



**Autism in Schools Report
Shropshire
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Parent Carers in Shropshire were asked to provide feedback of their experiences of their children who have ASD attending mainstream school. They were asked to comment on the key issues faced by Autistic students in mainstream school and what changes they would like to see in mainstream schools to enable autistic students to have an improved school experience.

Introduction

“Around 1.4 million pupils in English schools have an identified special educational need. The SEND code of practice states that ‘a child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made.’ For pupils of compulsory school age, this means that they will have significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of their peers or have a disability that prevents or hinders them from making use of the facilities generally provided for their peers in mainstream settings. Four broad areas of need are identified in the SEND code of practice: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; social, emotional, and mental health difficulties; sensory and/or physical needs. This code of practice also sets out a ‘graduated approach’ which removes barriers and supports pupils learning with special provision. The provision is designed to be regular and personal assessment, targeted action, and review. This means that how provision is planned and achieved is dependent on the approach of the local authority and therefore what it means to have pupils’ needs met in mainstream environments varies.

An increasing number of children with SEND are being educated in mainstream schools- from 2000 to 2018 there has been a 17 % increase. One benefit of inclusive education is social development, being educated alongside typically developing peers provides the opportunity to increase social opportunities. Social inclusion is particularly relevant for students with ASD whose challenges with social communication can be increased in the school environment. Interestingly, although the school environment is suggested to be inclusive for students with ASD, research has suggested that such students are more likely to be isolated or not included in social groups. Without interventions, these social challenges will become more apparent over time and increase the risk of individuals facing mental health issues in later life.

While it has been found that a majority of educators support and advocate positive inclusion in the classroom and avoiding labelling, there is an increasing amount of

research questioning the extent to which schools are inclusive and their perception of the effect of the current system of education provision on practice in schools and outcomes for students.

A recent report by Ofsted (May 2021) has highlighted weaknesses in the special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) system. These include:

- gaps in external provision and training
- lack of coordination between services
- lack of accountability
- weak co-production

The autism in schools project started in the North East region and was developed in response to the fact that increasing number of young people with autism (without a learning disability) were facing mental health breakdown and facing hospital admission. Parent Carer Forums in the North East region worked with local Transforming Care leaders and identified that a combination of difficulties and challenges which frequently started in school (often a mainstream setting) and struggles to access quality support, resulted in escalating need and eventually crisis.

The Autism and Schools project aimed to address this situation by supporting schools to ensure that they provided positive environments for students with Autism. It involved whole school change and those schools who participated committed to reviewing behaviour policies and to considering in detail how the school environment worked for Autistic students. This meant thinking about improving communication, responding to sensory issues and considering how reasonable adjustments could be put in place to meet the needs of Autistic pupils.

Training

Research has suggested that although there has been a dramatic change in the quality, quantity, and availability of research to support the delivering of teaching to SEND students, that the way training is delivered and implemented has an effect on the outcomes with students. It is suggested that all educational professionals can provide good quality interventions if they are well trained, however, if they do not understand the principles and motivations of training approaches, they are implementing, then such interventions will not work.

A recurring issue which has been highlighted has been the training that staff receive who are working with ASD students, this included training relating to ASD awareness and the way training was delivered to staff.

“Teachers should be made aware of asd and be educated on how to work with children on the spectrum. I think the ignorance of not knowing can lead to indirect discrimination against children on the spectrum. It should be made compulsory for teachers to be trained in this area”

In addition, only training specific staff members- such as SENCo's is problematic, as the trained member of staff will not always be available. This meant that problematic behaviours escalated as they were not dealt with efficiently.

“Not having key trained personnel (eg teacher) available at key transition times of the day, e.g. lunch/ break times. Relying on unskilled staff (eg lunch time supervisors) to deal with issues that could be quickly nipped in the bud”

Another issue with the current level of training provided, highlighted that teachers needed to be more aware of behaviours and capabilities of students with autism- parent carers felt that their children were not understood and were instead being punished for not being able to cope.

