

## **Bedford Borough and Central East Integrated Care Board Local Area Partnership Response to the 2025-2026 Parent Carer Forum Outcomes Report**

On behalf of Bedford Borough Council and our partners across education, health and social care, we would like to thank the Bedford Borough Parent Carer Forum (BBPCF) for the publication of the Outcomes Report 2025.

We recognise the significant time, care and commitment that parent carers have given to completing the survey and sharing their lived experiences. The volume of responses and the depth of qualitative feedback provide a strong and credible evidence base which the partnership takes seriously.

### **Acknowledging the findings**

We are saddened by the overall deterioration in outcomes reported this year and acknowledge clearly the PCF's conclusion that there is more to do to meet the evolving needs of all children and young people with SEND well enough within our community. The fall in the overall average score, together with declines across most outcomes, must be understood and addressed collectively.

We particularly note and acknowledge the following key messages:

- The continued decline in experiences for children and young people with EHCPs, especially those in mainstream settings
- The significant fall in reported outcomes for children in specialist provision, which represents a material change from previous years
- Ongoing and serious concerns about bullying, including the impact of peer and, in some cases, adult behaviours
- Persistent difficulties with accessing health services, including long waits, threshold issues and gaps during periods of waiting
- The continued "cliff edge" for young people post-16 and post-education, with the poorest outcomes reported for those aged 20–25
- The poorer outcomes reported by families where parent carers themselves have a disability
- The strength of feeling expressed by families about not feeling heard, experiencing parent-blaming, and feeling that financial pressures outweigh children's best interests

The voices reflected in this report matter, and we value the way they will inform and shape how we prioritise improvement.

### **Response to the Forum's recommendations**

We welcome the six recommendations set out in the report and confirm the following commitments:

#### **1. Specialist provision outcomes**

We will work with BBPCF to convene focus group work and attend 'Let's Talk' events with families and leaders from specialist settings to better understand the reasons for the decline in outcomes and to agree specific actions.

#### **2. Bullying in mainstream settings**

We accept that more must be done to address bullying experienced by children and young people with SEND. This includes examining practice, culture and accountability within schools, and addressing concerns raised about adult behaviour as well as peer bullying. Our *Belong in Bedford* workstream is best placed to take this work forward.

### **3. Access to clubs, activities and community life**

We will support the development of coproduced working groups to explore how children and young people with EHCPs, particularly those with complex needs, can be better supported to access inclusive and meaningful opportunities. There is work currently taking place on this as part of the contract renewal process for our commissioned Community Activities (Short Breaks), which is working toward facilitating a broader range of activities for families, which is being shaped by feedback from families and providers in PCF 'Let's Talk' events that have been taking place.

### **4. Preparing for adulthood**

We agree that the Preparing for Adulthood strategy requires review in light of the outcomes highlighted, particularly for young people aged 16–25. This will be undertaken with partners and families.

### **5. Support during waiting periods and unmet thresholds**

We recognise the need to strengthen support for families waiting for health services or who do not meet service thresholds, and we will work with health partners to explore practical options.

### **6. Support for parent carers with disabilities**

We acknowledge the poorer outcomes identified and agree that additional consideration is needed. We will explore how targeted support, including key working approaches, could better support these families.

## **Our collective responsibility**

The partnership work between the PCF, the Integrated Care Board (ICB) and our Local Authority is something we are very proud of in Bedford Borough, as it pushes us all to continue to strive for a better future together.

Outlined below are the responses from our ICB partners in relation to the key points highlighted about Health in the Outcomes Report:

On behalf of Central East ICB and our health colleagues from the East of England Health and Care Trust and the East London Foundation Trust, we would like to thank you for sharing the 2025 Bedford Borough PCF Outcomes Report findings. It is important that our Parents and Carers continue to share their experiences of access to health services and along with our colleagues in the Local Authority and Education we listen to those and respond accordingly. The ICB remains committed to working in co-production with BBPCF, the Local Authority, and provider health services to address the identified areas of concern and improve outcomes for local children and young people (CYP) with SEND. It is positive to see a continued high number of responses to the survey.

This report provides an invaluable, albeit challenging, perspective on the services within our community and we recognise that 'Be Healthy' continues to be the lowest scoring outcome and note that there has been a slight decrease in the average 'Be Healthy' score year on year. The ICB is committed to supporting the recommended working groups to focus on addressing these concerns and will ensure that any resulting actions plans are fully supported by the Bedfordshire Designated Clinical Officers (DCOs) for SEND.

