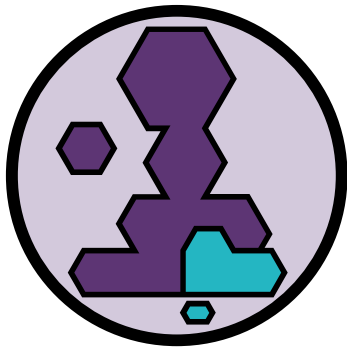




SESLIP

South East Sector Led
Improvement Programme

Evaluation of the 2024-2045 cycle of SEND Courageous Conversations

16 10 2025

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Appendix I: How the courageous conversations were organised and their immediate feedback.

Appendix 1 is available here: <https://www.seslip.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Appendix-I-Courageous-Conversations-Evaluation-details.pdf>

Appendix II: Interim Evaluation Report (March 2025).

Appendix 2 is available here <https://www.seslip.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Interim-Evaluation-of-the-2024-2025-cycle-of-SEND-Courageous-ConversationsFinal-March-2025.pdf>

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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 throughout the 'SEND Courageous Conversations' programme.

There had been strong regional buy-in into the programme, with 14 out of the 19 SEND areas in the South East hosting a Courageous Conversation during the 18 month cycle between January 2024 and August 2025 and 10 of these providing their staff to act as external peer reviewers.

They had already commissioned a mid-cycle evaluation, drawing on feedback from the first five Courageous Conversations to inform the delivery of the remaining scheduled sessions as well as feeding into decisions on the programme's future. This evaluation indicated that the SEND Courageous Conversations were positively received, with wholehearted support for future iterations of the programme. There were useful suggestions for future topics which informed subsequent Courageous Conversation planning.

This Report has been divided into two sections: the first which summarises the key outputs of the days and the second which provides an evaluation of the Courageous Conversation process, experiences of participants and any identified impact.

Executive summary

SEND Courageous Conversations are a well-recognised and highly valued opportunity for local authorities and local authority areas within SESLIP's sector-led improvement offer, utilising the Department for Education Improvement Grant.

They have taken place within the context of significant local, regional and national activity focusing on SEND and Alternative Provision. They play a small part within this, but a welcomed one.

The conversations have contributed to the DfE SEND Enablers in different ways according to topic chosen and structure of the day.

The Conversations provide a platform for local authorities to work constructively with parent carer forum representatives and other partners by focusing on a particular SEND or Alternative Provision (AP) topic of their choosing. The independently facilitated days provide safe, structured spaces for 'SEND Courageous Conversations' to take place at local area level and so to provide a space to reflect, explore and agree next steps.

Topics included Ordinarily Available Provision, impact for children from SEND assessments, Education Health and Care Plans, Annual Reviews and how to improve; communication with the SEND system; with parent carers; Quality Assurance; Alternative Provision; an area's Self Evaluation.

Participants noted a range of impact from the days including re-evaluation and changes to quality assurance frameworks and practice; revised and improved approaches to Annual Reviews; learning of best practice; improved partnership relationships and communication, including with parent carer forums; wider understanding of ordinarily available provision; improved development of Self Evaluation.

Significant benefits have also been recognised by participants (including parent carer representatives) from other local authority areas who have taken part as members of the visiting teams.

This evaluation research was carried out throughout July and August 2025 and involved a series of focus groups alongside a review of the 14 SEND Courageous Conversation reports and feedback from the day and the outputs from the Interim Report.

The evaluation has identified some process improvement suggestions; these were all offered within a context of an overwhelmingly positive experience that will have a lasting legacy well beyond the day itself, both for those participating as host and also those as external participants.

The SEND Courageous Conversations are being offered throughout 2025-2026. The results of this evaluation will be used to inform the Conversations going forward. These Conversations will be used to feed into the requests for SEND targeted support, as one of the ways to identify how best to use the SEND targeted support offer.

