

IDENTIFYING SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN THE EARLY YEARS:

PERSPECTIVES FROM SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS COORDINATORS

JULY 2020



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CQC	Care Quality Commission
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
DFE	Department for Education
DoH	Department of Health
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EHC plan	Education, Health and Care plan
ELG	Early Learning Goals
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
HV	Health Visitor
IEP	Individual Education Plan
LA	Local Authority
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
nasen	National Association for Special Educational Needs
NA SENCO	National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination
PVI	Private, voluntary or independent
SALT/CLT	Speech and Language Therapist
SEN*	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEND*	Special Educational Needs and Disability

*Note: the terms SEN/ SEND are used interchangeably within the report

Thank you to all the early years SENCOs and early years Area SENCOs who gave up their time to either complete the survey online and/or take part in the interviews. Your contributions are hugely appreciated, and we hope this research will contribute to the on-going discussions regarding the provision of high quality support for children with special educational needs in the early years.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, nasen has significantly increased its focus on SEN within early years settings. This has included nasen's partnership with School Improvement Liverpool on the Level 3 Early Years SENCO qualification as well as being part of the Early Years SEND Partnership led by the National Children's Bureau. A dedicated section of the nasen website now hosts a suite of free resources to support effective identification and provision of SEND in the early years: <https://nasen.org.uk/training-and-cpd/early-years.html>

The rationale for increasing our work in this area is the concept that early identification results in effective provision being put in place sooner. The intention is to support the narrowing of the educational gaps between children with SEND and children without SEND that are already too wide by the time children start school.

However, there are significant challenges to implementing early identification and increased SEND provision within early years settings. Early years is one of the least well-funded areas of our education system, but arguably one of the most important. The range of professionals is also broad, which can make the consistent identification more difficult to achieve in practice.

This is why nasen has commissioned this important study on identifying SEN in the early years. By better understanding what is working well and where the challenges are, nasen and others can continue to support professionals in early years settings in the months and years ahead.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Adam Boddison". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

Professor Adam Boddison

CEO – nasen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

Identifying special educational needs (SEN) in the early years: The role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) is a nasen research project which seeks to explore the way in which early years SENCOs manage the process of identifying SEN in their settings.

In 2019 there was an estimated 72,000 early years providers in England, through which 1.7 million Ofsted registered childcare places were offered (DfE, 2019a). Childminders accounted for just over half (54%) of all providers, whilst group-based settings, including nurseries and pre-schools, accounted for just over one-third (33%). The majority of group-based and school-based providers had an average of four children with SEN registered at their setting (DfE, 2019a).

With the requirement that maintained nursery schools appoint a teacher (with qualified teacher status) as a SENCO, and that all private, voluntary or independent settings identify a SENCO who should be a Level 3 practitioner, this research aimed to explore the approaches that SENCOs took during the process of assessing a child's needs, the resources they used and the wider support they could access. The research explored the perspective of SENCOs working across a variety of settings, including childminders, nurseries, pre-schools and maintained nursery schools. The research took a two phased approach. Initially a broad based online survey was conducted, which received over 200 responses from early years SENCOs. The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with sixteen SENCOs and three Area SENCOs.

KEY FINDINGS

Identifying SEN

The majority of SENCOs commented on the importance of staff knowledge and experience when considering whether a child may have additional educational needs in the early years. 80% of SENCOs reported that they felt confident when identifying SEN in their setting, citing a team approach and constant communication as central to this confidence. SENCOs also reported on the importance of staff training in identifying SEN, but noted that this was often lacking.

The importance of gathering a holistic picture of the child was cited by SENCOs as intrinsic to the identification process. In addition to exploring the prime areas of learning, SENCOs noted that all aspects of the child and family's life needed to be considered when investigating whether a child may need additional support; changes such as joining a new setting, moving house or a change in family circumstances could also explain the difficulties a child may be experiencing.

SENCOs reported that they took an evidence based approach to identifying needs in their settings, using data to track progress at regular (typically six weekly) intervals. The majority of SENCOs (69%) felt confident in these processes. Frequent and targeted observations were highlighted as the primary way in which staff gathered information, to help them understand how the child was developing, including their areas of strength and areas for development.

SENCOs use national and local guidance to support their decision making regarding a child's progress. Communication and interaction were noted as the key areas to focus on during observations; speech and language was cited by participants as the greatest area of need in their settings.

SENCOs raised concerns that, due to the time it can take to engage with parents and outside agencies, lower levels of SEN could be 'missed' in the early years. With some SENCOs suggesting that there was a tendency to focus on more complex SEN.

KEY FINDINGS

Relationships with families

SENCOs stated that developing a holistic approach meant that positive relationships with families were paramount. Many SENCOs noted that their setting was typically the parents' first experience of an educational setting for their child. Consequently, SENCOs noted the importance of steadily building relationships with families, which can take time, and 'drip feeding' information about their child's progress; key workers are central to this process. Home visits were cited as an important factor as part of developing relationships, but also as part of the process for identifying SEN.

KEY FINDINGS

The importance of understanding the early years

SENCOs felt that early years settings often had the scope to be more flexible in their approach to provision, and therefore meet needs in their setting. As a consequence, SENCOs felt that for some children their needs became more apparent in a more formal school setting, where there were different expectations, different staffing levels and potentially less flexibility with provision.

SENCOs voiced concerns that early years settings were not understood by others, including schools. Children may attend full or part time, for a short period or attend multiple settings. Settings may be for children from birth, or from three years old. This can impact on the time it takes to identify SEN, access support from multi-agencies and develop relationships with parents as well as impacting on transition to school. Early years SENCOs shared concerns that this could lead to the perception that children and their potential needs have been 'missed' upon transition, due to factors outside of the early years SENCOs control.

The theme of 'professional frustration' was shared by a number of SENCOs who stated that whilst they had an in-depth knowledge of the child and family, their views were not often given sufficient 'weight' in comparison to the view of a multi-agency professional. This could lead to missed opportunities for sharing information.

KEY FINDINGS

SENCOs accessing support

The ability to access timely multi-agency support was highlighted by SENCOs as important to the process of investigating a child's potential needs; however, the experience of SENCOs in different localities varied significantly.

Whilst accessing support from speech and language services was typically reported as positive, SENCOs reported that they often found it difficult to access health visitors, paediatricians and, in particular, occupational therapists. Concerns were raised regarding the time that it could take to access support for a child. Some SENCOs reported that the processes for accessing advice and/ or support from multi-agencies had become increasingly convoluted and lengthy.

Some SENCOs highlighted the financial pressure that accepting a child with additional needs can place on a setting, stating that there was not enough access to wider financial support. SENCOs cited a tension between the moral obligation to provide the correct support for a child whilst settings were under financial pressure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy

1. Guidance for identifying SEN in the early years should take into account the variance between different types of early years setting.

The early years is typically discussed as a homogenous group when referenced in SEN policy and guidance. However, the research undertaken demonstrates that the approach to identifying SEN in early settings, and providing the subsequent support, varies depending on the setting as well as the nature of the SENCO role. There is a need for more targeted guidance relevant to the different early years settings.

2. Greater representation of the early years sector, and the different types of setting, when seeking views for future policy making should be ensured.

Consideration should be given to how represented the early years sector is during local and national policy reviews. Following the principles of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) regarding the benefit of early identification and support for children with additional needs, it is important to ensure fair representation of all early years settings to ensure that issues, and good practice, can be identified and taken into account for all future policy making decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The SENCO role

3. Guidance should be developed to help determine the time allocated to the early years SENCO role in different settings.

Time for the SENCO role in the early years remains ad hoc, with SENCOs reporting varied approaches to managing their role, including working from home in the evenings. To support SENCOs and their line managers with this, guidance should be produced for early years settings, similar to the Whole School SEND Effective SENCO Deployment Guide. The guidance should be developed with practitioners and should explore how the SENCO can be effectively deployed in different early years settings.

4. A job description, specific for the early years SENCO role, should be developed.

To support how the SENCO role is perceived and understood by practitioners, an early years SENCO job description (DFE, 2018) should be incorporated into the review of the SEND Code of Practice (DFE and DoH, 2019) in 2020.

5. Work should be undertaken to help develop understanding of the early years SENCO role across the education, health and care sectors.

SENCOs often reported being excluded from multi-agency meetings, despite their in-depth understanding of the child they were supporting. They also reported concerns that they were not regarded as 'professionals', particularly when they voiced concerns about a child. This was particularly problematic as the SENCO was typically providing the subsequent support required for the child and family. Further work should be undertaken, specifically with wider multi-agencies, to ensure that the early years SENCO voice is incorporated into the process of assessing the needs of a child, to enable a consistent and timely approach to meeting children's needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Sharing good practice

6. The sharing of good practice developed by early years SENCOs, particularly in relation to developing family relationships, should be facilitated across the sector and later phases.