“Teachers thinking, they are normal and just being naughty Setting them up to fail Giving them work that they can't achieve Punishing them for actions that are beyond their control Lack of understanding Not knowing how to communicate with the child Teachers should all read and understand the child's EHCP and medical background They need empathy and compassion”

In addition, parent carers felt that the training did not consider individual differences and instead adapted a one size fits all approach which was not considerate to the individual needs of students.

"I feel that main stream schools often read about autism, then think they know it all and solutions are put in place, this solution works for child with Asd, however not for the next, they then don't have the ability to realise every Child's autism is different - they say we have two or three students in school everyday coping with autism, but then they don't see what happens at home or behind the eyes of the child, they don't truly understand or try to know the student they just expect them to get on with it and learn to change!"

It could be suggested that the training staff are receiving is not being delivered efficiently and that those attending courses are not being given enough examples of real-life scenarios which can be used to put the training into practice.

"Teacher training SENCo monitoring Support staff trained and making sure they have a good understanding of the child's meds and backgrounds Safe spaces to go to"

"Training to all staff, staff to show empathy and understanding to autistic students"

It has also been highlighted that training is not always effectively implemented in the school environment.

"There should be SEN departments that are properly staffed run alongside and integrate with the mainstream pupils, with sensory facilities to accommodate SEN teaching and support"

Parent carer's feel that staff being delivered incorrect training can cause problems later on in education.

"From experience primary schools fail to record behaviours appropriately that lead to secondary school placement being inappropriate Resulting in failing education"

In addition, it has been highlighted that training needs to be provided which teaches the difference in the way behaviours are presented between girls and boys.

"I would like teachers to gain training in autism and understand it's not a one size fits all and that girls may not display behaviours the same as boys and the stereotypical autism"

"Understanding of autism by Senco, including female presentation"

When asked what changes could be made to improve the school experience for autistic students, a number of parent carers commented that the way training was implemented was a key factor to consider.

“TRAINING, TRAINING, TRAINING!!!!!! For staff. ALL staff. working on knowledge of ASD, specifically in more able students. And on how to work WITH parents and how honestly working with them and admitting when things go wrong or are beyond their knowledge makes the relationship between home and school better”

Support

It is clear from current feedback that parent carers' have experienced issues with both the support they are receiving from school and the support their child is receiving in school.

“If parents are supported and schools are sincere in their help the student stands a better chance of wrap around support via school and home”

“Supporting and believing parents”

“Body of evidence from parents of what they experience and what they know”

Parent carers also felt that if they discussed problems they faced at home, that they were not supported if these problems were not presented in the school environment.

“Staff need training in communication, honestly saying if they are unfamiliar with the problems the parents describe”

In addition, parent carers have been made to feel that if their child does not display challenging behaviour in school that they will not be supported in the referral process by school.

“Getting a referral for diagnosis when your child is “fine in school” regardless of struggles at home and getting child to school”

It was also found that if students were reaching targets with academic work, that other support was not available for them

“No extra support, they are apparently hitting their goals in English and maths”

Parent carers also felt that the support their child received in the school environment was not consistent, and school was limited in the support that they could offer.

“Whilst the school my child attends tries hard they are very limited with what support they can offer. They also have a couple of teachers who automatically label my child as “naughty”

It was also felt that the support provided was not enough for children attending mainstream schools.

“Not enough specialist support for autism”

Support from external services has also been highlighted, the timescale that it has taken for support to be put in place for individuals is a concern.

“My son has been seriously let down by cahms/Beeu. I have been asking for support since he started school in reception class. He is now in year 11 and things have only just been put into place for him. His social and emotional wellbeing has been effected. He began getting into trouble and taking risks doing dangerous tasks when being encouraged by peers. I am grateful for the support we have now been given but it is all too little too late”

It was also highlighted the need for consistency with support, which was in place daily to meet children’s needs.