National and regional context

SEND Courageous Conversations were introduced as part of the SESLIP offer in the summer of 2023, with the first one taking place in January 2024. This was at a time when the SEND reforms of 2014 had led to significant changes in the approach, support and financing of SEND which were being acutely felt in an increasing number of LA areas. Demand for assessments, education, health and care plans, specialist support and placements were outstripping availability and capacity, and significant overspends were emerging on the High Needs Block in a significant number of local authorities.

The impact of COVID19, including multiple lock downs, was also part of the context as local areas began to re-establish unrestricted working relationships with children, parent carers, partners (including across health commissioning and provider services) and providers including settings, schools and post-16. Necessarily, most work had been done remotely, via a variety of internet platforms, such as Teams or Zoom.

Before the change in national government in 2024 there had been a SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) green paper and then a response to the consultation, both of which shaped the response to challenges nationally and locally. The new national government from July 2025 has put in place some work and funding to support the development of the SEND and AP systems, including increased regional improvement grant. The Department for Education (DfE) has set out a series of SEND Priorities and Enablers as follows:

DfE SEND Priorities:

1. Delivering Better Value
2. What Works in SEND
3. Greater inclusion in mainstream settings
4. Reduction in high-cost placements
5. Reduction in home-to-school travel
6. Development of stakeholder partnerships

DfE SEND Enablers:

1. Co-production and relationships at the heart of the system
2. Shared vision and evidence-informed priorities
3. Stable and knowledgeable leadership and governance
4. A focus on high-quality delivery of the essentials
5. A well-organised, skilled and supported workforce.

SEND Courageous Conversations supports local areas to determine a locally relevant topic and focus, all of which have covered a number of the priorities and provided opportunities for partners across local partnerships to develop the SEND Enablers.

SESLIP utilised the DfE regional improvement grant for SEND to fund the work, fulfilling the requirements of the grant and supporting the underlying aims of SESLIP, to support, share and develop best practice between local areas and enable staff to benefit not only from work taking place within their local area, but also to take part in work in other areas. This not only benefits the host area but also provides important and valued continuous professional development opportunities.

Impact

The DfE has cited five enablers to support the development of SEND and AP systems. These are:

1. Co-production and relationships at the heart of the system
2. Shared vision and evidence-informed priorities
3. Stable and knowledgeable leadership and governance
4. A focus on high-quality delivery of the essentials
5. A well-organised, skilled and supported workforce.

Our evaluation makes clear that the 14 Courageous Conversations undertaken from January 2024 to July 2025 have supported – and will continue to contribute to – all five of these enablers at local level, to a greater or lesser extent depending upon the local area topic chosen and the experience of the day itself.

The conversations have provided an opportunity for reflection and dialogue across local area partnerships, supporting the development of improved relationships and understanding of different stakeholder perspectives and leading to a set of agreed local next steps.

Many reported that participating in the SEND Courageous Conversations had led to the local development of new ways of working with partners including groups of schools, revised approaches to Quality Assurance, new templates such as EHCP plans and enhanced processes for standard documentation and strategic reviews, in line with the varying

focus topics selected by each local SEND area. This had led to noticeable changes to partnership working and a shared determination to deliver change.

We have made the Annual Review a working document – so much quicker, so it can be part of a cycle. No need to update the whole plan – this allows people to focus on a specific area.

LA representative



Whilst particular positive outcomes were identified, all participants in the focus groups were careful to acknowledge that it was likely to be too early to tell if there was a measurable positive impact on the experiences of children and families in terms of fundamental shifts across the local system. It was also acknowledged that levers of change were not all held at local SEND area level.

Many reported a discernible positive change in culture, particularly regarding improved relationships with Parent Carer Forums.

I can see a direct line between the CC sessions and the development of the SEF, particularly with relation to the parent/carer set of questions.

LA representative

For host local areas, participation has raised awareness of current good practice within the local authority and its partners, as well as from other areas, much of which can be taken forward in future locally.

For those who have contributed as part of the external visiting team, not only has the experience allowed them to encounter different examples of good practice to support practice improvements in SEND and AP provision across the region, but also to better understand the levers of organisational change such as improved coproduction and clearer communication.