SENCOs reported the benefits of developing relationships with families, and the impact that this can have on developing a holistic picture of the child. This was facilitated through varied types of engagement, but in particular home visits. Therefore, there is scope for early years colleagues to share good practice with later phases of education to help continue the development of parental relationships, particularly during transition.

7. Good practice demonstrated by early years SENCOs, in relation to developing inclusive environments, should be shared across phases.

SENCOs reported that a strength of early years settings was how they could respond to a child's needs, through adapting the curriculum and environment to meet the needs of the child. Whilst primary and secondary colleagues are meeting different demands in their settings, there is an opportunity to facilitate at a local and national level the cross phase sharing of good practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Training

8. Training in relation to speech, language and communication needs should be prioritised within the early years sector.

Speech and language and social communication/ interaction were cited as the highest incidence of SEN in settings, and therefore the most common focus of observations. This indicates a training need at both local and national level.

9. Early years practitioners, particularly those new to role, may benefit from support with how to develop family relationships.

Some practitioners may benefit from specific training on how to develop effective relationships with parents, including how to have what may be perceived as difficult conversations regarding their child's progress to ensure that concerns are investigated and supported in a timely manner. There is also a potential training need regarding how to develop parents' awareness of SEN in the early years, to support the development of future conversations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Liaison with other settings and agencies

10. Information from the progress check at aged two should be shared between the child's providers as standard practice.

Schools in particular noted concerns that information regarding the progress check at aged two was not always shared with the early years setting. Local areas should consider how this information is shared, to ensure early concerns are communicated with early years providers, as missing such information could lead to a delay in accessing support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Possible further research

11. Perspectives of transition across phases.

The research highlighted that some aspects of transition were problematic, with early years SENCOs stating that they felt some issues related to transition were specific to their setting. However, transition is an issue across phases. Future research into transition, in particular the specific issues at each phase, with a view to making recommendations for working with each phase, may help increase understanding, and therefore improve outcomes for children, in this area.

12. Developing relationships with families, securing good practice from the early years.

The research suggested that SENCOs in the early years particularly prioritised the development of relationships with families, suggesting that this helps to build trust and therefore family resilience. Research into how this is facilitated would help inform practice in later phases.

13. Parents as partners. The development of true co-production

Whilst the research indicated that developing relationships with parents was a priority, the involvement of parents through the process of raising concerns, through to identifying and supporting needs was more mixed, echoing later phases in education. Research into how parents are involved in a meaningful way across phases, and thereby fulfilling the principles of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015), would help identify good practice and as well as identify areas for development, and therefore potential training needs.

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

Overview of the research

Identifying special educational needs (SEN) in the early years: The role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) is a nasen research project which seeks to explore the way in which early years SENCOs manage the process of identifying SEN in their settings, including the approaches they take, the resources they use and the wider support they can access. Factors which both help and hinder the process are also explored. The research explores the perspective of SENCOs working across a variety of settings, including childminders, nurseries, pre-schools and maintained nursery schools. The research took a two phased approach. Initially a broad based online survey was conducted, which received over 200 responses. The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with sixteen SENCOs and three Area SENCOs.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Background to the research

In 2019 there were an estimated 72,000 early years providers in England, through which 1.7 million Ofsted registered childcare places were offered (DfE, 2019a). Childminders accounted for just over half (54%) of all providers, whilst group-based settings, including nurseries and pre-schools, accounted for just over one-third (33%). Just over three-quarters of children aged 0 – 4 accessed some form of childcare and just under two-thirds (64%) accessed formal childcare (DfE, 2019b). The 2019 Summary of Childcare and Early Years Providers Report illustrated that ‘the majority of group-based (75%) and school-based providers (80%) has at least one registered child with SEND at their setting’ (DfE, 2019a p. 15). The most recent statistic published by the Department for Education (DfE) in relation to Education, Health and Care plans (EHCP) illustrated that 0.5% of children with EHCPs were in non-maintained early years setting (DfE, 2019c). This equates to 1708 children. However, the majority of group-based and school-based providers had an average of four children with SEND registered at their setting (DfE, 2019a).

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) states that, in terms of entitlement, all children should have access to education which enables them to:

- achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes, and
- become confident young children with a growing ability to communicate their own views and ready to make the transition into compulsory education (DfE and DoH, 2015 p. 79)

The SEND Code of Practice is emphatic that those who work in early years settings should be ‘alert to emerging difficulties and respond early’ (DfE and DoH, 2015 p. 79). All early years providers must have in place clear processes for identifying and responding to additional needs. Whilst it is a statutory requirement for all maintained nursery schools to appoint a teacher (with qualified teacher status) as a SENCO, the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage states that it is an expectation that private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings identify a SENCO (DfE, 2017). Guidance published by the DfE in 2018 stated that the early years SENCO role in PVI settings is for a Level 3 practitioner.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

In addition to this, the DfE worked with organisations, including nasen, to develop a Level 3 early years SENCO qualification and job description for those in non-maintained settings. The job description states that the early years SENCO is responsible for the day to day operation of the SEN policy, which includes implementing the graduated approach (DfE, 2015).

The Care Quality Commission (CQC) and Ofsted were commissioned by the then Minister of State for Children and Families to undertake a series of local area inspections (152 areas) over five years, following the introduction of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015). The purpose was to inspect 'the effectiveness of local areas fulfilling their new duties' (Ofsted, 2017 p. 3) in relation to the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014 and related statutory guidance.

The report which reviewed the first 30 Local Area inspections concluded that, 'children's and young people's SEND were identified well in the early years, particularly those with complex needs' (Ofsted, 2017 p. 5). The report stated that the two and a half year check was instrumental in leading to 'timely and accurate early identification' (Ofsted, 2017 p. 5) and transition arrangements were particularly effective. However, the Local Area SEND inspections report specifically cited children with the most complex needs, rather than children who may be considered to require SEN support.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

In addition to the Local Area SEND inspections report (Ofsted, 2017) in the autumn of 2019 the House of Commons Education Committee published the findings from the cross-party inquiry which scrutinised the implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014 (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019). Whilst the report highlighted that a focus on EHCPs had led to the neglect of children at SEN support, this was referred to in the school context with no reference made to early years provision. Additionally, the issue of transition between nursery and primary school was cited as a challenge for parents whose children have additional needs, challenging the Local Area SEND Inspection report findings (Ofsted, 2017).

Given the above information, including a lack of focus on the experience in the early years and following the recent National SENCO Workload Survey (Curran et al., 2018) which found that 70 % of SENCOs felt that they did not have enough time allocated to the role, the purpose of this research was to explore the perspective of the early years SENCO and to explore further the issues related to early identification in their settings.

RESEARCH AIMS AND SCOPE

The research endeavoured to explore the process of identifying SEN in the early years, from the perspective of the SENCO. The research specifically explored the varying ways in which SENCOs approached the process, beginning with initial concern, the evidence they draw upon and how they worked with colleagues and families.

The aims of the research were to explore:

- The process of identifying SEN in early years settings, with a specific focus on the SENCO role and their working relationships with children, parents, staff and other relevant individuals.
- From the SENCOs' perspective, the key issues regarding the identification of SEN within their early years settings, including how they understand the difference between what may be considered 'typical development' and a possible special educational need.
- The key enablers and barriers in relation to identifying SEN, as perceived by the SENCO in their settings.
- The support and resources SENCOs are able to access during the process of identifying whether a child may have an additional need.

The research was undertaken between November 2019 – March 2020.

RESEARCH AIMS AND SCOPE

The project consisted of two phases:

- **Phase one: an online survey.** Completed November – December 2019.
- **Phase two: interviews with early years SENCOs and early years Area SENCOs.** January – March 2020.

The first phase of the study was an online survey, open to early years SENCOs. The survey was shared through local authority networks, social media and SEN networks.

The second phase of the study consisted of semi-structured interviews with early years SENCOs and local authority Area SENCOs. The interviews provided more in-depth, more nuanced data, and sought to develop the themes emerging from the findings in phase one. All interviews were conducted over the telephone, with each interview lasting between 15 – 35 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data was analysed using the thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

The findings from the early years SENCOs have typically been reported as a homogenous group, unless the type of setting was specific to the contribution. The findings from the early years Area SENCOs have been reported separately, under the theme Supporting early years SENCOs.

