

## Section 6: The Role of the Early Years SENCO

This section of the toolkit is about the role of the Early Years SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator). It outlines the SENCO's main responsibilities.

This is important because the setting SENCO has a key role in supporting colleagues and co-ordinating the response of the setting to children with SEN.

### SEN responsibilities: having a SENCO

Providers must have arrangements in place to support children with SEN or disabilities. Maintained nursery schools and other providers who are funded by the local authority to deliver early education places must have regard to the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice. Maintained nursery schools must identify a member of staff to act as Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator and other providers (in group provision) are expected to identify a SENCO.

DfE (2014) *Statutory Framework for Early Years Foundation Stage*, para 3.67

## Respective responsibilities

### The provider

The legal responsibilities for disabled children and children with SEN lie with the *responsible body* (Equality Act duties) or the *appropriate authority* (Children and Families Act duties). In both cases this is the *governing body* for a maintained school, including a maintained nursery school, and the *proprietor*, that is the owner or the management committee, of a private, voluntary or independent nursery.

### The manager

The manager or head of the setting has responsibility for the day-to-day management of all aspects of the setting's work, including work with children with SEN. The manager agrees policies with the provider; works closely with the SENCO on the implementation of SEN and disability policies; and has an important role in enabling the SENCO to meet their responsibilities.

### The SENCO

The SENCO works closely with the manager and with all practitioners in the setting; has responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the setting's SEN policy, and for coordinating provision across the setting; and for supporting colleagues in all aspects of their work with children with SEN.

### All practitioners

In addition to the setting's manager and the SEN coordinator (SENCO) all members of staff have responsibilities to disabled children and children with SEN and need to understand these and the setting's approach to identifying and meeting SEN. Where a child is identified as having SEN, the Code of Practice envisages that the individual practitioner, usually the child's key person, will lead the engagement with the child and the child's parents, with the support of the SENCO, and remains responsible for working with the child on a daily basis.

## The role of the SENCO

The role of the SENCO involves:

- Ensuring all practitioners in the setting understand their responsibilities to children with SEN and the setting's approach to identifying and meeting SEN
- Advising and supporting colleagues
- Ensuring parents are closely involved throughout and that their insights inform action taken by the setting, and
- Liaising with professionals or agencies beyond the setting

DfE and DH (2015) *SEN and disability code of practice: 0-25 years*, para 5.54

Each of these elements of the role is considered below. Many of the elements of the SENCO role are explored more fully in other sections of the toolkit. This section brings the elements together and refers throughout to other relevant sections where there is more detail.

### 1

#### All practitioners understand their SEN responsibilities

Ensuring all practitioners in the setting understand their responsibilities to children with SEN

All settings must have regard to the *SEN and disability code of practice*<sup>1</sup>. The SENCO supports practitioners in understanding their responsibilities to young children with SEN and disabilities, as set out in the Code. A shorter *Early Years Guide to the SEND Code of Practice*<sup>2</sup> is published on the Department for Education website and a brief summary of the statutory responsibilities is set out in *Section 2: Statutory responsibilities*.

There may be training and other sources of support available locally to SENCOs to help them in explaining the duties to colleagues. There are also resources explaining different aspects of the responsibilities on the Council for Disabled Children<sup>3</sup> and the Foundation Years website<sup>4</sup>.

### 2

#### All practitioners understand the approach to identifying and meeting SEN

Ensuring all practitioners in the setting understand the setting's approach to identifying and meeting SEN

The SENCO has a role in leading and co-ordinating the graduated approach across the setting; and supporting individual practitioners in implementing the approach for individual children. In particular, the SENCO needs to ensure that all practitioners understand how the setting:

- responds to any cause for concern and identifies and responds to special educational needs, see *Section 4: First concerns and early identification*;
- focuses on improving children's progress and outcomes;

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-guide-for-early-years-settings>

<sup>3</sup> [www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk](http://www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup> [www.foundationyears.org.uk](http://www.foundationyears.org.uk)

- implements SEN support and the cycle of action: assess, plan, do, review, see *Section 5: SEN Support in the Early Years – a graduated approach*; and
- meets the requirements for record-keeping in a way that supports the participative decision-making process and, at the same time, avoids excessive paperwork, see *Section 5: SEN Support in the Early Years – a graduated approach*.