Overall, the process was a useful reminder that for sustainable change required committed time and resources.

SECTION 1: 14 Courageous Conversations

A detailed description of how the courageous conversations were organised and their immediate feedback can be found in Appendix I, accessed via this [link](#).

Headline topic areas

Looking at the headline topic areas selected by SEND Areas to form the focus for each conversation, there were few surprises given the current context for SEND provision at national level. Nearly a third of all conversations focused on the quality of EHCP plans, including whether they made the best of representing the child's needs in totality, and also whether they were necessary in order to meet those needs. Annual Reviews and Alternative Provision were both chosen as a focus topic by two SEND areas.

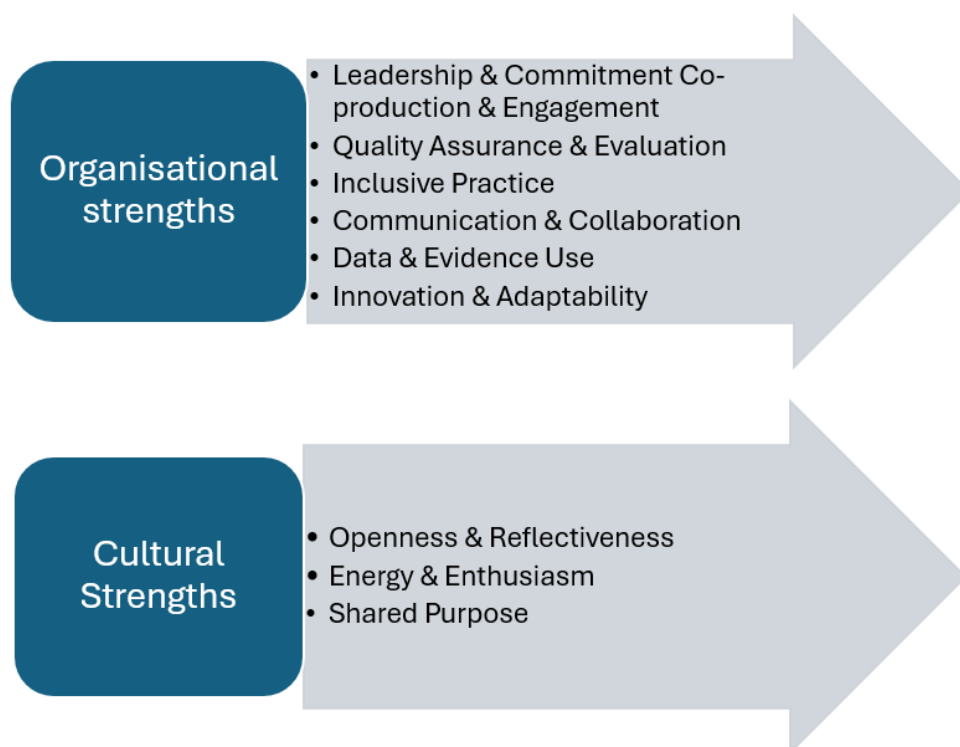
Topic Area	Emerging Themes
EHCPs (5)	Totality of need, QA systems, child voice, clarity of provision, impact measurement
Annual Reviews (2)	Celebrating progress, capturing change, simplifying language, improving multi-agency contributions
Alternative Provision (2)	Purpose and pathways, reintegration planning, quality assurance, family engagement

Ordinarily Available Provision (1)	Strengthening universal offer, building practitioner confidence, clarifying expectations
Graduated Response – using the refusal to assess as a point of focus (1)	Supporting children effectively in mainstream school, reducing tribunal appeals, embedding assess-plan-do-review cycle
Communication (1)	Accessibility, plain language, digital formats, feedback loops, "you said, we did" approaches
SEF Development (1)	Joint narrative, evidence of impact, clarity of strengths and areas for development
Other	This included approaches to co-production, neurodiversity; schools settings and services involvement and reasons why things have worked well for children and how is this known?

