

**MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF FAMILIES AND CARERS TOGETHER IN
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE**

THURSDAY 26TH SEPTEMBER 2024

MISSENDEN ABBEY, GREAT MISSENDEN, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, HP16 0BD AT 9.45AM

PRESENT: 1 TRUSTEE
27 MEMBERS (including 5 Steering Group member)
6 GUESTS

APOLOGIES: 2 TRUSTEES (both due to illness)
3 MEMBERS

Andrew Howard (Team Leader) chaired the meeting at the request of the Trustees.

**1. CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL JARRETT (DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION & INCLUSION,
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL)**

Michael introduced himself and thanked FACT for the opportunity to start a dialogue with parents which he was keen to do at any opportunity, as it is a key element in the Council's ongoing strategy and which he knew to be important as he was also a parent of 2 children with EHCPs living in Bucks. He acknowledged that partnerships were essential if we are to deliver a robust SEND provision in Bucks and this is echoed in the draft SEND strategy which will be open for public consultation shortly. He noted that FACT have been engaged in the conversation around its drafting and that wider parent consultations are being arranged by FACT and the SEND team to ensure that parent carers can feedback into the emerging strategy.

Michael noted that funding was a substantial challenge as the Council's allocated funding from central government is insufficient to meet demands. A concerted effort is now being made to enter into a dialogue with the DfE to gain an improvement to the funding offer, as historic levels of funding are inadequate. As a result of the potential for the growth in SEND expenditure to place the whole Council in a financial crisis and a possible section 114 notice, a decision was taken in early September to stop payments from the Higher Needs Block (in particular the portion of school funding assigned for SEND support) and for payment requests to be considered individually and approved in exceptional circumstances. The timescale for this change is unknown but the aim is to keep it as short as possible but that depends on the funding discussions with the DfE. This change was communicated to schools at the start of term but as this directly impacts schools as they access these funds, it was not felt necessary to communicate the change directly to parents.

Whilst a revised funding agreement will ease the situation, creative and innovative solutions are still needed to ensure that available funds are used effectively and targeted in particular at meeting need at the earliest opportunity and in ways that allows CYP to remain in their communities and with their peers whenever possible. To this end, we need an increase in school place provision in Bucks which can meet the needs of those CYP currently educated outside Bucks in costly independent provision. The development of a robust sufficiency strategy is therefore a high priority as reflected in the draft SEND strategy and this will include post 19 provision for those with higher support needs as they transition to adulthood.

Michael also spoke about the Delivering Better Value programme which was a DfE initiative to assist Council's to adjust their solutions through an injection of one off funds. The DBV process had been another in which many partners were engaged and the focus that has emerged is on supporting mainstream schools to be more inclusive. A number of appointments have been made to facilitate this and an Inclusion Conference was held this week which had been strongly attended.

In response to Michael, the following comments were made:-

- The direct result of reducing funding for SEND support in schools will be an increase in ECHNA requests as parents seek to guarantee the provision their children and young people require.
- Parents are often blamed for being 'demanding' and no doubt that will be the response again when these arbitrary decisions begin to impact on children and young people forcing parents to seek the provision they need.
- Restraint is used too often in schools and instead efforts should be focussed on reducing arousal
- Work with parents rather than fight them – why does the Council still insist on fighting appeals against refusals to assess which they always concede or lose in the end but only after much time, energy and bitterness.
- Flexibility of approaches is what is required and schools are the least flexible institutions left in the country
- The Council officers continue to make illegal statements and offer responses which are unlawful (as is shown whenever parents have the time, energy and money to take the matter to judicial review or the LGO), so why is there not more time and money spent on educating staff?
- Social care are often the source of even more distress for SEND families than schools (which is no mean feat) and yet they are never willing to engage in discussions
- The recent Transport issues for post 16 in particular could have been avoided and the increased anxiety for students reduced if processes had been better planned.
- There is a need for a cultural change. Bucks needs to stop seeing SEND as a problem to be fixed and focus on it as a means of safeguarding children and young people with additional needs.

[During the conversation, questions were posed electronically by attendees and by others unable to attend and the answers to these have been provided by Michael and colleagues after the meeting. They form an Annex to these Minutes.]

2. REPORT OF THE STEERING GROUP

Andrew Howard made a presentation on behalf of the Steering Group on the activities of the Charity during the 2023-24 year as detailed in the annual report. [A copy of the presentation slides are available at www.factbucks.org.uk]

In overview, the following were the delivery highlights of the year under review

Delivering Ourselves - Webinars; SEND Survey; Meet the iSEND team

Encouraging parents to participate – Self Evaluation Framework for SEND; Preparing for Adulthood; Parent Support Groups

Leading initiatives – Joint Strategic Needs Analysis; Integrated Care Board engagement ; ADHD focus

Offering the parent perspective – Early Help; iSEND process review; Delivering Better Value

Being unpopular – Delivering Better Value; Governance Review; SEND Strategy; DSG Review

The Steering Group's self-evaluation on performance against the objectives set by the Trustees show that 8 had been met in full; 10 had been part in part (usually due to these being strategic changes the timetables for which are outside parent control); and 3 had not been started.