Please see Appendix 1 for detail regarding the methodology and participants.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

Participants

216 people responded to the online survey, with 214 giving their consent for their data to be reported within this document. Of the 214 respondents who consented to their data being reported, 202 stated that they worked as a SENCO in an early years setting. Therefore, the data reports upon this group.

36% (n=72) of respondents worked in a pre-school setting. Nearly one third worked in a day nursery (31% n=62). 4% (n=8) of respondents worked as either a childminder or providing childcare in the home (e.g. nanny, au pair). 51% (n=102) of SENCOs described the sector they worked in as private, with just over one quarter (27% n=53) working in the maintained sector.

Over three-quarters of respondents (78 % n=157) had at least eight years (or more) experience of working in an early years setting. Experience of the SENCO role was more varied, however nearly two-thirds of SENCOs (63% n=128) stated that they had four years (or more) experience in the role. Qualifications varied significantly. However almost all of the respondents (99% n=200) stated that they had a level 3 qualification or higher. 20 respondents (10%) stated that they had Early Years Teacher Status, while 39 respondents (19%) had Qualified Teacher Status. 45% (n= 91) had completed, or were completing, the SENCO award.

Time allocated to the role varied significantly. 10% (n=20) of all respondents stated that they did not have any allocated time. 22% (n= 43) of all respondents were allocated time on an ad hoc basis. The majority had one day or less per week to focus on the SENCO role (43%, n=85), although 54% (n=38) of pre-school SENCOs reported that they one day or less per week. Only 39% (n=78) of all SENCOs, and 19% (n=5) of local authority maintained nursery school SENCOs, felt that they had enough time to complete the SENCO role.

Please see Appendix 1 for more detail regarding the participants for this phase.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

Identifying SEN in the early years: the process

32% of SENCOs (n=64) cited that the early identification of a potential SEN was the current priority for their setting. However, the majority of SENCOs who worked in a nursery setting stated that early intervention was their current priority for the development of SEN provision (33% n=20).

Nearly 70% of SENCOs (69% n=139) stated that they felt either extremely confident or very confident that there was a clear process for identifying SEN in their setting. A strong theme which permeated the responses to this question was the importance of having clear policies, processes and procedures when considering whether a child may have an additional need.

Any children that staff have concerns about can be shared either at their supervision meetings, in staff meetings or discussing informally. Actions are agreed, and all interventions are only put in place once parents have been consulted and to see what parents feel.

We use a graduated response and I meet termly to review with [the] teachers whole class progress.

In addition to this, SENCOs highlighted the importance of communication with colleagues. Information sharing between key workers and the SENCO was noted as an intrinsic part of the identification process. It is noteworthy that the majority of respondents referred to the process of identifying SEN as one which is embedded through their typical processes for monitoring the development of all children, as opposed to something that is additional to their current processes.

We have a very clear process and plenty of resources accessible at any time. We all see each other all the time, we are a good team and work together which allows for effective communication. Teachers are incredibly good at discussing any issues or concerns with me even at informal level.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

94% of SENCOs (n=188) stated that they were familiar with the SEND Code of Practice (DFE and DoH, 2015), specifically chapter 5, potentially indicating confidence in being familiar with the expectations and the processes related to SEN in their settings. However, when asked to expand on their answers, only nine respondents specifically mentioned the graduated approach as part of the process for identifying SEN in their early years settings.

We adopt a graduated approach to the identification of SEND. Through the reflective cycle of assess, plan, do, review we are able to identify where a child is not making progress. This is embedded into our policy which I wrote myself. Supporting other team members to understand the process during staff meetings has also helped. It has raised their awareness of SEND and what to look for when identifying a need.

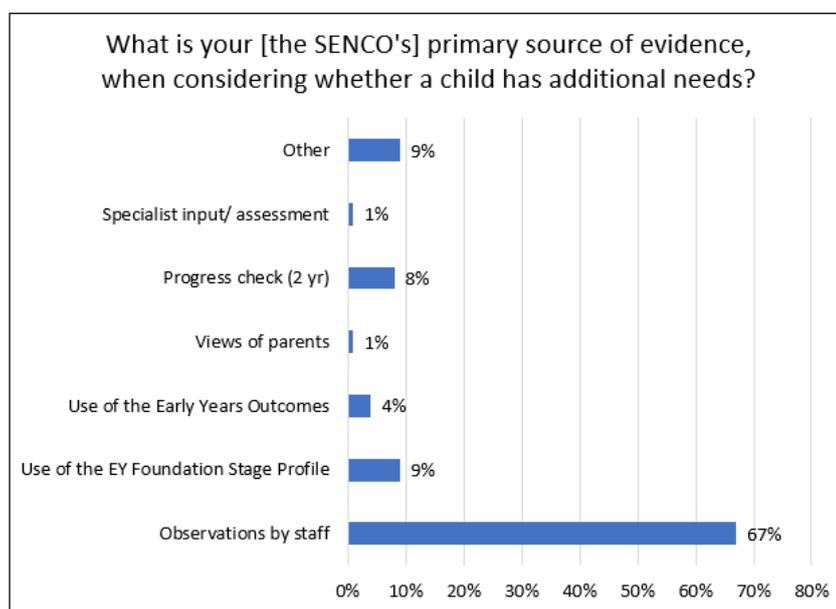
Whilst only 29% (n=57) of all SENCOs reported that they felt it was difficult to meet the requirements within the SEND Code of Practice (DFE and DoH, 2015) this figure increased when specific settings were considered, with 65% (n=17) of SENCOs working in local authority maintained nursery schools reporting such difficulty, with one respondent stating:

Very limited funding for additional support from Local Authority even when [the] child get[s an] EHCP. Leaves little time for staff to carry out preventative work with children at the lower end of a graduated response. Time frames very tight, combined with long waiting lists for SALT means it can be challenging to ensure children get the specialist input and evidence towards needs assessment within the preschool year.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

Identifying SEN in the early years: an evidence based approach

When asked about the primary source of evidence a SENCO could refer to when considering whether a child has additional needs, 67% of SENCOs (n=134) stated observations by staff, with 90% of SENCOs (n=179) stating that this evidence was either extremely useful or very useful. Only 1% (n=3) of SENCOs stated that the views of the parents were the primary source of evidence.



When asked to provide further information, fourteen SENCOs also specifically highlighted the importance of review meetings; the frequency of these varied with some commenting that meetings happened every 6 weeks, and others 3 times per year.

In addition to this, a variety of other sources of evidence and information were mentioned by the respondents which supported the process of identifying SEN in their settings. This included vulnerable logs, Wellcomm screening, progress meetings and IEP reviews; however predominately tracking and assessment were referred to in a non-specific sense.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

Identifying SEN in the early years: involving others

41% (n=81) of SENCOs stated that they felt either extremely confident, or very confident, that parents understood the process for identifying SEN in their settings. It is notable however that only 23% (n=6) of the local authority maintained nursery school SENCOs agreed with this statement, despite the statutory requirement to have a SEN information report.

54% of SENCOs (n=107) stated that they would involve parents as soon as concerns were first raised; although for those who had completed, or were completing, the SENCO Award, this increased to 64% (n=57). 43% (n=86) of all participants stated that they would wait until after a period of evidence gathering.

I feel that partnership with parents is key and something that is effective in my setting. However, I do feel early years practitioners would benefit from training around those initial tricky conversations, not all families receive the news as a positive, some don't agree with your judgement and can challenge your professional opinion.

This indicates that the SENCOs were, as stated by the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) gathering evidence and then considering this with parents. However, to a degree the data suggested information was shared rather than co-considered; the validity of the observational input from parents was less clear, with only 1% (n=3) of SENCOs stating that this was a primary source of evidence. Whilst this indicates that parental partnership is key, the timing and degree of this involved varied.

