

26 March, 2023

Early Years and Special Educational Needs

Ward(s): ALL

Portfolios: Education and Skills Councillor Statham

1. Aim

- 1.1 This report focuses on the provisions of the SEND Code of Practice as they relate to early years education, highlighting key practices that have been developed within Walsall to ensure young children with SEND receive the support they need from the earliest possible stage.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 For the committee to note the impact of the work carried out by the SEND Service including the developments specifically within early Years (EY) and the EHC (Education Health and Care) Systems.

3. Report detail – know

3.1 Information to know and understand regarding Early Years and Special Educational Needs

The SEND Code of Practice 2015 emphasises early identification and support in early years settings. It outlines the duties of early years providers, schools, colleges, and local authorities to meet the needs of children with SEND. The SEND Code of Practice promotes a child-centred approach, ensuring that children and their parents are actively involved in decision-making processes. The SEND Code of Practice sets a clear framework for early years providers to support children with SEND effectively. By emphasising early identification, inclusive practices, partnership with parents, and integrated support, it ensures that all children, regardless of their needs, have access to the opportunities they need to thrive in their early years and beyond.

Key Principles for SEND Practice in Early Years

The SEND Code of Practice advocates for a coordinated approach to supporting children with SEND, involving collaboration between early years providers, local authorities, health services, and other professionals. This ensures a holistic approach to meeting the child's needs. The legislation relates to all children from birth to twenty-five years old. It is important to recognise children aged 0 to 5 years with SEND must have their needs identified and met with appropriate provision regardless of not being in education. This highlights the importance of pathways between social and health care providers and

Walsall SEND services. A strong partnership with parents is also vital. Parents must be fully informed about their child's needs, the support available, and involved in decision-making processes regarding their child's education and care.

Once in education, early years providers are required to identify children with SEND as early as possible to ensure timely support. This involves regular monitoring of children's progress and working closely with parents and professionals to identify any concerns. All early year's providers must be inclusive ensuring that children with SEND can participate fully in the settings alongside their peers. Providers must make reasonable adjustments to their practices and environments to accommodate the needs of all children.

Requirements for Early Years Providers

- SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator): Early years settings are required to appoint a qualified SENCO to oversee the implementation of support for children with SEND. The SENCO plays a crucial role in coordinating support, advising staff, and liaising with external professionals.
- SEN Support Plans: For children with identified SEND, early years providers should develop individual support plans in collaboration with parents and relevant professionals. These plans outline the child's needs, the support to be provided, and the expected outcomes.
- Local Offer and EHC Plans: Early years providers contribute to the local authority's Local Offer by providing information on their SEND provision.

3.2 What do we know about Early Years children with SEND in Walsall

Early Years Children with an EHC Plan in Walsall

As at 29 February 2024, there were 4,543 CYP with an EHCP maintained by Walsall's SEND Team, 487 are children aged 0 to 5 years old. This equates to 10.7% of the EHC population. There are significantly more boys aged 0 to 5 (7.5%) with an EHC plan than girls (3.2%). This includes children in Reception year of primary school.

Age	No. with EHCP	% with EHCP (of overall total of CYP with an EHCP)
0	0	0%
1	0	0%
2	7	0.2%
3	69	1.5%
4	176	3.9%
5	235	5.2%
Total	487	10.7%

Age	Female		Male	
	No.	%	No.	%
0	0	0%	0	0%
1	0	0%	0	0%
2	4	0.1%	3	0.1%
3	22	0.5%	47	1.0%
4	61	1.3%	115	2.5%
5	58	1.3%	177	3.9%
Total	145	3.2%	342	7.5%

There has been an increase in children aged under five with an EHC plan in early years settings before entering Reception.

Age	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Under 5 years	68	91	71	87	82	125	252
%	3.9	4.5	3.4	3.4	3.2	3.7	5.5

Although the numbers of children with an EHC plan in preschool settings has increase since 2018, this has been mostly in line with the overall increase in all children and young people in Walsall with an EHC plan. However, there has been a significant increase in early years children with an EHC plan throughout 2023 this is partially due to improvements in service delivery and the removal of a long-standing backlog. Within early years, this was highlighted further in 2023 due to the SEND service improving the identification and assessment process through new way in which Early years funding was issued. Previously children were funded through a high needs amount and were not expected to have an EHC plan until entry to formal education. The SEND service recognised this was causing delays in appropriate provision being in place. As a result, settings are now required to make applications for EHC assessments alongside requests for high needs funding resulting in robust identification from the earliest opportunity.

