational Health etc. In our area we are still awaiting a replacement school doctor – since March 2015 I believe – so medical assessments are holding up the whole process of statementing. (Even where there is no medical problem, the delay in a nil return holds up progress.

### 1.10

In all these instances, the teachers and school budgets are being left to ‘fill the gap’ until the appropriate services finally get involved.

For years the Department have used the term ‘Early Intervention’, producing initiatives and policies, but in truth the actual rolling out of these in practical terms has left a lot to be desired. More is expected from schools whose budgets are under constant restriction and attack. The support measures needed, and which should be put in place by services outside of the school budget, can be difficult to fund and resource from within the school’s own resources. Teachers’ time can be monopolised dealing with those children with SEN to the detriment of the other children. If the Department are serious about Early Intervention then they need to resource the schools adequately to deal with it and have a root and branch review of the present school support structures. And they need to listen to the practitioners in schools.

### 2.1

I believe that we need to be doing more ‘formal’ literacy within the foundation stage. This is a personal opinion, but I believe that the ‘Play based’ learning which is being pushed so much by ‘educationalists’ and ETI is detracting from the early writing and reading skill development. That, which was once a staple in P1 and P2, is sometimes being relegated to an activity within a play session which cannot be as structured or supervised by the very nature of the activity. Teachers work hard to provide meaningful activities but I believe that more time actually needs to be almost ‘ring fenced’ for actual ‘old school’ reading and writing teaching, with teachers concentrating on those skills solely, without the distraction of other activities within the class. This would mean having to rethink the emphasis on play, so that teachers can have direction on this, not simply told to do more literacy, as well as everything else. They need space to

concentrate on what, to my mind is most important, rather than squeezing it in amongst a host of other demands.

### 3.1 Summary

I have over 26 years experience as a principal. Perhaps I'm considered too 'old school', but I have seen initiative after initiative flounder over recent years due mainly to under resourcing and funding. The term 'capacity building' has outgrown its use. Teachers are working at full capacity – and with less resources and time to do so. So the answer is not to heap more initiatives on top of existing ones. Capacity building is like filling up a balloon – eventually there comes a critical moment after which all is lost. Many teachers and schools are at that critical moment. The lack of proper services to support them adds to their burden. They need to improve and teachers need time to concentrate on what I, and many others, would consider to be the basics skills of Literacy and Numeracy.

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