However, it is notable that a recurring theme was the time it can take to engage with parents, especially if there are concerns regarding a child's development, with one SENCO stating:

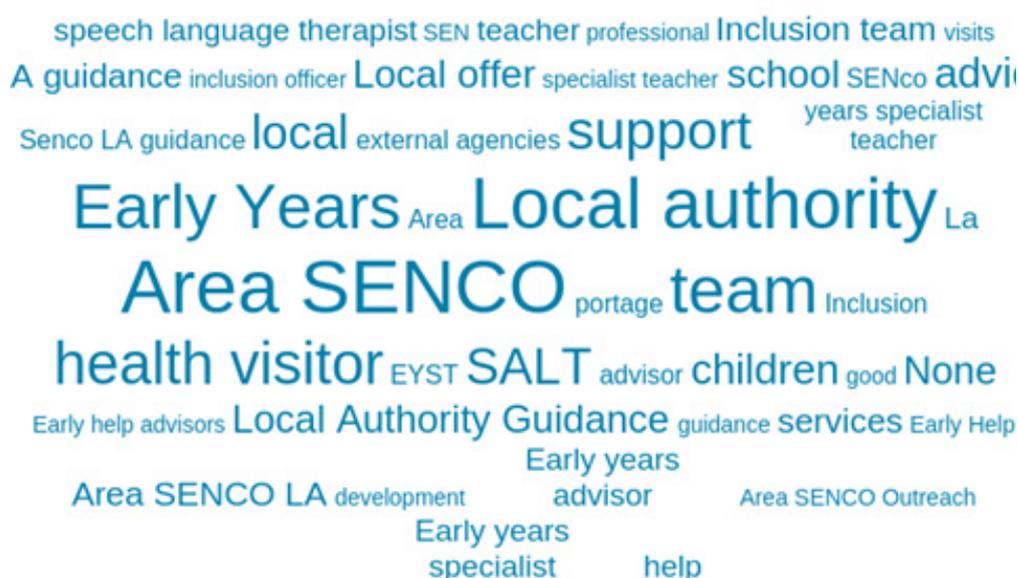
FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

Parents often don't want to hear that their child has any difficulties and it can therefore take time to move to further assessment.

Parents don't always want to hear that their child requires additional support, this can be a difficult conversation and needs to be handled carefully.

Just over a quarter of SENCOs (26% n=51) stated that they would involve an external agency only if additional support or advice was required, whilst 29% of SENCOs (n=56) stated that they would contact the local authority only if additional funding was required. Area SENCOs tended to be contacted either following a period of evidence gathering (30% n=59) or when additional advice or support was required (23% n=45).

The survey illustrated that SENCOs were accessing varied support, and that this differed depending on where the SENCO was based geographically. The majority of respondents reported that they were able to access support from the local authority, typically this meant either written guidance or support from the Area SENCO through either setting visits or training. However, the issue of accessing support and funding in a timely manner permeated the survey responses.



FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

Understanding the difference between 'typical' development and a potential SEN

88% of all SENCOs (n=175) and 92% (n=24) of SENCOs from local authority maintained nursery schools indicated that communication and interaction was the primary type of need in their setting. Only 3 of the respondents stated that they felt cognition and learning was their primary area of need; with one interviewee suggesting that this was 'more the role of the school'. However, whilst the numbers are small, when individual settings are considered it is worth noting that 12% (n=7) of nursery SENCOs reported that social, emotional and mental health difficulties accounted for the primary type of need in their setting.

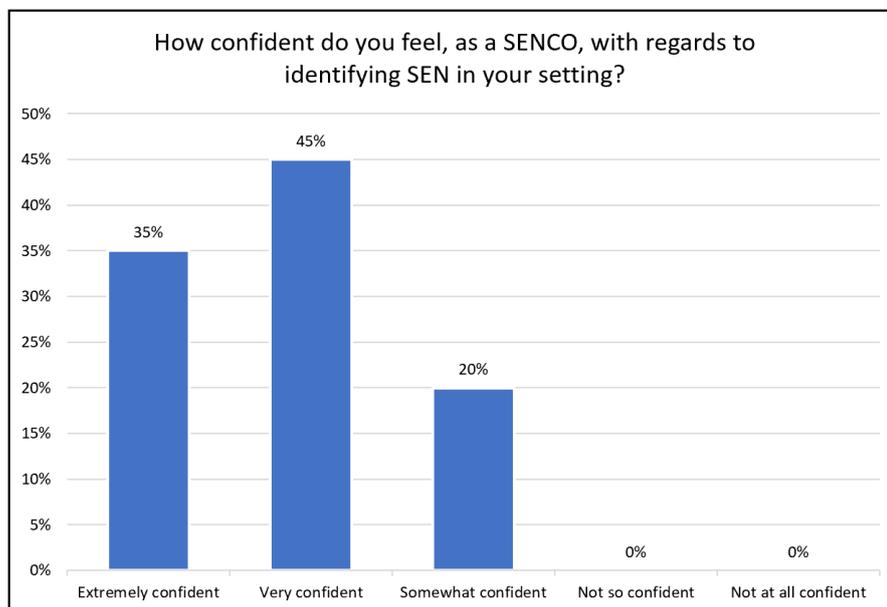
80% of SENCOs who responded to the survey (n= 160) stated that they felt either extremely confident or very confident with regards to identifying a SEN in their setting, reflecting, to a degree, the confidence expressed regarding the processes for identifying SEN in their settings. A prominent theme was the importance of practitioner experience. However, it is notable that of the 91 respondents who had completed, or were completing, the SENCO qualification, 87% (n=78) felt either extremely confident or very confident regarding the identification of SEN in their settings.

I have been a SENCO for 14 years and have lots of knowledge and experience.

Experienced gathered through years of working with SEND children means I am now often able to identify concerns early.

I have many years of experience with children with SEND and feel my knowledge and experience enable me to identify and put strategies in place to support SEND from an early point.

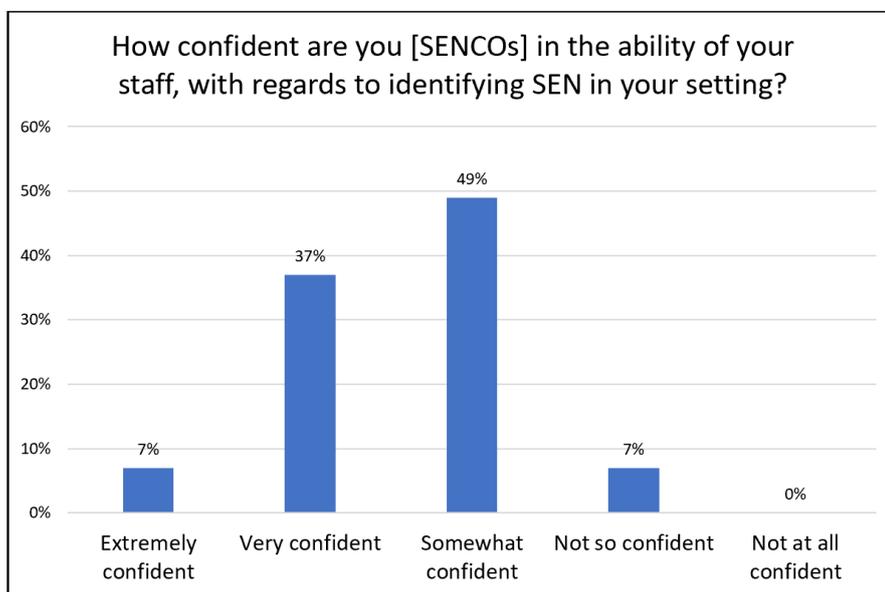
FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY



In addition to experience, a number of SENCOs reported on the importance of training. 58% of all SENCOs (n=116) stated that they had received training specifically in relation to identifying SEN in the early years. When specific settings were explored, 68% (n=48) of pre-school SENCOs and 5 out of the 7 childminders reported that they had received training specific to SEN in the early years. A further 20% (n=39) of all SENCOs reported that they had received general training in relation to identifying SEN. A number of SENCOs stated that their own personal interest in the area had prompted them to undertake further training. The training providers varied, with a number of SENCOs referring to local authority training, as well as the Level 3 SENCO training. Training on autism was also a pervading theme in terms of the focus of the training.

SENCOs also reported that the experience of their staff was central to identifying SEN early on, through knowing 'what to look out for', although it was evident that this was hard to quantify. Whilst SENCOs were predominantly confident in their ability to identify SEN in their settings, they were less confident in their staff. 45% of SENCOs (n=85) stated that they felt either extremely confident, or very confident, in the ability of their staff in relation to identifying SEN.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY



Again experience, or lack of, permeated the responses with concerns voiced that less experienced members of staff had not received training in this area. SENCOs felt that their relationship with staff was important, noting the importance of staff being able to approach them with concerns, as well as their role in providing ongoing training and support for staff:

Many of the staff team are very newly qualified and have identified themselves as lacking confidence in this area.

Some of the staff are fairly new to early years and have not been on any SEN training as yet.

All staff are made aware of our SEN policy at their induction. The staff are encouraged to discuss any concerns and observations they have on their key children. Inset days are used to update all staff on any SEN trainings and reports.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

The level of knowledge varies across the team. It is a challenge to make sure that less experienced staff know the importance of early identification and have the knowledge to do so successfully.