“Making sure that they have teachers, TAs, mentors to go to meet child every day, explain what is happening, be guided by child and their anxiety, have strategies in place, have computers with fun things to do in a hub if they can't face the class, talk with parents so both have a plan with school”

The lack of support led to difficulties with keeping up with academic work and further problems with education.

“Without the right support they can fall behind & end up in special school, where the opportunities are not the same, particularly with social situations”

The impact that the lack of support had on a child with autism was highlighted. This was not limited to support with academia but supporting the child as a whole.

“My autistic sons experience in mainstream was traumatic 5 years ago for jack and myself when he started school, it was a horror story as he was treated like ‘an outsider’ by the headmaster who said he was ‘in a world of his own’. the headmaster said I was supposed to cry as a parent to these words!! I’ve not cried, I was totally relieved when Jack was moved into a special school 5 years ago where empathy and support is given. How mainstream schools are treating SEN pupils is a serious concern and needs addressing by our government. When I was my sons age the SEN department had its own facilities and staff, and the school integrated the SEN pupils well with a strong emphasis on non-discrimination and acceptance of differences, which taught me to be empathetic with others as a person How are we supposed to teach our children empathy and understanding towards different personalities and intelligences if our schools don’t support this? I’m now a senior nurse... and would appreciate a shake up in the education system they only support its ‘gold standard’ pupils....”

Understanding

Following on from training, another theme that emerged that was linked to this was 'understanding'. Parent carers felt that their children were not understood at school. This was both that professionals did not fully understand autism and therefore lacked empathy towards children and also that due to the lack of understanding that expectations placed on children were too demanding.

"Lack of understanding and or flexibility"

"Staff that don't understand Autism"

"Lack of understanding from the school"

"Teachers to become better informed too, to understand traits & work with appropriately. Many children with ASD remain in mainstream for years before a diagnosis is given."

"Teachers to be more aware that just because they know one child with asd they don't know all children with asd"

It was also highlighted the importance of understanding when a child is masking their behaviours and the negative impact this causes.

"Understanding of the damaging effects of masking and the "pop bottle effect" and the need to ensure decompression during the day. And also understanding of the same across the whole teaching profession."

"Masking due to being misunderstood and being in trouble if being themselves"

"Masking, lack of understanding"

Furthermore, the lack of understanding means that learning styles are not being adapted to suit the child and also that they are expected to complete work in the same time at typically developing peers.

"Not enough time, and understanding of students learning styles"

"Lack of understanding by teaching staff (other than Senco team). Expectations to behave in a similar way to neurotypical kids and not enough allowances made"

In additional to professionals working with the child in school, it was also highlighted that there was a lack of understanding from peers.

"Lack of understanding about autism from peers and more emphasis needed to encourage a circle of friends"

"More awareness and understanding of special needs / autism"

Having staff who understand children with autism makes both the child and parent carers life less stressful.

"I have also had brilliant experiences with schools also, just the staff showing understanding and willing to listen makes school so much less stressful for parents and the children"

It was also highlighted that the lack of understanding within schools had exacerbated mental health issues in some instances. Approaches which were unsuitable had been put in place, it could be suggested that if the professionals involved were more aware of the individuals needs that the outcome of this situation would have been more positive.

"Lack of understanding Requirement to "try" a series of clearly unsuitable approaches over a number of terms after possible mental health crisis has been identified, not even stopping when self-harm/suicidal thoughts have begun, until I stopped it. Definition of crisis being actual self-harm or suicidal attempts, and making it clear to the child, thereby prompting expectation of doing so"

Mental Health

Children and young people with autism are more likely to experience mental health problems than typically developing peers. This is due to there being fewer resources and support to help to develop coping skills. In addition, the likelihood of experiencing negative life events, facing stigma and discrimination from people and services is much more likely to occur when the child or young person has autism.

Parent carers have concerns around the allowances made for their children in the school environment, and the importance being placed on mental health. It is a concern that children are being made to reach 'breaking point' before their mental health is being prioritised.