We have reviewed the report and identified the themes below in relation to the ICB:

- A reduction in 'Be Healthy' scores across both mainstream and special schools with a greater fall in scores for CYP with an EHCP.
- A significant fall in satisfaction for CYP accessing medical services within special schools.
- Difficulties for parents with disabilities accessing services and information with an increase in parents seeking support from BBPCF.

- Transition from children to adult services with a change of provision in adult services.
- CYP with the most complex needs reporting difficulties in accessing clubs/organised groups.
- Long waits for health services.

**A reduction in ‘Be Healthy’ scores across both mainstream and special schools with a greater fall in scores for CYP with an EHCP and a significant fall in satisfaction for CYP accessing medical services within special schools.**

The ICB wants all children and young people to have their health needs met in both mainstream and specialist settings, with and without an EHCP. The Bedfordshire DCOs currently support work in this area as part of their roles which aim to support the identification and prioritisation of needs across the health system with a focus on the availability and quality of health provision. The DCOs will continue to work in co-production with BBPCF and local CYP and their families to ensure that their voices are heard, and their experiences of the SEND system continue to inform future multiagency service redesign and SEND system provision.

The DCO team is supporting the regional NHSE workstream ‘Caring for CYP with Medical Needs in Educational Settings’. This workstream is a regional forum for information sharing of how CYP with medical needs are supported in schools in line with local and national guidance and legislation which is then disseminated to local providers. National guidance for health services regarding the management of medical needs in schools is anticipated later this year. The DCO team will support providers in the dissemination of this information and embedding this within practice.

**The 2025 survey findings continue to demonstrate that access to health services and long waiting times remain a concern for local families.**

We acknowledge that some families are continuing to wait too long to access health services. The ICB and DCO team continue to be committed to working with provider services to address this issue and ensure that support for families whilst they are waiting for specialist support/assessment is further developed, along with better publicity and awareness of service developments and improvements amongst local families. As an ICB we value the continued support from BBC PCF in co-designing our Team Around the School transformation pilot that is focusing on earlier identification and support for a child with needs to support this concern. It is anticipated that this will evolve further alongside the SEND reforms and feedback from the pilot.

The ICB is continually developing the BLMK Health SEND data dashboard to support with review of waiting times across health services and inform SEND System improvements within the Bedford Send Partnership. The ICB are also working closely with Bedford Borough local Authority to devise the SEND Reform local implementation plans which have a focus on early identification, support and intervention for local CYP with SEND.

**Transition from children to adult services with a change of provision in adult services.**

A current priority of workstream for the DCO team is increasing the uptake of Annual Learning Disability Health Checks in the 14-25 age group. A video promoting access to the Annual Health Check was co-produced with BBPCF and local young people in 2025. The video starred a local YP and had over 8.8K views on YouTube within the first 6 months of uploading. Uptake of the Annual Learning Disability Health Checks in Bedford Borough has been 78.2% in 2024/25 and 76.3% in 2025/26.

Further to this, a QI Project ‘My Health and Me’ is being carried out in partnership with ELFT and BBPCF.: This aims to increase participation in Annual Learning Disability Health Checks whilst

ensuring healthcare professional information is consistently included in annual reviews to improve care coordination.

The project is in its initial stage and will involve co-produced health education and empowerment activities to make health information accessible and promote self-advocacy among young people. It will also improve inclusion in their healthcare through increased knowledge and awareness of the learning disability register and the Annual Health Checks.

The Deputy DCO is currently working with Bedford PCF and ELFT to co-produce further GP training regarding reasonable adjustments following feedback shared with the PCF by local families.

### **Difficulties for parents with disabilities accessing services and information with an increase in parents seeking support from BBPCF.**

The DCO team ensures that Easy Read Formats are available when working with families and supports health providers with this. The DCOs will work with providers and BBPCF to promote access to health resources.

### **CYP with the most complex needs reporting difficulties in accessing clubs/organised groups.**

It is disappointing that CYP with SEND cannot access clubs to the extent of their peers. The Children's Physiotherapy Team (Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust) are working towards an event for local CYP with complex needs to promote access to sports and activities. The DCOs will continue to work with local providers and BBPCF to promote access to local activities.

### **East London Foundation Trust (ELFT) Adult Services**

ELFT are continuing to develop signposting, communications and educating local professionals regarding referral processes into their services.