Strengths

A review of each of the presentations prepared from the 14 Courageous Conversations illustrates the strong passion and commitment to co-production and change across the sector to improve outcomes for children and families.

There was clear strategic intent to use events as catalysts for change and visible ownership of SEND priorities.



Reflections

SEND areas are thinking critically about their systems, the challenges and opportunities for improvement.

Key themes included:

- A willingness for an honest appraisal of pressures (financial, staffing, cross-border complexities)
- Active pursuit of external reflection and feedback – this could be uncomfortable truths to and from different partners, including schools and health services, parent carer forums and other professionals
- Recognition that co-production varies across areas, means different things to different people, and needs tailoring. Aligned with this was a desire to move from engagement to meaningful partnership
- Reflections on how to more effectively hear the voice of the child, of parent carers, and better embed child and parent carer voice in evidence, assessments, plans and reviews
- Desire to align SEF development with lived experience and frontline insight. This includes closing feedback loops and using audits for improvement
- Recognition that communication and visibility of impact are essential. This included reflections on how QA processes can be strengthened and better communicated
- Desire to reduce reliance on EHCPs through strong Ordinarily Available Provision
- Recognition of the need for clearer shared understanding of "what good looks like" and an acknowledgement that statutory compliance alone doesn't define "good".
- Emphasis on relationships, timing, and local delivery as key enablers
- Recognition of good practice examples and how to share them more widely
- Reflections on how SEND fits into broader LA priorities

Next steps identified throughout the Courageous Conversation cycle

Each of these Courageous Conversation events resulted in a set of operational and strategic next steps which are intended to be used to inform the individual internal improvement journey.

Looking first at the set of operational 'next steps' across all 14 conversations, the sessions resulted in a series of clear, actionable practice-level improvements focused on communication, documents and service delivery. Many of these could be identified as 'quick wins' to provide an early and visible boost to service improvement.

Each local authority was left with the materials generated from the day for them to use as they saw fit. In addition, a summary report was provided, again for the local area to use as appropriate to fit with the SEND work already taking place or planned.

Next step theme	Operational Actions
Quality Assurance of EHCPs	- Develop multi-agency QA frameworks - Clarify what "good" looks like in EHCPs - Reduce duplication and jargon - Improve child/parent voice in plans
Communication & Engagement including EHCP correspondence	- Simplify language and formats - Use storytelling and word-of-mouth - Improve reach to underrepresented groups
Child-Centred Planning	- Include child photos and direct quotes - Focus on lived experience and aspirations - Ensure EHCPs reflect real progress
Graduated Response (Practice-Level)	- Improve communication of Refusal-to-Assess decisions - Use videos and bite-sized communication for accessibility - Address backlog and documentation complexity
Coproduction (Practice-Level)	- Refine EHCP letters using parent feedback - Use "you said, we did" formats - Build trust through transparent comms
Training (Practice-Level)	- Create an 'local way' for Annual Reviews - Provide bite-sized training for practitioners - Use visual aids and overlays to support understanding

A number of the proposed 'next steps' were of a more strategic nature, requiring local leadership, often across the SEND partnership, to take forward effectively over a period of time.

Next step theme	Strategic Actions
System-Wide Strategic Alignment	- Use SEND Partnership Boards to drive change
	- Align SEF, strategy, and inspection readiness
	- Develop system-wide capacity for Annual Reviews
	- Clarify ownership and leadership roles
Training & Workforce Development	- Build consistent training across settings
	- Reduce documentation burden through simplification
Coproduction & Parent Carer Involvement	- Embed coproduction in QA and strategic planning
	- Involve forums in decision-making panels
	- Use feedback loops to refine system processes
Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP)	- Embed Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP) expectations across settings
	- Use champions to model inclusive practice
	- Align OAP with funding and inclusion strategy
Alternative Provision (AP)	- Define AP purpose and reintegration pathways
	- Clarify QA roles and funding mechanisms
	- Build shared understanding across LA and schools
Graduated Response & Early Intervention	- Strengthen graduated response post-refusal
	- Build confidence in non-EHCP pathways
	- Clarify escalation routes and thresholds
Data, Metrics & Evaluation	- Use audits and dip sampling to track impact
	- Share metrics across system partners
	- Evaluate strategic interventions (e.g. inclusion teams)

SECTION 2: Courageous Conversation evaluation

Methodology

The evaluation findings are drawn from a synthesis of three sources: the Interim Evaluation which looked at the experience of the first five participating SEND areas; immediate feedback from each of the 14 Courageous Conversation collated and shared as part of the session output; and three focus groups.