However, a concern was voiced that children with 'low levels' or 'less complex' SEN may be missed, due to the age of the child, as well as there being a greater focus on those with more complex needs.

In addition, the young age of the children can sometimes disguise an underlying SEND.

Not all staff have clear understanding of EYFS and child norms of development, so issues aren't always picked up early.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

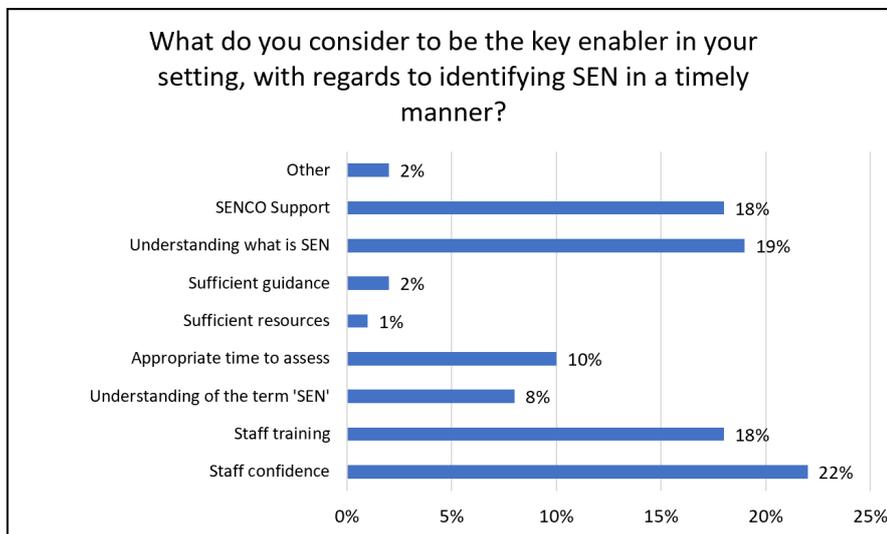
What supports the process of identifying SEN in early years settings?

A key theme which pervaded the responses throughout the survey was the importance of staff confidence, which tended to develop from experience. 22% of SENCOs (n=44) stated that staff confidence was the key enabler when identifying SEN in a timely manner, with 30% (n=18) of nursery SENCOs considering this the key enabler. In relation to this, SENCOs also cited understanding at what point needs may be considered SEN (19% of SENCOs n=38) and staff training (18% of SENCOs n=36) as the primary enablers.

Staff who confidently understand what SEN is, who confidently feel they can speak up and confidently explain those concerns will come to the SENDCO as soon as they have concerns. Staff who lack confidence may have all the knowledge but hesitate to speak up and act.

It is interesting to note that time was not cited as a key factor, with only 10% of respondents (n=19) stating that this as key. This may relate to the team approach cited by SENCOs, as well as the holistic, embedded processes for SEN. A 'team approach' was frequently cited as a factor which supported the process of identifying SEN in their settings, particularly as this facilitated effective communication between colleagues.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

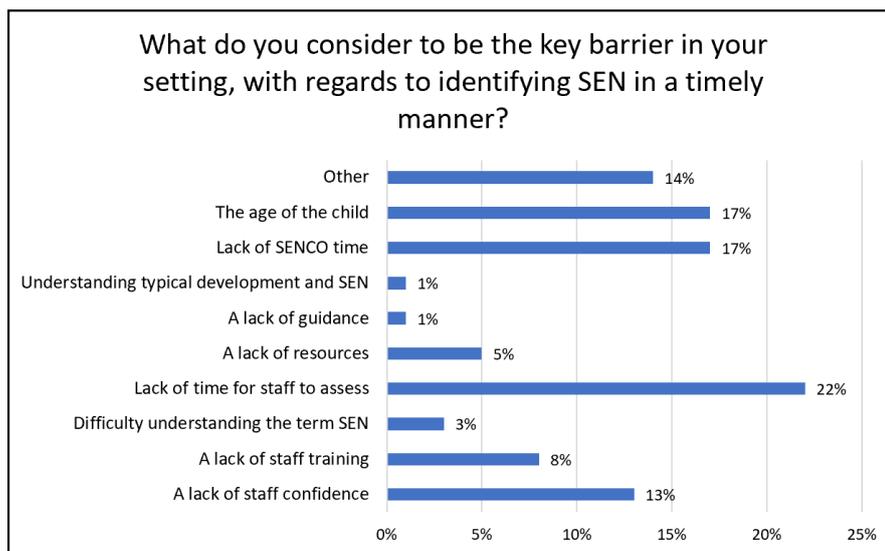


In addition to this, SENCOs reported upon the importance of having robust systems, which staff engaged with, as a factor which enables the timely identification of SEN in their settings. Within this regular meetings, formal or otherwise, were cited as key.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

What factors can hinder the process of identifying SEN in the early years?

The factors which SENCOs considered to act as a barrier when identifying SEN were more varied and without a general consensus.



However, 3 of the 7 childminders highlighted a lack of resources as their biggest barrier for identifying SEN in their settings.

There are not the facilities to refer to! Early intervention is all well and good... but the teams such as SALT and HV etc are so stretched that unless the need is extreme then you have NO CHANCE of a referral... children with mild to moderate difficulties are overlooked... the ATS in my area emailed in September to say they have no more capacity for any referrals... it's disgraceful.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

In addition to this, the expanded answers highlighted further issues which could impact on the process for identifying SEN in the early years. These responses included accessing external agency support, engagement with parents, the age of the child and the time the child is in the early years setting.

It can be difficult to assess a child if they are not in the setting very often, e.g. due to illness, only attending one or two days a week, holidays, parental choice on how often to send them.

Over the last few years, the professional services like speech and language therapists, Camhs etc seem to be stretched resulting in delays before a child referred is seen. This is frustrating as we often have children only for a year before they move to primary school. This is the main barrier in getting specific strategies to put into place.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE TWO: THE INTERVIEWS

The findings have been reported under four over-arching themes: identifying SEN, the importance of relationships with families, the uniqueness of the early years and working with multi-agencies.

Participants

The following section reports on the findings from the semi-structured interviews which were undertaken with early years SENCOs and local authority early years Area SENCOs (or equivalent) between January 2020 and March 2020. Sixteen early years SENCOs and three early years Area SENCOs took part. The SENCOs were from varying settings, including pre-schools (6), nurseries (6) and maintained nursery schools (3). One participant was a childminder. Geographically, the majority of participants were located in the South East and South West of England. However, there was also representation from other areas including the Midlands and the North West. The early years Area SENCOs were from three different local authorities, in the South and South West of England.

All SENCO participants held roles in addition to their SENCO role. Typically, these were management roles, for example designated safeguarding lead, deputy manager, manager, headteacher and owner. Four of the SENCOs were also room leaders, whilst some others took responsibility for providing small group or 1:1 support for children with additional needs in their setting. Two of the SENCOs worked across more than one setting. Time allocated specifically to facilitating the SENCO role varied significantly; whilst some were full time noncontact SENCOs, or had specific time allocated on a weekly basis, a high proportion were allocated time on an ad hoc basis, or felt that the SENCO work was assimilated into their other roles. Some SENCOs reported that whilst they carried out 1:1 support and meetings in their setting, paperwork was completed at home. SENCOs reported that if they needed any additional time for the role they were able to request this from their manager.

Please see Appendix 1 for further information regarding the methodology and participants.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOS

Identifying SEN

Identifying needs should be a holistic process

Whilst the majority of SENCOS stated the importance of staff knowledge and experience when considering whether a child may have additional educational needs, the importance of gathering a holistic picture of the child was cited by SENCOS as intrinsic to the identification process, with one SENCO stating:

You can't identify a SEN without understanding the whole picture.

SENCOS were empathic that it was important to take into account all the factors which relate to the child's life, including their home life, whether they had any siblings, whether they had attended a different setting previously, or whether they currently attend more than one setting. One SENCO noted that this was particularly important as children tended to arrive at their setting with very little information. For some settings the SENCOS noted that understanding the development of children with English as an additional language (EAL) was imperative. The list of elements to consider was considerable, with one SENCO participant stating:

The rest of it [considering potential SEN] we have to investigate, so we'd have to investigate what the life at home [is like], maybe go see them at home, go and see what routines they've got, who's connected to them, are they going to childminders, are they seeing other people, what do they do in their spare time? Those sorts of things build us up a better picture of what we're seeing. Is it a special education need, or is it anxiety, [eg] there's been a change.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOS

The idea of developing and building up a holistic picture was further evident through the contribution of another SENCO participant, echoing the sentiments regarding the need to holistically investigate as shared with the other participants:

You investigate everything. You're putting the child in the middle and you're investigating their worlds, so it's not just... it's about their family, their relatives, who they've got, who they interact with, where they live, their environment, what friends they have, what their parents lives are like, what their parents jobs are like, how that impacts on the parents and how it impacts on the family.

