

Interim Evaluation of the 2024-2025 cycle of SEND 'Courageous Conversations'

FINAL

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Introduction

Directors of Children's Services in the South East represented by the region's 'SE19 SEND Network' wanted to understand the impact of the supportive peer activity delivered through the 'Courageous Conversations' programme.

They therefore commissioned a mid-cycle evaluation in order to inform the delivery of the remaining scheduled sessions of Courageous Conversations and any decisions on future programme..

The Conversations are offered as part of the Sector Led Improvement Partnership work, funded and supported through the DfE regional grant for SEND network activity. The programme was established so that each LA area has the opportunity to benefit over an 18-month period to March 2025.

SEND 'Courageous Conversations offer peer challenge and support for local areas (SEND Partnerships) to recognise strengths, help develop and improve. The format is designed to support the local area's SEND and Alternative Provision priorities, preparation for (or follow up from) annual engagement meetings and/or inspections/engagement meetings and to enable mutually beneficial learning for all involved in the activity.

Courageous conversations provide a unique opportunity for the local area to focus on a particular topic or theme, rather than the fuller range of SEND review activity provided by the LGA Peer Review approach or SEND Advisor work.

In November 2024 the area leads and their colleagues in the five Courageous Conversations to date were emailed with a short email survey¹. Four responses using the email survey format were received, with additional feedback received via two free text email responses.

This report provides an analysis of these responses and also includes feedback received from participants immediately after the Courageous Conversations took place, sent via email to the SEND Courageous Conversations organiser and facilitator, Chris Baird, SESLIP Associate.

Summary

The feedback has been extremely positive, including from those that participated on the SEND Courageous Conversations teams i.e. representatives from other parent/carer forums and from LA colleagues outside of the host LA.

The work has resulted in areas agreeing and taking some next steps in their work. The SEND Courageous Conversations are not simply one-off events.

The planning and development of each programme for each area is welcomed and provides LAs with a chance to reflect and hone the days to meet their needs.

There are positive consequences of representatives of local SEND Partnerships spending a significant amount of time focusing on a topic, including opportunities to

¹ A copy of this survey is included as Appendix 1



understand more of each other's perspectives. This has led to a more positive "whole area" commitment at the end of sessions.

There are sessions planned in January 2025 to May 2025 for Windsor and Maidenhead, Portsmouth, Surrey, West Berkshire, Brighton and Hove, Oxfordshire ,and Medway. Slough has also expressed an interest. There is also interest from LAs who have had a SEND Courageous Conversation to have another one over the next period.

Responses

In November 2024 all participants in the five Courageous Conversations to date were emailed with a short structured email survey². Four responses using the email survey format were received, with additional feedback received via two free text email responses. This report also includes feedback received from participants immediately after the Courageous Conversations took place.

Five Courageous Conversations have taken place to the end of 2024 during the 2024/2025 cycle:

SEND Area	Date
Buckinghamshire	29 Jan 2024
Kent	18 April 2024
Reading	28 June 2024
West Sussex	24 Sept 2024
Hampshire	20 Nov 2024

Respondents were invited to engage key partners in their responses, with feedback received from a range of participant roles as follows:

- Assistant Director, Education & Inclusion
- Alternative Provision Strategic lead
- Senior Manager Quality of Education
- Director of Children's Services
- Parent Carer Forum Chair Representative – Families and Carers Together in LA
- Assistant Director – Fair Access and (Interim) SEN Processes

Feedback was received from representatives from four 'host' SEND areas and from two reviewers, both of these reviewers participating in the Courageous Conversation focusing on the Hampshire SEND area.

The representatives from the four 'host' SEND areas responded in relation to Hampshire as well as West Sussex, Reading and Kent Courageous Conversations.

This means that half of the responses to the email survey related to the Hampshire Courageous Conversation, likely due to the fact that it had taken place the same month as the survey was initially disseminated.

² A copy of this survey is included as Appendix 1



The findings also include the immediate responses from LAs that hosted a Courageous Conversation and also those that took part as part of the teams, emailed to Chris Baird shortly after each day.