"Making no allowances for the mental health impact of being different to peers and not fitting in e.g., when kids with autism has reached the point of not coping not allowing them to ring home, leave school with family for time out. My daughter's school were great once she had a complete mental health breakdown and wished to be dead. Up to that point they pushed for her to do a full school timetable and behave as other kids. School saying 'their fine in school - how can they possibly know' just by looking. This makes me so sad to know teachers think like this. My daughter sees her time at mainstream school as a prison sentence"

In addition, the point that children were receiving mental health support was found to be problematic, children were not receiving help until they reached crisis point.

“Access to appropriate mental health support before the point of crisis”

Furthermore, the difficulty faced in accessing mental health services was highlighted.

“The pandemic has forced schools to look more closely at mental health. The problem now is the link between anxiety/mental health problems and ASD means students have trouble accessing mental health care that is tailored to ASD.”

When asked how such services could be improved, it was suggested that therapies being used were not suited to those with autism and needed to be adapted to meet individual needs.

“I am a mother to a primary age student with ASD and a wife to a husband with ASD who are both intelligent and clever, but both have high levels of anxiety. They have both accessed mental health support, but both have struggled with traditional 'talking' therapy as by their nature, talking therapies are very abstract for people on the spectrum. To be ahead of the game, Shropshire could work on training ASD mental health supporters to work in schools which would in turn ease CAMHS, and support parents and carers.”

“More TMBSS funding and places, so that able to access at the point of starting to struggle with attendance, rather than 2 years later at the point of suicide. More Life Shed and similar provision available, so that children can access at all times, not only at the point of crisis”

It was also highlighted that when parent carers were asking for help relating to mental health concerns of their child, that not enough was being done to help.

“Deregistered my son due to school refusal and high anxiety, was getting letters about fines, when I'd been asking for help for years, and nothing was done”

Furthermore, parent carers felt that it was important for children to have a 'safe space' in the school environment and that their mental health was prioritised.

“Safe spaces that are exactly that, no "pastoral support" allowed to come and question them when they have chosen to be there. Putting mental health before school targets. Senco teachers required to be trained before taking on the role. Body of evidence on good practice approaches.”

Sensory needs

It has been found that stress and anxiety in the school environment are impacted by environmental factors such as noise, crowding, limited mobility opportunities, curriculum demands and changes to routine.

Parent carers also highlighted the issues their children are facing with the school environment. The environment can trigger many different effects with variable outcomes depending on the level of sensory overload experienced by the individual. When sensory overload is experienced, individuals are unable to effectively participate, this is problematic as individuals can become upset, frustrated or angry. The severity of the behavioural outcome depends on the environmental factor which has triggered the sensory overload and how long it takes to understand the reason behind the behaviour to eliminate it.

Triggers which have been identified by parent carers include noise and the number of other pupils in the school.

“Sensory issues, level of noise, movement around buildings, proximity of other bodies in class and corridor”

It was also felt the school environment was not made inclusive for those with sensory issues.

“The school environment not being inclusive, too loud so the child has to leave the lesson instead of the lesson being made quieter”

“The amount of children in the school, especially at break and lunch times, lack of understanding generally by the teachers as a whole”

“Loud bells, smelly rooms, chaotic corridors with all children moving at the same time, visually blindingly busy, all the sensory aspects that make an autistic child in a sense of overload from minute one, even from the moment of waking up, knowing it will be like that.”

this was not just limited to the environment within the classroom, but also the school day as a whole. Issues such as routine being changed, and new staff members also lead to challenges for individuals.

“Sensory overload is a massive problem in mainstream school. Changes in routine, being rushed, unfamiliar staff who don't know the quirks of the child”

It was also highlighted that the way sensory overloads are dealt with in the school environment is problematic.

“Being in a classroom environment. Not being able to stay focused. Easily distracted and then causing a distraction which then leads to not following instructions, then to isolation/detention and exclusion”

Furthermore, it was felt that lunchtimes at school did not meet the needs of those with sensory issues. This was both food options and the noise and number of people in the lunch hall.