Two of the nursery school SENCOS and three of the nursery SENCOS added that they would also discuss with the parents the child's birth, in particular the term of their birth. One of the nursery school SENCOS stated:

We ask questions about the pregnancy, recognising that the first thousand days from conception are the most important. So, we've changed our home visits now so that we ask from pregnancy.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

Raising concerns is more than a ‘gut-feeling’

The participants were asked, at what point did key workers tend to raise concerns; what prompted the process of considering whether a child may need additional support? Whilst all SENCOs highlighted that knowledge of child development and experience in the role were intrinsic to understanding whether a child may need additional support, five of the sixteen participants referred to having a ‘gut feeling’ about a child, which would often prompt the process. A nursery SENCO described how she often felt a ‘professional curiosity’ about how a child was developing, and this would prompt her to investigate further.

Central to the idea of unpicking whether a child has additional needs, and therefore requiring additional support, was the concept of allowing the child time and space to develop, particularly when they were adjusting to a new setting. One nursery SENCO described this process as ‘watchful waiting’; a phrase which has been used by The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in relation to guidance for Depression in Children and Young People: identification and management (NICE, 2005; 2019). The participant expanded that it was important not to react too quickly, and that alongside allowing time for children to settle into the setting, progress in developing across all areas should be considered.

It is particular[ly] pertinent in the early years... is at what point do you kind of start saying ‘could this be a typically developing child who’s maybe taking a little bit longer than their peers’ or at what point do you start to say ‘no, we’re pretty sure this might be an additional need?’

Another SENCO discussed the concept of ‘school readiness’ in her setting. She expanded that she was conscious of the demands of school when she was considering the additional support a child may need:

I think that it’s awareness of the school system and what going to be expected from them in formal education.[...] One of the main things for us is getting that child ready for school and looking to, whether that child will support in school, and then we need to get that in place before they get there.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOS

The importance of taking an evidence based approach

Whilst the theme of practitioner knowledge and experience was central to identifying needs in early years settings, echoing the findings from phase one, when asked to expand on the process it was evident that the SENCOS were taking, on the whole, an evidence based approach to identifying needs in their settings.

All participants commented on the importance of tracking children's development in their settings. The tracking data was used to consider whether progress was being made, and in what areas, but also to consider whether the gap between the individual and their peers was widening, therefore potentially indicating an additional need. Data was collected and recorded at regular intervals, with the majority of SENCOS stating that this takes place every 6 weeks.

SENCOS discussed the range of resources they used to track children. Whilst this included the Early Years Foundation Stage profile, typically the SENCOS reported that they also used additional resources, which further broke down the Early Learning Goals; for the majority of participants this was guidance produced by their local authority. However, other SENCOS referred to additional resources such as the Tapestry Online Learning Journal (Tapestry, 2020) and the What to Expect, When? document (4 Children, 2015). One SENCO mentioned the usefulness of Mary Sheridan's book 'From birth to 5 years'. It is noteworthy that whilst a small number of SENCOS mentioned the graduated approach, the definition of SEN was not discussed or referred to at all during the interviews.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

Reflecting the findings from phase one, all SENCOs reported that observations were intrinsic to tracking a child's development. Frequent and targeted observations were highlighted as the primary way in which staff gathered information, to help them understand how the child was developing, including their areas of strength and areas for development. Whilst SENCOs carried out observations, this was typically in conjunction with the key worker. The participants reported that they focused their observations of children on the prime areas of learning: communication and language development, physical development and personal, social and emotional development. However, a particular focus on communication and interaction during observations was a consistent theme throughout all of the interviews. Carrying out such observations early on helped the SENCOs establish a baseline for tracking the child's development.

When determining the needs of the child, SENCOs reported on the importance of putting in place support and then evaluating whether the intervention and strategies had been effective. Such observations would serve to provide evidence of whether a child may have needed a short amount of targeted support, or whether there may be further specific additional needs which required support. Some SENCOs reported that they would use Individual Education Plans (IEPs) as a method to record a child's progress, with one SENCO stating that she put in place strategies for six weeks and would then review progress, although this was the exception rather than the rule.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

Communication with the setting team is essential

All SENCOs stated that communication with key members in their setting was essential as part of the identification process for SEN in their settings. This was particularly evident for SENCOs who worked across multiple rooms in settings, or who worked in larger settings. Key workers typically led the process when querying whether a child may have additional needs and would be the first to raise initial concerns. Concerns typically related to the child not progressing as expected, or if they needed advice on how to support a child. Two SENCOs highlighted the usefulness of undertaking the Level 3 SENCO award, with one specifically stating that it helped her to understand the role of key workers, and the importance of delegating the task of identifying SEN to those who had the most knowledge of the child. To aid this process, some SENCOs developed a SENCO referral form for their key workers to complete to ensure that the assess, plan, do and review process was monitored.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

The SENCO plays a supportive role, but also needs support

The ability to access timely multi-agency support was highlighted by SENCOs as important to the process of investigating a child's potential needs. When referring to this support, SENCOs mostly referred to the support offered by the local authority, through their early years teams, although the term 'early years Area SENCO' was not typically used by the SENCOs.

The support SENCOs were able to access varied significantly, reflecting the findings from phase one, with some stating that they could access six visits per year from their local authority early years team, during which they would be supported with the assessment of children through observations. In addition to this, cluster meetings and training were also available.

Some local authorities took a different approach. One SENCO noted how each month a meeting would be held consisting of multi-agency professionals, including early years SENCOs, where children would be discussed informally, and advice could be accessed immediately. The children could then, with parental permission, be subsequently raised to the appropriate agency formally. The SENCO felt that whilst this required commitment from all attending, this was an efficient way of accessing immediate advice and support. Others voiced the importance of access, including the benefit of drop in surgeries, phonelines and termly networks. This was something that all SENCOs particularly valued.

SENCOs welcomed the support offered in settings, such as joint observations. Some SENCOs cited the benefit of someone confirming their views regarding a child, giving them confidence in their decision making, whilst others stated that the perspective from an outside agency gave weight to their observations.

Access to support outside of the local authority was more varied, although the majority of SENCOs reported that they could access support from their speech and language therapist.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOS

We also have really good links with [the] speech and language therapist. They are great. They come and see the children in the setting and then work with practitioners supporting them on strategies and things.

Whilst accessing support from speech and language services was typically reported as positive, SENCOS reported waiting lists of between 6 – 12 months for speech and language assessments. The main agencies which SENCOS found difficult to access were health visitors, paediatricians and, in particular, occupational therapists. One SENCO found this particularly troublesome as they had number of children in their setting who were experiencing sensory processing difficulties and required specific occupational therapy advice. One SENCO commented that access to support ‘did not appear joined up’, with another SENCO remarking that due to the waiting times a child could be ‘well on their way to school’ before an assessment is made and before they get any additional support.

In relation to the theme regarding a delay in accessing support, some SENCOS reported that in their opinion the processes for accessing advice and/ or support from multi-agencies had become increasingly convoluted and lengthy. One SENCO shared concerns that the processes appeared rigid, regardless of the needs of the child, with another SENCO remarking that she felt thresholds for accessing support had increased. Others voiced concerns that support was being reduced within the local authority. Some SENCOS highlighted the financial pressure accepting a child with additional needs can place on a setting, stating that there was not enough access to wider financial support, citing a tension between the moral obligation to provide the correct support for a child whilst settings were under financial pressure. This further highlighted some of the challenges a SENCO may specifically experience whilst seeking to act as an ethical leader (ASCL, 2020).

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOS

Accessing information and support from health visitors was particularly varied. For some settings there were clear links and processes in place for timely information sharing. For others, they voiced frustrations that information regarding the 2 year check was not passed on to their setting. A number of SENCOS felt that this was a missed opportunity to share important developmental information. Others described the situation as ‘hit and miss’ voicing their understanding of the pressures health visitors were under, whilst also acknowledging the inconsistency in practice would ultimately negatively impact on the child. This echoed the findings from the 2019 SENCO Workload Survey (Curran et al., 2019) where participants highlighted concerns related to information sharing between stakeholders.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

The importance of relationships with families

The first setting to develop relationships with parents

SENCOs stated that taking a holistic approach meant that developing positive relationships with families was paramount. Many SENCOs noted that their setting was typically the parents' first experience of an educational setting for their child, and therefore this meant that it could take time to develop trusting relationships. One SENCO described this as '*taking the parents on a journey*'.