Findings

The email survey dealt with three broad areas: Commentary on the organisation of the session; impact including next steps and future ambitions for the programme, including recommendations for authorities who are yet to participate.

Organisation of the session

General organisation

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with particular areas brought out for specific commendation:

- Development conversations between the host LA and the SESLIP facilitator enabled the best use of the day and supported the host LA in developing their thinking
- Having a mix of LA participation brought in new perspectives
- Ethos of the day was supportive and collaborative
- Good balance between group and plenary discussion
- Good use paper as a planning tool
- Good attendance

Agenda on the day was likely still a little too ambitious in its scope, however, each session still provided a very helpful analysis of LA's various positions of development.

It was suggested by one respondent that more than one topic could prove distracting to participants.

Host LA

Appropriate representation

Participants were asked if there were the 'right people in the room'.

Again, feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

One participant reflected that having more representation from primary schools would have been helpful for the Conversation, but noted that this had not been possible due to their LAs self-imposed short time-scales, thus highlighting the importance of providing as much notice to prospective participants as possible.

Likewise, another respondent noted that more representation from health/ICB providers would have been helpful in their focus SEND area's Conversation, although was unsure whether this would have been achieved through further communications.

However, a respondent attending a different Courageous Conversation reported a 'good spectrum of representation across the SEND community' and noted that having too many participants can be hard to manage logistically.

It was reflected in feedback that the distinct approach of each local authority to the SEND Code of Practice became apparent during each of the day's discussions. This



distinctness of approach enriched the discussions, and enabled areas to move toward a more shared understanding of the topic and issues raised. In some SEND Courageous Conversations this had not been apparent as something to explore before the day took place.

The different LA experiences of similar issues or topics was also evident in those that were part of the visiting SEND Courageous Conversations teams, enabling them to reflect on their own area differences too.

Impact including next steps

Likewise, the reported impact has been overwhelmingly positive across the board, with specific outcomes cited as below:

Improved relationships across stakeholders, particularly due to the in-person format of the Courageous Conversation, leading to improved partnership working.

Improved communication between schools/Local Authority/Parent Carer Forum. The Parent Carer Forum representatives felt valued and listened to by the organiser and by those with whom they were speaking. This positivity is expected to drive positive change/improve outcomes for children, including those at risk of exclusion.

Mapping of local services and the **publishing of an updated Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP)** offer, co-produced with partners and parent carers.

Reworking of Self Evaluation Framework leading to a better description of strengths and areas for development and so improve outcomes for children.

Reassessment of the extent to which SEND Code of Practice and Safety Valve's responsibilities have been met, leading to enhanced mainstream offer.

Identification of areas of improvement of quality assurance processes.

Strengthening of processes supporting Health and Social Care partnership working.

Reflection on area's **SEND Strategy Group** membership with new co-chairs (DCS and ICB representative) resulting in improved identification of system risks and improved joint ownership and proactive approach to problem solving.



These combined efforts have resulted in LA's improvement notice being lifted in record time, reflecting the significant improvements made across all services.

Host LA



I have previously fed back that we have found it incredibly useful thus far!

Host LA

Next steps – within local SEND area

Respondee reported their plans to drive forward the outcomes, ensuring that those who were unable to attend were involved in making this happen. This includes setting up workshop series, incorporating the general approach into focused workflows and disseminating the report more widely than participants only.



Participants reported that they continued to build on the in-person relationships, with further local 'courageous and challenging' conversations held in a respectful manner, facilitating the identification of risks in the system with collective agreement on how to tackle these risks.

Next steps – between local authorities

Further exploration of the similarities and differences between different LAs in terms of SEND and the inclusion agenda including the Ordinarily Available Provision.

CC processes provided valuable insights and reflections that allowed Kent to analyse its developing plans. We would encourage others to take part. When considering areas of discussion, it would be helpful for those LAs to be very targeted in their thinking, to allow a depth of conversation to take place throughout the day.

Host LA

Next steps – strategic forums

One respondent noted that the outcomes of the follow up workshops would be reported to their SEND and Alternative Provision strategic board .