The immediate feedback was collected during time within the Courageous Conversation format which allowed for participants to provide their immediate reflections on the day. These were recorded and shared to participants who had the opportunity to check for accuracy. They provide an invaluable resource to inform the evaluation of the Courageous Conversation and include feedback from all participating external and host partners including parent carer forum representatives, present in 13 out of the 14 Conversations.

Additionally, all those who took part in any of the 14 Courageous Conversations were invited to a set of three focus groups: one which explored the parent carer forum experience and views and two which focused on the local authority experience. These were held at the end of the cycle, which allowed participants to reflect on actual change since the Conversations.

Findings (1) - Interim report

A mid-cycle evaluation was commissioned after the region's first five Courageous Conversations to inform the delivery of the remaining scheduled sessions and any decisions on the future of the programme.

The research was conducted via a dissemination of a structured email survey to participants. The full Interim Report is included via a link as [Appendix II](#) with key findings as follows:

- The feedback was extremely positive, both from the standpoint of the host SEND areas and also those participating as external contributors, i.e. representatives from other parent carer forums and from LA colleagues outside of the host LA.
- SEND Courageous Conversations were reported to have had an impact beyond the day itself and were seen as 'not simply one-off events'. The work resulted in areas agreeing and taking forward some next steps in their work. The planning and development of each programme for each area was welcomed and provided LAs with a chance to reflect and hone the days to meet their needs.
- There were positive consequences of representatives of local SEND Partnerships spending a significant amount of time focusing on a topic, including opportunities to understand more of each other's perspectives. This led to a more positive "whole area" commitment at the end of sessions.
- Specific practical learnings were identified and taken forward to the remainder of the SEND Courageous Conversations, such as ensuring that there was mixed representation on each table.

Findings (2) - Immediate feedback from the day itself

Overall, participants felt it was a worthwhile use of their time. The overwhelmingly positive observations across the 14 local authority areas have been organised thematically below.

Shared Purpose & Commitment

It was clear that there was a strong desire to improve outcomes for children with SEND across the South East, with a sense of collective responsibility and energy which ran throughout the day, building as the days went on. Many saw the Courageous Conversation event as a springboard for change and left with tangible actions and ideas for improvement.

Openness & Collaboration

Participants consistently valued the open, respectful format of the day, providing a 'safe space for honest dialogue. The mixed tables were welcomed by participants as they encouraged the sharing of fresh perspectives and deeper understanding through cross-service and cross-LA engagement.

Time & Space to Reflect

Dedicated time was seen as rare and valuable, providing an opportunity to "step back" and reflect on materials, processes, and assumptions. The face-to-face format enabled richer, more nuanced conversations about complex issues. In some areas it was the first time colleagues had spent a significant amount of time working together face-to-face.

Parent Carer Voice

The presence of Parent Carer Forums and other parent carer organisations was widely appreciated, with their contributions adding depth and authenticity providing an opportunity for all to hear about lived experiences directly.

Local Context & Identity

Many LAs reflected on their unique challenges and strengths with a recognition that local context shapes service delivery and priorities.

There was an ambition to build on what's working locally while learning from others.

Suggestions for development

Some participants suggested further improving the process by ensuring more specific goals at the start of the day and follow-up. Likewise, some thought there could be more refinement of the prompts during the day. Some participants thought that pre-circulating materials would aid the work of the day.

Others welcomed the open nature of the day and welcomed the chance to hear, listen and reflect without the immediate closed direction of a specific task/goal and that this would have stifled the positives that came from the day. Others also welcomed the opportunity to work without the presumption of pre-SEND Courageous Conversations prep work, which a number admitted they would not have had time to do.