“Lunch times and limited lunch menu i.e., not liking foods mixed together or touching on a plate. If given an early lunch pass, they feel singled out but do still need longer to eat”

Another issue highlighted was uniform- and the issues seams, and labels can cause for children with sensory issues.

School uniform full stop. Just should provide a seam free/itch free alternative, or allow choice”

“Choice with uniform.”

It was also felt that when a child had sensory issues in the classroom, that they needed a quiet ‘safe space’ they could use which met their sensory needs.

“Allow more time out of classroom noises gets too much”

In addition, consideration for the needs of an individual need to be considered when speaking to a child 1:1, instead of expecting a child to sit at a desk and remain still.

“When having a chat to someone with autism don't do it in a closed off space or sat around a table - they need to be able to move as this helps them to think and so will open up more”

When parent carers were asked how such issues could be improved, adaption of the environment and consideration for children with sensory issues were the main points where parents felt improvement could be made.

“Schools designed and ran as though all students have autism as this would allow everyone to have a better school experience”

“Make all classes more inclusive so they don't stand out or have melt downs”

“Improved education of others, adapting school environment, understanding”

Peers

Research highlights the difficulties that children with autism have making and maintaining friendships, whether this is due to communication difficulties, the struggle to read body language or understand social cues or anxiety, peers play a

big part in school life, and difficulties linked with this can make the experience of school even more difficult.

Parent carers felt that issues that their child faced with friendships and peers could be due to the lack of awareness that peers had of autism

“Lack of peer empathy and understanding of ASD”

“Misunderstood by peers”

This was evident both at break times and in the classroom. As it is known children with autism can struggle to form friendships, encouraging games what will allow children to all play together as a group could encourage friendships.

“More understanding from peers and their parents! Less Judgement! More feedback about child’s day and encouraging friendships or group games that child can then play at break times”

It was also highlighted the difficulty of peers working together in the classroom- where table plans are often assigned by teachers.

“Being seated by someone that can’t connect with them”

“Other students will target an autistic student even though they may be allocated a TA that TA is used elsewhere or for the whole of the class not enough work is done on the social issues that students have”

Students are also worrying about other peers judging them, especially when they are asked questions in the classroom

“Being asked to answer questions so feel like they are being judged by other peers”

When asked how this could be improved in a school environment, it was suggested that work needed to be done around socialisation and giving children the opportunity to mix with peers in different settings.

“Better integration with peers, better recognized alternative curriculum, accessible after school clubs”

Isolation

Parent carers have concerns not only over the lack of social opportunities with peers, but also for the isolation children are experiencing in the school environment. What we know about social relationships is that they include positive shared emotional

experiences, purposeful engagement in social activities and communication about shared interests, which is what forms the foundations for meaningful friendships- if children are being isolated in school, then friendships will become more difficult to make and maintain, and children will become to feel lonelier.

"Social isolation"

"No great personal care and cannot interact with other children"

"Being left alone"

Parent carers also felt situations were not being effectively dealt with in school- when their child experienced bullying, the school made the child to feel isolated and withdrew them from the social environment.

"Also, instead of dealing with bullies they segregated my child"

"Discrimination, bullying isolation"

"Bullying, don't get enough help"

It was also felt that children with autism were not being offered the same opportunities as typically developing peers which also lead to isolation.

"My son attends a specialist school but when in mainstream I felt he was separated a lot from peers and not offered a full timetable or same opportunities"

Communication

Parent carers feel that there is an issue with communication at schools, and that they are not being listened to. It was felt that schools were not working with parents.

"Schools need to work with parents, not against them"

"Just think parents need to be listened to more"

"Parents are your greatest asset, listen to them!"

In addition, it was felt that communication is a problem between families and other services.

"Much better communication with families is needed as this has an in pact is for life The local LA needs to listen to the families more and transport department needs a total overhaul as it causes so much stress"

Communication was not just highlighted in relation to listening to parent carers. It was also a mentioned that the child needed to be listened to and involved.