There are some areas of policy and practice where SENCOs may need to provide particular support to colleagues. These are likely to include:

- how the setting works in partnership with parents to identify a child as having SEN, see *Section 7: Involving parents and carers*;
- how the practitioner and the SENCO agree, in consultation with the parent, the outcomes they are seeking for the child, see *Section 7: Involving parents and carers*;
- how plans for support, within the setting, should take into account the views of the child, see *Section 4: First concerns and early identification*.

### 3 Advising and supporting colleagues

The SENCO works with the practitioner and with parents throughout SEN Support. The SENCO's advice and support to colleagues is integral to each stage of the cycle of action: assess, plan, do, review. In addition, the Code of Practice highlights the importance of:

- drawing on interventions supported by reliable evidence of effectiveness and
- practitioners having the relevant skills and knowledge.

**Reliable evidence:** the support and intervention provided should be ...based on reliable evidence of effectiveness

**Relevant skills and knowledge:** the support and intervention should be ... provided by practitioners with relevant skills and knowledge

**Staff development needs identified and addressed:** any related staff development needs should be identified and addressed

DfE and DH (2015) *SEN and disability code of practice: 0-25 years*, para 5.40

**Reliable evidence of effectiveness:** SENCOs can draw on a range of sources to inform their advice and support to colleagues on the effectiveness of different approaches to improving children's progress:

- SENCOs themselves will be able to draw on their own understanding of effectiveness, based on the evidence from their own setting.
- The Area SENCO has a role in developing and disseminating good practice and will be able to support the SENCO in identifying approaches that are supported by reliable evidence of effectiveness.
- Other local services, such as early years advisory teachers, specialist teachers for children with a sensory impairment, Portage workers, educational psychologists or speech and language therapists will be able to provide advice.
- The Communications Trust What Works database of evidenced interventions to support children's speech language and communication<sup>5</sup>;

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/whatworks>

- The Education Endowment Foundation has developed an early years toolkit that brings together a range of evidence about the impact of different approaches on children's progress<sup>6</sup>.

**Relevant skills and knowledge:** in addition to the sources identified above, the Trusts funded by the Department for Education have brought together a range of resources and provide advice, information and training in relation to particular impairments:

- The Communications Trust, referred to above;
- The Autism Education Trust<sup>7</sup> for children on the autism spectrum;
- The National Sensory Impairment Partnership, Natsip<sup>8</sup>, for children with vision impairment, hearing impairment and multi-sensory impairment.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Inclusion Development Programme<sup>9</sup> provides e-learning resources to support the development of practice in relation to young children with: behavioural, emotional and social difficulties; autism; and speech, language and communication needs.

Nasen hosts an online portal, the SEND Gateway, which provides access to information, resources and training to meet the needs of children with SEN and disabilities<sup>10</sup>. See *Section 8: Working with other professionals and other sources of information and support*.

**Staff development needs identified and addressed:** the SENCO has an important role in working with colleagues to identify and address staff development needs within the setting. To meet these needs SENCOs should link with Area SENCOs who have a role in supporting the development and delivery of training both for individual settings and on a wider basis.

Some of the sources identified above provide a framework for professional development and a means for practitioners to assess their skills and competencies, identify any gaps and next steps in professional development in relation to particular impairments.

## 4

### Parents are closely involved

Ensuring parents are closely involved throughout and that their insights inform action taken by the setting

The SENCO is responsible for making sure that parents are involved in the discussion of any early concerns, in identifying any SEN, and agreeing:

- The outcomes they are seeking for the child
- The interventions and support to be put in place
- The expected impact on progress, development, behaviour
- Date for review

Parents' insights should inform action taken by the setting and they should feel that their wishes, views and feelings are taken into account, in line with the principles in the Children and Families Act.