Likewise, another reported that the revised Self Evaluation and the OAP offer would be taken to the SEND Strategy Group.

Future ambitions for the programme

There was wholehearted support for future iterations of the programme, which would benefit from being over a similar period of time so that LA areas have the chance to fit the session into their programme of work and development and ensure the topic chosen adds value to what is already planned.

Suggested topics included:

- Exploration of the 'whole' Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP), including the school / classroom offer and high quality teaching and learning.
- Supporting other services working with children with SEND
- Neuro Diverse Pathways
- Co-production – with end users including parents, schools and settings and other partner agencies.



Recommendations for authorities who are yet to participate.

Respondents were asked what they would say to those colleagues who had not yet participated in the Courageous Conversation cycle, with the following responses.

“Highly recommend. Very supportive, well managed and useful. Ensure that there is a good mix of participants on each table.”

Host LA

“They missed the opportunity to have a collaborative and honest conversation resulting in an improved mutual understanding of different perspectives and experiences that informs how we move forward together to improve outcomes for children with SEND.”

Host LA

“Take the leap – talking and sharing are vital if the roadblocks are to be identified and successes identified”

Reviewer – Parent Representative

Immediate Feedback From Sessions

The following comments were provided from LAs that hosted the SEND Courageous Conversation, gathered in the week after the session took place:

“The verbal feedback has been really positive.”

“We have already started to explore some the things discussed in the session which is positive e.g.: how we get better engagement and raise queries linked to Appendix D quality.”

“We have a face-to-face workshop following the report to explore next steps and how we strategically move this forward.”

“We have been reflecting on the day too and it's already sparked some very interesting internal dialogue, so consider the day a great success.”

“The hope was for a really diverse mix of people, all in a room because of their wanting to make things better for children and young people with SEN, bringing their incredible range of experiences to the table to enhance all of our knowledge and understanding, and to help us all think about how what we had heard should



change our plans and actions moving forward, and that's exactly what happened!"

"Thank you ... for facilitating such a productive day for us. The format works really well in providing space and time for rich discussion. There was a positive energy in the room and what felt like genuine enthusiasm from colleagues to work together to improve the experiences and outcomes for some of our most vulnerable children."

"I found it to be an incredibly well-run meeting which hit just the right balance to allow for open discussion and constructive feedback in what felt like a really meaningful and positive way. I have also had similar feedback from others and have no doubt this can be used as the catalyst for some really impactful change."

Comments were also gathered from those that took part as part of the SEND Courageous Conversation teams.

"I really valued the opportunity to be part of the work, and following the conversations with Surrey our wider teams and health services are already in conversations surrounding best practice and therapy advice within the national context. These opportunities are so valuable and allowed us to progress at pace knowing other LA's implementation plans and practice examples."

"Thank you again for the opportunity, it really has allowed me to also consider some of the strengths we have in Buckinghamshire and the challenges we have overcome since our written statement of action across our partnership."

"Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the visit yesterday. I feel I have gained as much from being there as we hopefully offered to Kent colleagues."

Conclusion

The responses have demonstrated the value of the SEND Courageous Conversations which offer a unique opportunity to LAs and LA areas. They have been highly valued and deemed to be worthwhile, providing a different, structured opportunity for representatives from SEND Partnerships, including parent/carer forum representatives, early years settings, schools, colleges, NHS providers and ICBs, to come together and focus intensively on a particular issue that is key to the local area's development.

The Conversations have provided a positive environment to recognise and celebrate what is working well in an area, and this includes enabling all participants to achieve a common understanding and commitment on next steps.

Those that have taken part as part of the SEND Courageous Conversations team from other areas, including Parent Carer Forum chairs representatives have found the days worthwhile in terms of reflection on what is taking place in their own LA area, as well as learning about what is happening in the host LA.

Update on programme

SEND Courageous Conversations are planned for Windsor and Maidenhead, Portsmouth, Surrey, West Berkshire, Brighton and Hove, and Medway. Slough are in discussion. The opportunity is at present open for other LAs who have not yet taken part



to end of July 2025.. If the programme were extended there is interest in LAs having a further round of Courageous Conversations.