“Listening to the child to be at the centre of SENCo provision, including training on how to listen without words”

Reasonable adjustments

Parent carers also highlighted issues around reasonable adjustments in school. This is problematic as reasonable adjustments are dependent on the specific child and their needs, which will deem what is classed as a ‘reasonable’ adjustment. Under the Equality Act 2010, schools have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled pupils are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to non-disabled pupils and can participate in all aspects of school life. If a pupil is struggling to navigate the sensory world of school (i.e., classroom environment, crowded areas) due to their sensory differences, then a school must make reasonable adjustments to help them cope and reach their full potential. Many reasonable adjustments are inexpensive and just require creative changes in practice, rather than the provision of expensive pieces of equipment or additional staff. Schools have a duty to put reasonable adjustments in place, which should be reviewed regularly.

“Better staff training hubs where students know they can go when they have problems school management will take into account the disability when making the rules and regulations of a school make adjustments if needed special autistic sessions to help a student around social situations woodlands professional advice is brought in when needed”

“Support from specific Senco team, and exempt from "behaviour officer", "attendance officer", "uniform officer" etc from intervening, or even better, not having those Draconian/non-person-centred approaches at all”

Parent carers suggested that the school curriculum does not always meet the needs of their child, and that an adaption of learning style would be beneficial.

“Option of blended approach re online and in school learning. Flexible curriculum approach for each individual, with unsuitable lessons not required, e.g. languages, drama, PE or alternatives offered, e.g. life skills, decompression time.”

It was also felt that homework was adding to the existing pressures children face and completing work at home after school could cause further issues.

“Option to either not complete homework or complete in a session that would otherwise be an unsuitable subject.”

In addition, it was suggested that time built into the daily routine to allow the child some time to process and relax would be beneficial.

"Decompression time built into the day."

When parent carers were asked what changes could be implemented to improve the school experience, it was suggested that there should be adjustments in all areas of school life to make children feel more comfortable at school and to make it a more positive experience.

"Child centred goal setting not to mean "to arrive on time" but to be something meaningful and valuable for the child. Children supported to understand life goal setting and co-produce own goals. For every-one goal for the child, there should be ten for the school. For younger children there should be no goals for the child, all goals should be for the school, eg "to support the whole class to communicate appropriately with X", "to minimise classroom smells and explore smells that are pleasing to X", "to learn how best to reward and encourage X".

Other comments

Parent carers were asked if they had any further comments. These did not fit into the themes made from other comments but help to get a further understanding of parent carers views of their children's school experience.

Parent carers felt that the assessment process for diagnosis was taking too long.

"Faster assessments would help massively"

It was also felt that full-time school may not suit all students.

I think children who have verbal skills and no physical issues may benefit from partial integration to main stream

Parent carers also shared comments of their experiences of their children attending mainstream schools, and their feelings towards this.

"Mainstream schools have a lot to learn about autism"

"My autistic child (without any learning or developmental delay) gets offend by the term "support for learning" as he doesn't feel he need help with his learning, just help with understanding social norms and regulating his emotions. Also, in primary school I felt as he was by far achieving the academic success required and his "disability" (also a word I'm not happy having associated with his condition!) was not affecting his academic progress, there was little inertia to do anything to support him until he demonstrated "challenging behaviour". A very reactive approach."

"As a parent mainstream was a nightmare. Still affects me what we went through college was a much more positive experience"

“I home schooled my child from year 7 as I was told he wasn’t bad enough for special school and to put him mainstream school and hope for the best! There was no between school for him.”

“Doing nothing except saying inclusion is a preference is simply insufficient”

Parent carers also commented on the system as a whole.

“The whole of this system is a mess, not just autistic people in mainstream, autistic children in special schools are also being held back”

“Holiday clubs are needed for parents to have a rest. Maybe open the school through holidays for a few days a week.”

Comments were also made about overall feelings and outcomes.