In financial terms, the Charity had expended more than it received in income as a deliberate policy using accumulated reserves to fund updating of website and related branding as well as an allocation of time for a parent carer to work to increase participation in the work of the Charity.

Looking into 2024-25, the outstanding objectives have now all been initiated and a further 22 had been identified through a coproduced process involving Trustees; Steering Group members; and wider parent reps.

Parent carer forums are here to stay

– locally and nationally – as the source of parent input

Co-production is a concept that has proved its value but needs promoting

– user input makes things work better and we should be champions of it

Parent voice is vital at a strategic and operational level

– there is substantial change in hand and it won't be truly effective without us, although this is currently a real challenge to deliver

Parent lived experience heard by services prevents system bias

– it is easy to adapt systems to suit employees if the user experience is missing and so dialogue directly with service providers, however uncomfortable, needs to continue

Social media provides a tool for communication

– no excuses for any of us not being able to get messages to parents – and FACT are working hard on this

In financial terms, an increased grant from Buckinghamshire Council and the Integrated Care Board has been secured and this will allow further allocation of paid hours to parent carers in key roles including communications, general admin and Team Leader. There is also work funded from a grant received in the previous year for ADHD.

3. ANNUAL REPORT AND FINANCIAL STATEMENTS 2023-24

The Annual Report and Financial Statements 2023-24 had been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Charities Act and had been Independently Examined. They have been published to members via a website link www.factbucks.org.uk.

The Trustees have approved the Annual Report and Financial Statements for adoption by the Members. The Members resolved nem con to adopt the Annual Report and Financial Statements.

4. ELECTION OF TRUSTEES

None of the current Trustees were required to seek re-election. Beth Knighton indicated her intent to resign. Allison Milligan and Gemma Davenport indicated that they would like to discuss the option to become a Trustee. It was agreed that either or both could be appointed by the Trustees if they indicated their subsequent willingness to stand. It was noted that the Charity can have up to 12 trustees and that new Trustees can be appointed through the year. Anyone interested in being a Trustee was asked to contact admin@factbucks.org.uk

5. QUESTIONS

There were no questions for the Steering Group or Trustees

6. CONVERSATION WITH BELINDA SESTON (HEAD OF INTEGRATED CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONING, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL AND INTEGRATED CARE BOARD FOR OXON, BUCKS & BERKS WEST)

Belinda introduced herself and her colleagues, Marie Mickiewicz, Olli Stycuk-Dean, Adrian Timon and Caroline Hart.

Belinda explained the role of the team in planning for services in a range of areas many of which impact SEND children and young people and their families including CAMHS, Therapies, Community Paediatrics, Short Breaks etc. The team also monitors those same services and advocates with funders when there is clear need for additional funding. The team works jointly for Buckinghamshire Council and the Integrated Care Board which has assumed the overarching responsibility for health provision in Bucks as well as Oxfordshire and Western Berkshire.

The team offered a presentation outlining their areas of responsibility [this is available to view on the website www.factbucks.org.uk]

In the conversation the following comments were made:-

- There does not appear to be an understanding of SEND within public health as was demonstrated by the challenges faced by many families trying to access the arrangements for vaccinations during COVID.
- The variety of styles between GP practices make it very challenging for families who move or who rely on other families to guide their response to issues they face.
- Clinical environments do not reduce stress and anxiety – on the whole they increase it.
- Many health professionals have little knowledge of how to communicate with individuals for whom traditional methods of communication are not appropriate and clearly training is required
- The ND passport developed by Oxford Health is a positive development for users but needs to be more widely recognised by practitioners

- The AES portal offer seems attractive but there remains a concern that the organisation running it still supports the use of ABA/PBS
- The Autism Strategy action plan (like the strategy itself) needs to be coproduced and overseen co-productively – with action happening more quickly.
- There is a clear increase in comorbidity in SEND in recent years and yet the pathways and systems seem unable to adapt to this reality
- Respite provision is inadequate and the offer of direct payments by social care is only valuable if you can find someone to provide the service you need
- Whilst Mental Health in Schools initiative is worthy, the reality in most schools seems to be focussed on attendance and not on meeting the mental health needs of young people
- The waiting times for ADHD and ASC diagnosis remain too long and families are still being prevented from accessing support without it in many instances. The changes to HNBF payments will reduce school interest in recognising and adapting for ASC/ADHD without an EHCP.

The meeting closed at 1pm