I think its [being a SENCO in the early years] different and one of the big differences is that, I think, so often we are the first people to talk to parents.

When raising concerns, SENCOs noted that it was imperative to have an established relationship in place with the parents first, before broaching any concerns regarding their child's development. SENCOs reported that they would initiate a conversation with parents, asking them if they had noticed anything about their child's development. However, the participants added that in the early years they were often raising concerns related to speech and language and/ or social communication, with one SENCO noting that it was more challenging for parents to hear that their child is experiencing difficulties in these areas, as opposed to cognition and learning which may be raised in a primary setting.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

It takes time to develop trust

Consequently, SENCOs noted the importance of steadily building relationships with families, which can take time, and the importance of 'drip feeding' information about their child's progress; key workers are central to this process as the development of informal relationships with regular contact helped to build trust for more formal conversations. One SENCO noted that she felt the development of trust was so important as her SENCO role crossed many boundaries, specifically stating that she sometimes felt she crossed over into social care issues. Whilst it was preferable to take time to develop relationships with families this did sometimes create a delay in accessing support for the child.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

Home visits help to develop the holistic picture

The development of relationships was approached in various ways. However, nine of the SENCOs specifically mentioned home visits before the child joined their setting as a key factor when establishing an initial positive relationship with parents, with one SENCO stating:

When a child sees you in their home setting it develops trust.

In addition to this, home visits were cited as an important factor when developing a holistic picture of the child. Specifically, home visits allowed space for parents to share concerns. SENCOs described the relief that parents often felt when they were able to speak to someone about their worries and to have their concerns regarding their child taken seriously. However as one SENCO stated, this does have an implication for staffing as two team members need to attend each home visit.

Settings who did not offer home visits cited other activities to support the development of family relationships, including welcome packs, introductory stay and play sessions and evening parent sessions.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

Unpicking misconceptions

A further reason as to why home visits were so important related to the opportunity to address parental misconceptions. A number of SENCOs stated that it was often during a home visit that a parent might disclose a concern, or the SENCO/key worker would notice something regarding the child's development. One SENCO highlighted that parents can often be concerned and worry that the setting will refuse to take their child if SEN is disclosed, as a result they may try and mask their difficulties. Through the home visit relationships can be developed, and trust can be built and potentially family resilience can be developed.

What the expectations are from parents, or what it means for us to be saying their child might be needing some additional support... Sometimes parents get really anxious... I think all parents would be anxious about it, but some more than others. We have had parents say, 'Can they still stay in nursery... Will there be a social worker... are you going to take my child away?'

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

The uniqueness of the Early Years

The experience in a setting varies for each child

SENCOs highlighted the importance of understanding that the experience of the child in the early years can vary significantly. Pre-school SENCOs highlighted that not only do children join at different, specific points during the year, they typically attended term time only. Some children may attend mornings or afternoons only, or different days during the week. A number of SENCOs highlighted that children may be in their setting for a short time, or be part time, or attend multiple settings. As a consequence, the SENCO participants highlighted how this could create a delay in identifying SEN within the setting and/ or a delay in accessing support from multi-agencies.

A delay in accessing support from outside of the setting could potentially impact on a successful transition to primary school. Early years SENCOs felt that, despite their best efforts, primary colleagues often felt children had been ‘missed’ upon transition. SENCOs noted that primary schools often voiced frustrations that needs were not escalated quickly enough in early years settings. However, SENCOs felt that primary colleagues had not appreciated the uniqueness of the early years and had not considered how long the child had been with them, noting that this could be for a relatively brief period of time in comparison to the primary phase. SENCOs also reported that, as often the first point of contact with parents in education, it takes time to build relationships with families and this can subsequently impact on the time it takes to access support. Whilst this further highlighted cross phase issues with transition, echoing issues experienced by later settings, it does indicate that SENCOs in Early Years settings may experience specific issues related to transition, which are different to those experienced by primary and secondary colleagues.

But you’ve only had them for a year and by the time you [have] waited to let them settle in... then you have your concerns, then you need a couple of reviews to say, actually what we’re putting in place isn’t working, time has gone and they are moving on [to school].

But they [the children] are with us part time, so then you’re trying to get a holistic view of a child but actually, not with a huge amount of time.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

The flexibility of the early years

A number of the SENCOs interviewed felt that early years settings had the scope to be flexible in their approach to provision, and therefore meet the needs of the child in their setting, with one SENCO stating that she felt it was easier for early years settings to adjust their environment than it would be for a primary school. One SENCO highlighted the adult to child ratio in the early years, and how the move to primary school often made the needs of the child more apparent, due to the change in approach and environment.

A lot of time in the early settings we can [provide support for a child] because we've got flexibility, we don't have set routines, although we have got a curriculum, again it is a very flexible curriculum, we [have] got the higher ratio of staff to children.

The childminder who participated in this phase felt that this was a particular benefit of her type of provision; she was able to provide a more tailored setting and could be flexible in her approach when providing 1:1 support for her mindees. However, one of the maintained nursery school participants highlighted that a benefit of the nursery school system was that children could remain with them for their primary reception year, if the parents wished to. Whilst this was not something frequently taken up, it did often work for children with additional needs.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

Specific challenges for the Early Years SENCO

Whilst the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework ‘sets the statutory standards for the development, learning and care of children from birth to age 5’ (DfE, 2017), and the SEND Code of Practice sets out the statutory guidance for early years providers (DfE and DoH, 2015) the SENCOs who participated in the interviews all raised the issue that early years settings were all very different; settings not only varied from each other, but also from later settings such as a primary school. Early years SENCOs could be working with three and four year olds, or from birth to five years. Settings could be described as a ‘pack away’ setting in a village hall or be part of a large nursery chain. This could present different challenges for SENCOs working in different settings with one SENCO highlighting how a SENCO could be working in a small, private pre-school, whilst another could be covering a large nursery which takes babies from six weeks old. This was also likely to impact on the support and resources which the SENCO could access. One pre-school participant voiced concerns regarding the financial pressures that accepting a child with additional needs can place on a smaller setting, including the challenges of accessing additional funding whilst also having a moral obligation to ensure that the right support is in place. One SENCO, at a maintained nursery school, felt that their setting in particular was often missed in terms of accessing support from the local authority, because they sat between typical private, voluntary or independent early years settings and schools.

SENCOs also raised concerns related to the professionalism of the early years SENCO role, with one SENCO noting that they were often excluded from multi-agency meetings and/or information sharing. The theme of ‘professional frustration’ was shared by a number of SENCOs stating that whilst they had an in-depth knowledge of the child and family, their views were not often given sufficient ‘weight’ in comparison to the view of a multi-agency professional, for example the family doctor, who may have only seen the child once.

I’m not saying that’s a definite professional thing, but lots of meetings seem to go ahead and schools get invited and we only find out from the parents that there [was] a meeting, rather than professional actually coming to us as a nursery setting and saying, ‘there’s a meeting [which has] been arranged’.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOS

Interviews with Early Years Area SENCOs

Note, the term 'Area SENCO' has been used in the following section to reflect the contributions made by those who complete the function of this role, as set out by the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015), in their local authority.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

Supporting early years SENCOs

Providing varied, accessible support

The Area SENCOs reported that they provided a varied package of support across their localities, each often taking a specific geographical area with the local authority. This typically included visiting settings, carrying out 1:1 observations, meeting parents, and supporting SENCOs with the statutory needs assessment request process. Area SENCOs also stated that they sought to provide early years SENCOs with more specific guidance than the EYFS, with the majority of this available online via the Local Offers or early years area on the local authority website. Whilst the support was often provided directly to settings, the Area SENCOs also noted that their work also involved liaison with other teams, including health and social care.

In addition to this the Area SENCOs reported that they provide training, both through networks and specific to settings. This was central to their role and noted as important in supporting early years settings. It was something that they encourage early years SENCOs to engage with. In addition to the support provided to SENCOs, the Area SENCOs highlighted the benefits of accessing the Portage service, an educational service for pre-school children with SEN and their families, providing support in the home. Support was usually requested via a referral system, which in some cases could be requested by a setting or a family. The importance of multi-agency working was highlighted by all as intrinsic to accessing timely support for children.