I believe it will take another few generations for things to really change in schools. They are so results based that until this changes and schools get Rewarded for supporting mental health problems and autism things won’t change. Let the schools earn rewards for recognising social and mental health issues and having independent teams to deal with it, when there’s bucks attached, we’ll see change.

Thank you for this opportunity. I hope and trust that this will not be a sticking plaster, but an opportunity for real change.

Conclusion

The open and honest responses that parent carers have provided has given an insight into the experiences faced by them and their children, who have autism, in mainstream schools in Shropshire.

Training

It is clear from the comments received from parent carers that there are many aspects of staff training that they feel could be improved. This included the way training was being delivered to staff, as it was felt that courses could potentially not be providing enough information relating to autism. This included awareness of autism, understanding behaviours and what these behaviours mean, being made aware of the presentation of behaviour differences in girls and boys, and realising that there are differences, and a one size fits all approach does not work. Furthermore, it was felt that training should be provided to allow staff to have reasonable expectations for each child.

Support

Parent carers felt that they were not being supported, specifically it was highlighted that if children were not displaying the same behaviours in school that they were at home, that parents felt they had no support from the school. Furthermore, there is a lack of support for those students who are academically achieving in school- and that the support received in school for students was not always consistent. It was also highlighted the long-term implications if the correct support is not in place when needed.

Understanding

It was felt that staff did not have a clear understanding of autism, this included an understanding of behaviours and traits, understanding the dangers of masking when children could not express themselves, and also a lack of understanding of individuals learning styles.

Mental Health

It was found that there is not enough mental health support available in schools for students with autism. Parent carers commented on the difficulties that they faced accessing appropriate mental health support for their children and that this was not received until the child had reached 'crisis point'. The impact of mental health not being appropriately dealt with was also raised- there have been issues accessing services that provide tailored treatment or therapy for children with autism, and that the therapies used did not always have a positive impact (such as talking therapy).

Sensory Needs

The school environment is not always suited to students with autism, and parent carers felt this was not inclusive. The numbers of students in each class could cause the noise to be too much and was often too crowded. In addition, it was suggested that the school environment was distracting for students due to them being over stimulated by things such as smells, sounds, visuals (such as large amounts of things on walls), and crowded corridors and playgrounds. Another area where children struggled was

with lunch and the limited food options for children who had issues with textures and taste of food. In addition, parent carers highlighted the difficulties children face with uniforms, and how they can find them uncomfortable due to labels, seams or the feeling of the material.

Peers

It was felt that there were issues with children being misunderstood by their peers, which caused further issues with social interactions with other students. Parent carers felt that there could be more done to encourage friendships.

Isolation

Parent carers raised concerns that when their child was a victim of bullying, that to deal with this their child was isolated from others. It was also felt that when children had difficulties with the mainstream curriculum that they were separated from their peers to access education which led to further isolation.

Communication

Parent carers raised their issues with the communication between themselves and school. They feel that they are not always listened to and that it would be a much more positive experience if they were listened to, and the schools worked with them. Communication between services was also highlighted to be an issue, again this involved not listening to the families and also not having clear communication when information was being given from services.

Reasonable Adjustments

Parent carers felt that adjustments could be made to rules and regulations when required, and that a person-centre approach should be implemented. Examples of adjustments included a blended learning approach, with an online learning platform which could be used from home if the child had a period of struggling with the full curriculum being delivered in school. It was also suggested that some aspects of the curriculum were not suitable, or that children may struggle with some lessons (such as PE or drama) and that alternative sessions such as life-skills may be more

beneficial. Another area where parent carers felt some adjustments were needed was with homework- as after being at school all day, children were not always able to sit down and do more work at home, it was suggested that making time in the school day and having homework sessions would be beneficial. In addition, it was suggested that building time into the school day for children to have decompression time would help them to cope with the day.

PACC would like to thank all the parent carers who shared the experiences captured in this report. Their feedback will inform the development of the North Midlands Autism In Schools Pilot and help to improve outcomes for autistic students in mainstream schools.