Findings (3) - Focus group discussions

To help understand the longer term impact of the sessions, the SESLIP central team held three focus groups in August 2025, 18 months after the first SEND Courageous Conversation, to which all local authority SEND Courageous Conversations contacts were invited, as well as Parent Carer Forum representatives who had taken part in the Conversations in other local authority areas.

Representatives from three parent carer groups and eight of the 14 participating local authorities took part in the focus group feedback sessions.

The Parent Carer Forum representative experience was explored in the first of the focus groups whilst the following two reflected on experience of the Courageous Conversation cycle from the local authority officer point of view. There was a common set of questions addressed in all groups:

- The positives of SEND Courageous Conversations:
 - For LA areas that have them
 - For LA reps who participate in other LA area SEND Courageous Conversations
- What are the key ingredients to make them effective?
- What helps them have an impact (and what has been the impact?)?
- What would help them develop?
- What to watch out for? Not do?

The positives of SEND Courageous Conversations In relation to host SEND Area

The positive feedback recorded during each area's Courageous Conversation was reflected in the focus group conversations, with many of the themes identified at the sessions revisited in both parent carer and LA officer focus groups.

Openness and collaboration enabled a shared purpose and commitment.

The opportunity to have a 'safe space', where honest conversations could be held 'without baggage' was seen as a way of moving to a 'collaborative space'.

Good opportunity to talk about SEND in more detail that might have been a 30 minute Teams call

Parent Carer representative

Good to have an opportunity to be transparent and honest. Not many other opportunities to be so blunt.

LA representative

[Provided] an opportunity to explore; honest, not defensive conversation, without baggage

Parent carer representative

The space provides an opportunity for collaborative working, underpinned by transparency.

We know our problems, now let's work together to help.

LA representative

The opportunity for **time and space to reflect** was likewise valued by both parent carer representatives and local authority officers. The clarity of the approach and that it



was well defined and boundaried, was seen as supporting purposeful, high quality conversations.

The Parent carer group particularly valued the face to face aspect of the day.

The **broad range of participating stakeholders** was cited as particularly helpful to making the 'Courageous Conversations' effective, both in the quality of the conversation but also as an aid to moving forward implementing changes

The broad range of participants – and their understanding - enabled the conversation to broaden out.

Great to have different organisations involved in the day. This will be particularly helpful when we start co-producing the QA framework and move forward.

Host LA participant

'[We were able to] meet with other people and get feedback that wouldn't have got.

Parent Carer representative

Having an external facilitator, outside of SEND team, helped to change tone of conversation and shift it, across the partnership.

Host LA representative

The **central role of the external partners** was appreciated by local authority partners, who felt that the objectivity enabled a conversation that resonated across the partnerships.

The role in the conversations in **learning from other areas** was cited as very helpful in future planning.

This was a point that was highlighted through the Parent Carer Forum workshop where it was pointed out that multi-LA representation in the conversations meant that those authorities where value and confidence is placed in the Parent Carer Forums could share the positive impact on local delivery. External facilitation was likewise welcomed.

[Participant "noted the great tips on how to approach understanding of the system and what was available. So this has led to LA working with 'best practice organisations' who can then disseminate this knowledge.'

Host LA representative

The positives of SEND Courageous Conversations for LA and Parent Carer Forum representatives who participate in other LA area SEND Courageous Conversations

This was reported to be a very positive experience for all involved: local authority colleagues as well as parent carer forum members on the day.

The advantages of bringing experience into – and taking it from – other areas was seen as invaluable. This was seen from many facets: breaking down silos and learning from examples of good practice from elsewhere, or 'nicking ideas'; communicating the importance of strong local Parent Carer Forum/ LA relationships and a realisation for some that the 'grass is not always greener'.

It also enabled participants to reflect that the undoubted challenges each area faced were commonly faced and a result of national challenges playing out locally. This context was particularly helpful when preparing presentations for elected members.