ELFT Health Equalities Service are currently leading on projects to improve patient experiences within Primary Care. The Learning Disability Friendly Project aims to ensure that people can access services when needed. The project has worked with GP Practices across Bedfordshire to ensure that Learning Disability Registers are up to date, Annual Health Checks are taking place and are of good quality, and training has been delivered to both clinical and non-clinical staff. Once the project is completed, next steps will include roll out of an accreditation scheme across BLMK which will enable GP practices able to achieve three levels of accreditation.

### **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)**

We have reviewed the findings of the BBPCF Outcomes Report for 2025 and wish to acknowledge the concerns raised by families, particularly within the 'Be Healthy' outcome. We recognise the frustration and distress caused by long waiting times for assessments and treatment, and the difficulties many families face in meeting service thresholds. The feedback highlights significant demand and capacity pressures currently affecting CAMHS, which we are actively working to address. These pressures do need to be understood within the context of pressures and limited resource within other areas, such as education and social care and cannot be resolved simply or within CAMHS alone.

Several new developments are underway to improve the accessibility and timeliness of our services. We are committed to offering support in more flexible and immediate ways, including:

- **Directly Bookable Online Drop-In Sessions:** We are introducing a system that will allow parents, carers, and young people to book directly into virtual drop-in sessions for advice and support without needing a formal referral.
- **Community-Based Face-to-Face Drop-Ins:** We are expanding our presence in the community by establishing face-to-face drop-in services within schools and other local community bases. These will provide accessible, early-intervention support for both young people and their parents.

We believe these initiatives will help to address the concerns raised by families in the following ways.

**Immediate Access:** Families can access support through drop-in sessions without the wait often associated with the traditional referral-to-treatment pathway. This provides immediate, low intensity help when a need is first identified.

**Reduced Threshold for Access:** Drop-ins lower the barrier to seeking help. Families who are uncertain if their concerns "warrant" a formal referral can easily access professional advice and guidance.

**Early Intervention:** Drop-in sessions allow for early identification of needs. Many concerns can be addressed with advice, psychoeducation, or signposting to community resources, preventing escalation to more intensive services.

**Appropriate Allocation:** This model acts as an effective triage system. It helps to ensure that only young people with needs that require specialist, ongoing CAMHS intervention enter the formal treatment pathway. This frees up specialist resources for those with the most complex needs, reducing waiting lists for those services.

**Increased Choice and Control:** Offering both online and in-person options gives families flexibility in how and when they access support, accommodating different schedules, transport limitations, and comfort levels with technology.

**Empowerment through Skills:** Drop-in sessions can focus on providing parents and young people with skills and strategies they can implement immediately, empowering them to manage difficulties proactively rather than passively waiting for treatment.

Since November 2025, targeted investment in the Autism Assessment Pathway (AAP) has achieved a significant reduction in waiting times. By increasing clinical capacity through additional assessment clinics—staffed by our substantive clinicians working bank shifts—we completed an extra 95 assessments beyond our usual weekly activity. This enhanced throughput has directly reduced delays and ensured that more young people received timely diagnostic support.

To further accelerate progress, we commissioned Healios (a UK based digital healthcare provider) to complete an additional 30 assessments. To maintain consistency and uphold the quality of care across all assessment routes, we developed a comprehensive, neuro-affirming post-diagnostic booklet and ensured that all families, including those assessed externally, have access to our post-diagnostic online intervention. This approach has strengthened equity of care, supported families to understand and embrace neurodiversity, and reinforced our commitment to delivering high-quality, person-centred support at every stage of the pathway.

Overall, these combined actions have increased capacity, improved timeliness, and enhanced the quality and consistency of Autism post-diagnostic offer—resulting in a more responsive, inclusive, and effective service for autistic children, young people, and their families.

We value the collaborative relationship we have with the BBPCF and see this report as a crucial tool to guide our service improvement strategy. We are committed to working together to ensure that the children and young people of Bedford Borough feel healthy, supported, and heard.

### **East of England Health and Care Trust:**

We have reviewed the 2025 Outcomes Report in detail and note the deterioration in overall outcomes, particularly in relation to Be Healthy, which remains the lowest scoring outcome. We take this feedback seriously and recognise our shared responsibility, as part of the local area partnership, to improve further.

Alongside the challenges highlighted, Community Health services continue to provide a broad range of universal, targeted and specialist support for CYP with SEND. This includes early advice and intervention for families, integrated support in education settings, specialist provision for children with complex needs, and jointly commissioned services that reflect strong partnership working across Bedford Borough. We recognise, however, that service development must continue if families are to consistently experience the positive impact of this support.