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOs

Specific support with identifying specific needs

Area SENCOs reported that they would often be called upon to support early years SENCOs during the process of querying the needs of a child, with one Area SENCO saying that she encourages the practitioners to use a 'detective model'. Echoing the early years SENCOs, she also encouraged practitioners to take a holistic approach, and noted the importance of taking a strength based approach. In addition to this the Area SENCOs highlighted the importance of evidencing concerns:

We try and be quite evidence based... we've tried very much to move away our identification from anecdotal and the SENCOs thoughts, to actually how is the child developing in terms of using evidence... and we have found that our referrals are more appropriate really.

However, whilst the Area SENCOs appreciated the challenges faced by early years settings when identifying SEN, the concern that some settings waited too long before taking action was a common theme. This was for varied reasons. In some cases, it was felt that expectations from the settings were too low, however it was also noted that practitioners can lack the confidence required to share their concerns with parents and would often wait for the early years local authority team before approaching parents.

I think it is a confidence thing. I think that historically, over the years, we've been... we are quite established as a team. I think that they wait for our support, which is not helpful as we have high caseloads.

Yet, echoing the challenges raised by the early years SENCOs, one Area SENCO highlighted the challenge specifically faced by early years SENCOs as the first educational experience for parents:

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS SENCOS

I think the other challenge is that, obviously, sometimes it's the first time parents have heard from anybody that there might be a problem. And it can be quite a long process. So getting the parents to understand that there may be other people who need to be involved... something... its quite upsetting to them and that takes a while.

One Area SENCO noted the importance of differentiating between the 'chat at the door' with parents and a specific meeting to discuss their child's progress, with the Area SENCO highlighting that this drew attention to the importance of recording information and drawing upon evidence. However, equally the Area SENCOs acknowledged the difficulties early years SENCOs can face when children may be in their setting for a relatively short time, with one Area SENCO citing the needs assessment request process. One Area SENCO specifically highlighted the challenge for a setting if a three year old joins a nursery, this could leave just one year to take action.

I know SENCOs feel under pressure to get that huge piece of work done and it's still a very bureaucratic process.

The Area SENCOs noted that they typically saw need relating to social and communication needs, with one noting this as a priority for their locality. However, echoing the early years SENCOs, one Area SENCO stated the issue with waiting lists, of approximately eighteen months, which could further impact on accessing support.

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The challenge of supporting different settings

In line with the view of the early years SENCOS, the Area SENCOS stated that supporting different settings could be a challenge. Area SENCOS tended to target settings which may require a greater level of support, for example if there is a new manager. One Area SENCO stated that a key challenge for supporting different settings was trying to achieve the balance between specific case work and more strategic work, which, it could be argued, would be more likely to have a longer term sustained impact. It was noted that it is important to work closely with other agencies, to ensure that work is not duplicated.

In addition to this the Area SENCOS noted the demographic of the workforce, specifically that there can be a high turnover of staff which they felt placed additional burdens on early years SENCOS as they needed to re-train colleagues time and time again. As such the Area SENCO noted the importance of working strategically and considering how their work is targeted to specific overarching needs, including the evidence based identification of SEN in early years settings in their locality and working with parents.

APPENDIX 1

Methodology

The aims of the research were to explore:

- The process of identifying SEN in early years settings, with a specific focus on the SENCO role and their working relationships with children, parents, staff and other relevant individuals.
- From the SENCOs' perspective, the key issues regarding the identification of SEN within their early years settings, including how they understand the difference between what may be considered 'typical development' and a possible special educational need.
- The key enablers and barriers in relation to identifying SEN, as perceived by the SENCO in their settings.
- The support and resources SENCOs are able to access during the process of identifying whether a child may have an additional need.

The research consisted of two phases.

Phase one: An online, broad based survey. The online survey opened on 13th November 2019 and closed on 7th December 2019; therefore, open for a total of 3 ½ weeks. The survey sought to explore:

- The SENCO demographic in the early years, including the setting within which they work, experience, training, qualifications, time to execute the role in relation to children on roll.
- The priorities in relation to the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015), as identified by the SENCO.
- The concerns SENCOs hold regarding meeting the requirements of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015).
- The key issues related to the identification of SEN in the early years.
- The issues which the SENCO perceives to be the key enablers and barriers with regards to the identification of SEN in their settings.
- The involvement of children, parents, staff and other parties through the process of identifying SEN in the early years

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The survey was open to anyone who was working in an early years setting, as a SENCO. This included private nurseries, pre-schools and maintained nursery schools. The survey was shared online, via a number of channels, which included Facebook and Twitter. The survey was also sent out, via newsletter, to nasen members. In addition to this, information regarding the survey was sent to local authority early years teams working across 61 local authorities/ boroughs/ councils were also contacted via generic email, which was accessible and held in the public domain, e.g. local authority generic team contact details.

Phase two: semi-structured interviews with early years SENCO and Area SENCOs. This phase was conducted between January 2020 – March 2020. This phase explored the themes which emerged from phase one, including:

- The process of identifying SEN in specific early years settings
- Indicators which lead the SENCO to consider whether a child has an SEN
- The use of evidence
- The engagement with children, families and staff
- Key enablers and challenges to the process
- Future priorities for the setting

In addition to the channels above, participants were able to opt into the research through phase one.

Potential participants had access to information regarding the research, and how their data would be used, before opting in to taking part. Consent was required from all participants. Participants who took part in phase two were sent an information sheet pertaining to the research, including why they were being asked to take part, and outlining the potential risks of participating, and how their data would be used. Participants were also sent separate consent information. All SENCOs were made aware that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time up until the point of data analysis, without reason. Interview transcripts were sent to all interviewees, with the option of adding, clarifying or removing information. Participants were also reminded that they could withdraw all their interview data at this point. All responses to the survey have been contributed anonymously and reported generically to ensure that no identifying information is included.

APPENDIX 1

Participants: Phase one

216 people responded to the online survey, with 214 giving their consent for their data to be reported within this report. Of these 214 respondents who consented to their data being reported, 202 stated that they worked as a SENCO in an early years setting. Therefore, the data reported upon within this document relates to the 202 respondents who reported that they worked as a SENCO in an early years setting.

The majority of respondents stated that they worked in a pre-school setting (36% n=72), with a further 31% of respondents (n=62) stating that they worked in a day nursery. 26 respondents (13%) worked in a local authority nursery school. Just over half of the respondents described the sector that they worked in as 'private' (51% n=102), with just over one quarter (27% n= 53) working in the maintained sector. Geographically respondents stated that they worked in various locations: rural (36% n = 72), urban (61% n = 123) and coastal (7% n = 14). Note, some respondents selected two options. Nationally the regions were represented, with recorded responses from every region in England. The majority of responses came from the South West (33% n=67) and the South East (16% n=32). The survey did not receive any responses from SENCOs working in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Size of setting	% of respondents	Number of respondents
n/a I am a childminder	3%	n=7
Less than 35 places	34%	n=69
36-65 places	28%	n=57
More than 66 places	34%	n=69

In terms of funding, nearly all respondents stated that they are receiving the universal 15 hours entitlement for all 3 and 4 year olds (95% n= 192). Only 4 respondents (2%) stated that they did not receive any funding from the Local Authority. The majority of respondents (94% n=189) stated that they had between 0 – 2 children in their setting who had a current Education, Health and Care Plan. Whilst the % of children with additional needs in each setting varied significantly, the majority of SENCOs (88% n=175) stated that the primary type of need in their setting was communication and interaction.

APPENDIX 1

Participants: Phase two

Sixteen early years SENCOs and three early years Area SENCOs took part. The SENCOs were from varying settings, including pre-schools (6), nurseries (6) and maintained nursery schools (3). One participant was a childminder. The size of the setting and the organisation SENCOs worked with was varied, with one SENCO working as part of a large provider, with ten settings, whilst others were based in one room (with access to outside space). Geographically, the majority of participants were located in the South East and South West of England. However, there was also representation from other areas including the Midlands and the North West. The early years Area SENCOs were from three different local authorities, in the South and South West of England.

All SENCO participants held roles in addition to their SENCO role. Typically, these were management roles, for example designated safeguarding lead, deputy manager, manager, headteacher and owner. Four of the SENCOs were also room leaders, whilst others took responsibility for providing small group or 1:1 support for children with additional needs in their setting. Two of the SENCOs worked across more than one setting.

APPENDIX 1

Data analysis and reporting of findings

The findings discussed in this report are derived from the online survey data. All data from the focus groups and both pilot studies have been discarded. For the purposes of the discussion, data reported reflects the views of all respondents, unless otherwise stated where relevant, for example, primary/ secondary settings. The data collected is predominately quantitative and has been reported as such. Questions which elicited further responses from participants has been thematically analysed and used for illustrative purposes.

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