<sup>6</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/early-years/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.natsip.org.uk/>

<sup>9</sup> [www.idponline.org.uk](http://www.idponline.org.uk)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.sendgateway.org.uk/>

SENCOs can help by making sure parents receive the information, advice and support that they need in order to participate in the SEN decision-making process. Settings can put parents in touch with their local information, advice and support service (IASS) which all local authorities must arrange. Information about the local IASS can be found in the local offer – local authorities must ensure that the local offer includes this information. There is more about involving parents closely in *Section 7: Involving parents and carers*.

## 5

### **Liaising beyond the setting**

#### Liaising with professionals or agencies beyond the setting

Links with Area SENCO or other local authority support service, such as an early years advisory teacher, will be an important source of advice and support to the SENCO. Such services will be able to advise on good practice, on training and professional development, on other sources of support for settings and families, see below.

It is important that the SENCO is aware of the local offer. On the next page, there is a summary of some of the key elements of the local offer that are relevant to early years settings and to families. As well as drawing on the information that is in the local offer, settings and families should be involved in the development and review of the local offer.

Early years settings also need links with the local authority. This will include appropriate links for liaising over individual children and links on wider strategic issues such as securing sufficient expertise and experience on SEN and disability locally and how funding supports settings in meeting children's SEN.

There is a further range of professionals with whom SENCOs will need to develop appropriate links across health and social care, IASS and local voluntary agencies who provide support to families. There is more information on working with professionals or agencies beyond the setting in *Section 8: Working with other Professionals and other sources of information and support*.

## Reflecting on your setting

A reflective task for the SENCO working with the manager of the setting:

Review the SEN and disability policy and practice within the setting and consider:

- How well children with SEN are learning and developing; what progress they are making; and how good outcomes are for them;
- How well practitioners understand their responsibilities to children with SEN or disabilities;
- How well practitioners understand the setting's approach to identifying and meeting SEN;
- How well supported colleagues feel, in terms of information, advice and support in identifying and meeting the needs of individual children; and training in SEN and disability;
- How closely parents feel they are involved and how well their insights inform action taken by the setting; and
- How well the setting liaises with professionals or agencies beyond the setting and how well this supports the SENCO and other practitioners in the setting.

### Appendix 1: The Area SENCO

The Area SENCO helps make the links between education, health and social care to facilitate appropriate early provision for children with SEN and their transition to compulsory schooling. Typically, the role of the Area SENCO includes:

- providing advice and practical support to early years providers about approaches to identification, assessment and intervention within the SEN Code of Practice
- providing day-to-day support for setting-based SENCOs in ensuring arrangements are in place to support children with SEN
- strengthening the links between the settings, parents, schools, social care and health services
- developing and disseminating good practice
- supporting the development and delivery of training both for individual settings and on a wider basis
- developing links with existing SENCO networks to support smooth transitions to school nursery and reception classes, and
- informing parents of and working with local impartial Information, Advice and Support Services, to promote effective work with parents of children in the early years

The Area SENCO plays an important part in planning for children with SEN to transfer between early years provision and schools.

Where there is an Area SENCO in place, they will want to work with early years providers who are registered with either Ofsted or a childminder agency. They should consider how they work with and provide advice to childminder agencies and their registered providers in supporting children with SEN.

DfE and DH (2015) *SEN and disability code of practice: 0-25 years*, para 5.55- 5.58

## Appendix 2: The local offer in the early years

The local offer must include a description of the provision that the LA expects to be available from providers of all relevant early years education.

It must also include information about the support available across education, health and social care services for disabled children and children with SEN, including information about:

- services assisting providers to support young children with medical conditions;
- childcare for disabled children and children with SEN;
- Information, Advice and Support Services: services providing parents and children with information, advice and support on SEN and disability;
- support groups who can support parent carers of disabled children.

The *local offer* should also include information about:

- provision such as Area SENCOs, SEN support or learning support services, sensory support services or specialist teachers, therapies such as speech and language therapy;
- support available to parents to aid their child's development at home, including such services as Portage;
- arrangements for identifying and assessing children's needs in the early years;
- arrangements for reviewing children's progress including health and development reviews between the ages of 2 and 3;
- the LA's arrangements for providing top-up funding for children with high needs;
- the arrangements for EHC needs assessments and plans.