### **Timely access to health services**

Consistent with previous years, families report significant challenges in accessing health services for their CYP. Prolonged waits for some services without adequate support has been identified as a primary concern. While work has continued since 2024 to strengthen early support and targeted interventions, we recognise that these actions may have not yet translated into improved lived experience for Bedford residents. We are committed to improve early intervention offers and we will plan new Expert at Hand models with system partners to enhance SEND support for mainstream settings.

Speech and Language Therapy continues to strengthen early intervention and school-based support through Family Centre and Early Support Hub provision, open access Early Advice Sessions, named Link Therapists for all mainstream and special schools, and joint delivery of the Communication Champions programme to build workforce confidence and inclusive practice across education settings. While waits for some therapy pathways have increased due to rising demand and workforce pressures, waiting times for initial assessment have significantly reduced over recent years, and families continue to have access to early advice, support and signposting whilst waiting.

We recognise the longest wait times for an initial assessment are within our Community Paediatric services. Waits have reduced in Bedford borough since December 2025, and we have a recovery plan to improve waits further. We have feedback from the evaluation of our 'Team Around Schools' TAS pilot and whilst improvements are needed there are signs that some children in Bedford borough are now receiving early multi-agency support. We appreciate there is more work to do for positive impacts across all education settings, and we will work with the Bedford borough PCF and local Authority to make this happen in a meaningful way.

### **Thresholds, equity and children “falling through gaps”**

The Neurodiversity Early Awareness Pathway is an example of systemwide response, using a strength-based tool to identify child/ young person's needs very early on, enabling early support to be put in place. We are committed to continuously reviewing and improving our service offers. For example, Early Support Workshops, which parents/ carers access whilst waiting for Community Paediatric specialist assessment, is accessible in various languages/ transcribed and dubbed (see link below). Since February half term, Bedfordshire & Luton Community Paediatric Service has recently implemented professional clinics to support Practitioners in school/ early settings with discussions about strategies/support for children where there are Neurodevelopment Concerns, It

is also an opportunity to discuss and identify if a child/ young person's needs may require specialist assessment and agree next steps. Initial feedback from Practitioners has been very positive: [Neurodiversity online training and workshops](#)

The Community Paediatric Occupational Therapy teams are a provider of Specialist occupational Therapy for children with functional needs that are not in line with their expected development or where they need specialist seating equipment. The team are not a provider of Occupational Therapy for children with sensory differences, where no functional needs are present. The team have seen an increase in referrals for children and young people with sensory differences and no functional needs. The leadership team are working closely with other organisations to help referrers to understand what the service can offer.

The children's Community Occupational Therapy Team are also working closely with system partners and parent carers locally to ensure that targeted and universal support for families of children who have sensory differences is meeting their needs. This includes working with other organisations and parent carers across Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes to develop an easy to navigate sensory resource pack.

The community Children's Occupational Therapy signposting letters are being reviewed with our Parent Carer Forums to ensure that the information is relevant and helpful for parents and carers where the young person's functional skills are in line with their developmental age.

We recognise the need to strengthen support for children and young people who are assessed and do not meet the criteria for specialist services. Clearer communication, improved signposting, and more preventative support will be key areas for our improvement focus. Furthermore, there will be increased SEND support from our SEND reform offers which will be shared once confirmed.

### **EHCPs and specialist provision**

One change between the 2024 and 2025 survey is the reported decrease in Be Healthy outcomes for children and young people with EHCPs and a difference between experiences in specialist and mainstream settings.

We recognise that families do not always receive clear information about the support available across community health services, what different services can help with, and how to access the right support for their child. Improving how we explain our services and making it easier for families to understand where to go for help will be an important part of our improvement work, not just in one service but all services. With one-page documents which are clear, easier to access and available in multiple formats (as well as languages and easy read text).

We have invested in a Specialist Health visitor who will be working with families, our PCF and system partners to ensure consistent early identification of need and appropriate support for identified needs is accessible.

We also recognise the opportunity presented through forthcoming SEND reforms to strengthen support in mainstream settings and improve earlier access to help. We will work with the schools, LA and our PCF in Bedford Borough to ensure additional services meet local need.

### **Transitions and preparation for adulthood**

Compared to 2024, the 2025 findings place greater emphasis on challenges associated with transition into adult health services and the reduction in support experienced by young people as they approach adulthood. Families describe uncertainty about eligibility, reduced continuity and limited coordination between children's and adult services.

We are actively working towards local and organisation pathways to identify young people early, engage with them and their families and ensure an informed preparation for transition to adult services.

