

SEND Parent/Carer Support Groups

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[www.essex.gov.uk](http://www.essex.gov.uk)

Dear Essex Family Forum

As we start a new academic year term, I am keen to update you on the work we are doing to improve the Essex SEND system. As you know, this is a priority for the council, and we have made further changes and additional investment this year to speed up the pace of improvements. We also know that there is more work to be done before every family feels the benefits of the changes being made.

I'd like to start my first SEND message of the academic year by saying how wonderful it has been to hear how much children and young people have enjoyed the inclusive summer activity places which were available over the summer break. You might remember that there were additional free places announced at the end of July. These were aimed at increasing access to opportunities and improving the experiences of children and young people with SEND. Activities took place at different locations across Essex and included a silent disco, family picnics, soft play and inclusive sport sessions.

Families have told us just how important opportunities like this are for children and young people, in addition to statutory support. I have included some of the feedback we received from parents and carers below. We are committed to running more activities and are currently finalising plans for future school holiday periods. Once these are confirmed, we will let families know how to book them.

*"Thank you to you and your team for an excellent event last night. We hope that there will be another one in the future! Seeing so many children with different needs in the same room was very special."*

*"It was brilliant, thank you so much. It's the first time we have ever done anything like this in Essex, I was a little worried at first, but everything went really well and the staff team were excellent."*

Earlier in the year, we also announced we were recruiting additional independent Educational Psychologists to support with addressing the backlog of Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNA). I have previously acknowledged that the wait time for these is unacceptable and that we are taking urgent action to address this as quickly as possible.

I can confirm that this contract is now in place and the backlog of requests is being processed. This additional resource is now bringing down the average wait times from initial request to a plan being issued, as our in-house team also continues to respond to requests for assessment. Please be reassured that the professional quality standards for these are the same, regardless of who is undertaking the assessment.

Back in June, I also mentioned we were making changes to our EHCNA process. These are aimed at making sure families receive help earlier and that we are providing a better overall service. Changes include, among others, introducing a draft education, health and care plan more quickly, and improving the quality of information available to families during the process. Again, these changes are one part of a wider programme of improvements and it will take a combination of different measures to improve families' experience.

Please be reassured that despite the progress we are starting to see in some areas, we are not complacent. We recognise that the SEND system is still facing significant challenges, locally and nationally. However, we remain steadfast in our efforts to address them. Over the coming year, our improvement journey will continue at pace. Our priorities include:

- providing more support for families who need different support to an EHCNA, or who are awaiting an EHCNA
- making improvements to the Annual Review process
- accessing opportunities to expand educational placements and provision for children and young people with SEND
- continuing to improve the way that children and their families receive support for their communication, occupational and physical needs
- wider engagement, partnership working and national lobbying for significant changes to SEND system

Finally, I'd like to highlight the next round of Local Offer roadshows. These sessions are a chance for families to meet our SEND teams, ask questions and find local support. They will be held in four new locations (Stansted Mountfitchet, South Woodham Ferrers, Brightlingsea and Billericay) this autumn and are open to everyone.

The Essex Local Offer website also provides a wealth of SEND information, advice and guidance. Lots of the groups, organisations and support services listed on here can be accessed without the need for a referral or diagnosis, and so are available to families at any stage of their SEND journey. I'd highly recommend taking a look if you haven't already.

We welcome feedback from families as we continue our improvement efforts. Please share this using Essex Family Forum's established Graffiti Wall: <https://essexfamilyforum.org/have-your-say/feedback-wall> The anonymised comments are reviewed and shared with us each term. We use these to inform our priorities. We will continue to keep you up to date on progress as it continues.

Yours sincerely,



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