The SESLIP SEND Strategic group has received regular updates on the programme. Updates have also been provided to the regional chairs of Parent Carer Forums, and to the SE Designated Clinical Officers group.

The intention is to carry out a further survey of all local authority areas that have taken part in June 2025 to evaluate the programme and impact.

Recommendations

To share this report with the South East SEND Strategic Group and the SE DCS group for their consideration.

To endorse a further programme of SEND Courageous Conversations with the offer to LAs to take up when the time is right for them over the next period.



APPENDIX I

Mid Programme Evaluation of impact of the 2024-2025 cycle of SEND Courageous Conversations.

INTRODUCTION

Objective of Evaluation

To understand the impact of the 2024-2025 cycle of SEND Courageous Conversations to:

1. aid Local Authorities in reflecting on benefits and how to engage with the programme in terms of future topics and subsequent work
2. inform future funding decisions and design of further iterations of the programme.

The programme is part of the South East region's approach to sector led improvement and is funded by the DfE.

It is understood that five partnerships have participated in the SEND Conversations to end of November 2025. Each will have approached the event with a differing set of experiences and contexts and therefore it is unlikely that 'impact' can be understood other than through the qualitative responses to a set of common questions.

We therefore would invite you to let us know your views on the impact of your recent SEND Courageous Conversation, using the loose question framework below. You may write as much as you like.

The broad areas that we are exploring are:

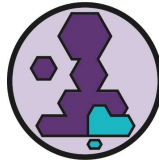
- Process of the SEND Courageous Conversation
- Impact on:
 - supporting improving outcomes of the children and young people in the area
 - supporting local families, parents and carers
 - supporting settings and schools
 - supporting other services working with children with SEND
 - staff
 - partnership working and relationships
 - partners
- Impact over time i.e. what has the SEND Courageous Conversation supported in terms of next steps, enabling work and relationships to move forward
- Reflections on how the experience of participating in such an event impacted on individuals involved
- What have been the further actions?

Please complete the set of questions using the boxes below, on behalf of your local authority area and return to isabelle@firstcareconsultancy.co.uk and bchrisbaird@gmail.com by **December 16 2024**.

Please make every effort to gather the views of parent carer forum participants in this feedback – and indicate what they are explicitly.

Also, please can you also include the perspectives of colleagues including DCS, Assistant Directors.

If you can include views from your ICB, schools, settings, colleges and others who participated that would be very helpful.



1. ABOUT YOU

- Your name
- Your organisation
- Role
- Who have you spoken to in collating this response? (roles)

2. COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION PROCESS

What are your reflections on how the day was organised – do you have any suggestions for improvements?

Do you think the right people were in the room? If not, how could we have improved our communications to enable them to be present?

3. IMPACT (i)

What has been the impact of the day and how would you evidence it? (i.e. anecdotal feedback, demonstrable change, inclusion in reports). For this section we are looking at impact on:

- supporting improving outcomes of the children and young people in the area
- supporting local families, parents and carers
- supporting settings and schools
- supporting services working with children with SEND
- partnership working and relationships

4. IMPACT (ii)

- What has the SEND Courageous Conversation supported in terms of next steps, enabling work and relationships to move forward

- Reflections on how the experience of participating in such an event impacted on individuals involved

5. FURTHER ACTIONS/ NEXT STEPS

What have been the follow-on activities? For example, have you taken the results of the day to the SEND Partnership Board and if so, what has been the further action?

What would you say to colleagues who have not yet participated in the Courageous Conversation cycle?

Would you welcome another opportunity to have a SEND Courageous Conversation over the next year? If so what topic would you choose?

Thank you for your input. The results of this survey will be collated and brought to the January 2025 SESLIP SEND Strategic Group and then to the SESLIP DCS board in 2025 with a view to defining the shape and scale of further SEND Courageous Conversations – so thank you! If you would be happy to talk to us further about your reflections, please let us know.

Responses by close of play December 16 please to:

isabelle@firstcareconsultancy.co.uk

bchrisbaird@gmail.com