External participants valued the positive energy of being part of a team and were grateful for the continuous professional development opportunities provided through the Courageous Conversation format.

This was such a brilliant CPD opportunity for myself and supported me to develop my understanding and explore new ideas within another LA's context which I was then able to apply when returning to [LA] and now as the Strategic Lead for SEND in [another LA], I am very grateful for this opportunity, and would say that this has probably been one of the most meaningful CPD I have engaged with in my career in SEND.

Based on my experience, when joining [another LA] I promoted my wider leadership team to engage in the programme to provide additional CPD. Being part of this work has allowed my wider leadership team an opportunity to develop a broader professionals network and an opportunity to consider best practice and how it can be implemented within the [other LA] context. My leadership team was grateful of the opportunity as they felt it was a meaningful opportunity to engage with peers; problem solve collectively and have some space to stand back and reflect on what is next for us in our LA.

LA external participant

What are the key ingredients to make them effective?

Event preparation and content planning: participants in the focus groups all cited careful action planning for the event as key. This starts with having the right people with different perspectives in the room: 'health/schools/ICB – the more partners the better'. Providing people with advance notice was helpful to secure attendance. On the day itself, the importance of mixing roles and teams up was seen as beneficial, enabled through a pre-arranged seating plan and table facilitators. The provision of lunch was welcomed where provided.

The use of a 'car park' methodology in one local authority area, was recommended to help the discussions stay on track, using post it notes – i.e. we hear you, but not for today. However, the importance of sufficient flexibility to pivot was also cited, with focus group participants noting the creative interplay between structure and fluidity.

The importance of good content planning was highlighted, in order to ensure that there was a clear question and the next steps were also clearly articulated. The value of involving the parent carer forum in developing the topic was highlighted, which led to greater ownership of the issue and the solution.

Having a manager present who was sufficiently senior to take forward next steps was seen as a way of ensuring management ownership of the outcomes and so promoting active participation.

Resources: good quality documentation was seen as highlighted, as well as visuals that were easy to read, with printed copies for ease.

A positive event culture: whilst the positive, collaborative energy of the events was welcomed by all, it was clear this did not happen by accident. Key ingredients cited included:

- Skillful independent event facilitation
- Acknowledgement that things aren't always right
- Positioning that everyone's voice is equal, with no 'hierarchy of views'.
- Clear understanding that SEND was the responsibility of everyone in the room
- Importance of a 'safe space' - the session was not adversarial.
- Flexibility from an understanding that local context makes conversations different

What would help them develop?

The idea of a '**hints and tips guide**' to a successful Courageous Conversation was discussed, drawing on the experiences of the 14 conversations to date. This could be built on further by providing an opportunity for scheduled host authorities to meet with those who had already experienced the process as a host authority, particularly those with a similar topic.

Stronger engagement with Parent Carer Forum representatives by LA staff on developing the topics to better reflect the issues faced by families in some LAs. Some parent carer forum representatives noted the difficulty in attending longer sessions, with the possibility of having a 10-2pm window, or a morning session and then a different grouping of individuals after a lunch break.

The opportunities arising from **involving SENDIAS** as a key element were reiterated.

To continually reflect on the balance between **discussion** and **detail presentation**. There were differing views on whether it would be valuable for local areas to disseminate all documentation used on the day before the day took place, whether it was better to review materials in groups together with everyone in the same starting position, whether in practice participants would look at the information beforehand. A further suggestion was made to keep the morning session within the larger group, but to move to smaller groups for afternoon feedback and 'next steps' sessions,

A built-in focus **on the use of data** to set out themes, possibly also LA **case studies** and an opportunity to **share best practice from other places** was suggested as an improvement.

A **stronger strategic linkage** between the two cycles of DCS Peer Challenge and the Courageous Conversations was suggested, for example a DCS Peer Challenge with a focus on SEND – with the Strategic Lead/Heads of Service and Self Assessments.

Increasing the **visibility of the process** and what had been discussed as **local 'next steps'** would help to ensure accountability for agreed actions and so ensure there was a sustained positive impact.