## **Next steps**

We recognise that the 2025 Outcomes Report raises concerns about impact, consistency and equity in relation to health services for children and young people with SEND. While there is ongoing improvement work underway, we acknowledge that this has not yet resulted in improved outcomes as experienced by families in all services.

We are committed to:

- Reviewing access and threshold arrangements to reduce inequity and escalation
- Strengthening early intervention and support in mainstream settings through SEND reform programmes and multi-agency working
- Improving support for families while waiting for assessment or treatment
- Strengthening transition planning and continuity into adult health services
- Shaping local services offer to match local need
- continuing to work in partnership with Bedford Borough Parent Carer Forum to shape services through co-production and lived experience.

We value the role of the Parent Carer Forum in holding the system to account and look forward to continuing our co-production work to ensure that planned improvements are grounded in lived experience and lead to meaningful change. This will be tracked and managed through our regular monthly meetings with the PCF Chair, as well as any specific workstreams that are identified to support this work

We are working closely with the local authority to shape delivery of a stronger universal and targeted health offer for children and families as part of the 2026 SEND reforms. We anticipate enhanced services to evolve over the next three years improving access to advice and support.

## **Moving forward together**

The Local Area Partnership would like to reaffirm our commitment to coproduction and to working transparently with BBPCF and with families more widely. The experiences described in this report must shape how we set priorities, commission services and measure success.

As well as shaping our future SEND Action Plan, the findings of this report will also directly inform the development and delivery of our Local Area Partnership SEND Reform Plan. The report reinforces the need for a clear, system-wide programme of reform that addresses culture, practice, capacity and accountability across education, health and social care.

Work to develop the SEND Reform Plan is already underway and will be shaped by the lived experiences highlighted in this report, with a strong focus on inclusion in mainstream and specialist settings, timely access to health and social care support, improved access to support, through the Experts at Hand model, transitions into adulthood, and strengthening how families are listened to and involved. The actions arising from this report will form a core part of our improvement programme, with progress monitored through robust governance at SEND Operation Group meetings and our SEND Improvement Board and continued engagement with the Parent Carer Forum to ensure that reform leads to tangible improvements in outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

We recognise that trust is built through action, not intent alone. Our focus will be on translating these findings into clear, time-bound improvements, and on being open about where progress is being made and where it is not.

*“I would like to thank the Bedford Borough Parent Carer Forum and, most importantly, the families who shared their lived experiences through this year’s survey. This report provides a clear, independent and honest assessment of how our SEND system is performing, and it makes challenging but necessary reading. While the pressures facing councils and partners nationally are well known, they cannot and must not be used to explain away the very real impact on children and families described in this report. I am committed to working in partnership with the Parent Carer Forum and our statutory partners to turn these findings into meaningful, measurable improvements for children and young people with SEND in Bedford Borough.”*

*– Cllr Jane Walker, Cabinet member for Valuing Families*

*This report provides an honest and challenging reflection of how families experience SEND services in Bedford Borough, and I want to thank the Parent Carer Forum and the many families who took the time to share their views. While there are areas where dedicated professionals are making a positive difference, the overall findings show clearly that outcomes for too many children and young people with SEND are not where they need to be. As Director of Children’s Services, I recognise the responsibility on us as system leaders to listen carefully, to work in genuine partnership with families and colleagues across health and education, and to translate these insights into meaningful and sustained improvements. We remain committed to learning from this feedback and to strengthening our collective accountability for the impact of our services on children, young people and their families.”*

*– Harmesh Bhogal, Director of Children’s Services*

*“This report provides vital insight into how our education system is being experienced by children and young people with SEND and their families. While it recognises the dedication and commitment of many school leaders, teachers and support staff, it also highlights areas where outcomes are not strong enough and where confidence in the system has been eroded. As Chief Education Officer, I am particularly concerned by the experiences of children with SEND in mainstream settings and by the fall in outcomes reported for specialist provision. These findings reinforce the importance of strengthening inclusive practice, which will be supported by the work we are undertaking in response to the SEND Reforms, addressing bullying, and ensuring that support, expertise and resources are directed where they make the greatest difference. We remain committed to working with schools, partners and the Parent Carer Forum to improve consistency, capacity and quality across the system so that every child with SEND can learn, thrive and feel safe.”*

*–Chris Morris, Service Director Education, SEND & School Infrastructure (Chief Education Officer)*

We thank BBPCF again for your continued challenge, insight and partnership working. We look forward to working together to ensure that the experiences of children and young people with SEND in Bedford Borough improve in a meaningful and measurable way.

Thank you.