As a region, sharing the learning from the full set of 14 Courageous Conversations to inform future activity was seen as pivotal. This would be achieved by the dissemination of the evaluation report and ongoing reflections of the Courageous Conversations and their impact through group sharing sessions

What to watch out for? Not do?

Importance of choosing appropriate topic: the chosen 'conversation' topics were highlighted as critical to the success of the day, with too wide a scope seen as one potential pitfall.

Risk of echo chamber: the importance of keeping the event purposeful was highlighted, to avoid becoming a 'navel gazing' exercise.

Practical pointers: the importance of ensuring prospective participants were well-briefed in advance was highlighted. Prior knowledge couldn't be assumed, so the visibility and importance of the event should be shared. A practical example of this is in relation to the school sector where a pre-meet would have been helpful.

The importance of ensuring there was sufficient LA seniority to make change happen was highlighted.

Ensuring that planning and preparation was resourced and shared with appropriate business support was seen as key to the smooth running of the day.

Conclusion

The findings from the full set of 14 SEND Courageous Conversations bore out the initial promise identified from the mid-cycle evaluation of the first five sessions.

Feedback has been very positive. The events provided **a much-needed space to enable all stakeholders to work together collaboratively** to improve the services and so outcomes for children with special educational needs and disabilities at SEND area level.

It is important to note that whilst valued, SEND Courageous Conversations are a small part of the work that is taking place continually in each local area to focus on and improve SEND and AP systems and provision. It is for each area to take the next steps in making use of the outcomes of the day.

Specific positive outcomes were identified, and some practical changes have been made in different Local Authority areas. All participants in the focus groups were careful to acknowledge that it was likely to be too early to tell if there was a fundamental and measurable positive impact on the experiences of children and families across the local system. However, there was a reported **discernible change in the energy and engagement** across partnerships to work together to achieve improved outcomes.

Many participants reported they had already taken action in response to locally agreed 'Next Steps' output from the SEND Courageous Conversation to enhance the **process building blocks** which improve local SEND outcomes, such as better EHCP templates and clearer parental documentation.

The evaluation has identified some process improvement suggestions, but these were all offered within a context of an overwhelmingly positive experience that will have a lasting legacy well beyond the day itself, both for those participating as host and also those as external reviewers.

Future Activity - Regional Improvement Plan

After the positive interim evaluation and supported by further positive feedback, a new cycle of ten Courageous Conversations is included within the region's Regional Improvement Plan for 2025-2026, funded by the Department for Education. This activity falls within the 'regional diagnostics strand'.

The opportunity to participate in the Courageous Conversation cycle will be offered to all 19 SEND areas across the SESLIP area and the Regional Improvement Plan for 2025/26 has a target of 10 to be delivered by the end of the financial year. As at September 2025, 6 have been delivered with 2 more planned in November and further requests being received for the rest of the financial year. There is some scope within the regional improvement grant to hold more than 10, depending on demand.

The SEND Courageous Conversations will be used to feed into the requests for SEND targeted support, as one of the ways to identify how best to use the SEND targeted support offer.

Feedback from this evaluation report will be taken on board to improve the process through the development of a 'hints and tips guide to a successful SEND Courageous Conversation'.

This report will be shared with the SEND Governance Group, the SESLIP Steering Group, and the SEND Strategic Leads to enable themes to be taken into other regional and SEND focused work.

There will continue to be an emphasis on area teams' (including health, education and third sector partners) involvement, not just local authority staff.

Significant scoping work will take place before the delivery day to ensure effectiveness of each session using:

- output from SEND Data Capacity and Capability as it develops,
- analysis against the 5 SEND Enablers, alongside.
- LAs own self assessments, incorporating.
- Safety Valve and
- Delivering Better Value work and
- regular liaison with LGA and DfE leads.

The SEND Courageous Conversations, as a key component of the integrated Regional Improvement Plan offer will form part of the entry point to trigger the region's targeted support offer.

The current evaluation programme will be extended and carried out annually.