Early Years EHC Requests

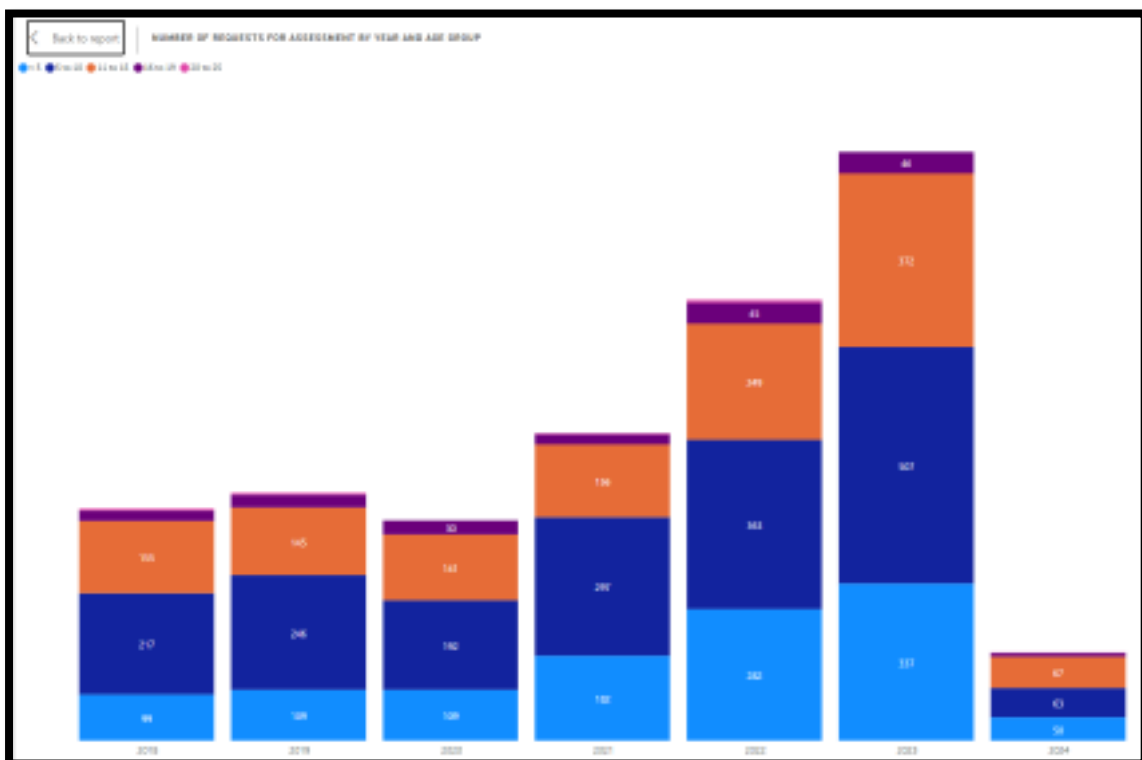
Number of 0-5 year olds with requests for an EHCP assessment, as at 29 February 2024

In total there are 328 EHC statutory assessment requests in progress for children and young people aged 0 to 25 years. As at 29 February 2024, 93 (28.4%) of these are for children aged 0-5, with the majority of these being for three year olds. This connects with children starting formal education.

Age	No. with a request for an EHCP in progress	% with EHCP (of overall total of requests in progress)
0	0	0%
1	0	0%
2	4	1.2%
3	22	6.7%
4	43	13.1%
5	24	7.3%
Total	93	28.4%

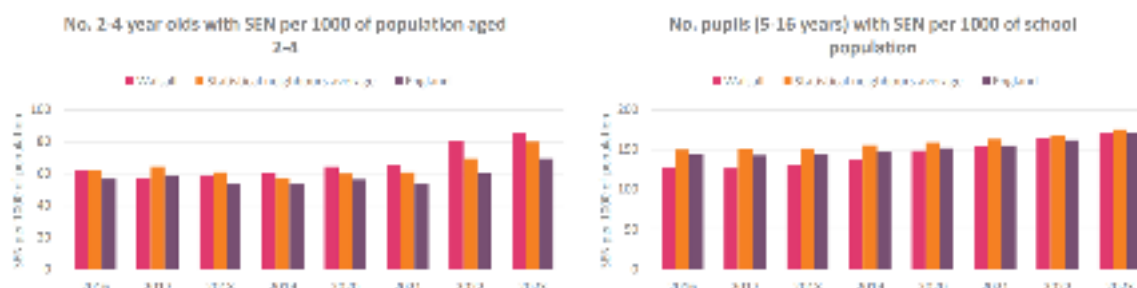
75% of statutory assessment requests come from schools, 15% from parents and 10% from Early Years teams and professionals. Our statutory assessment requests for Early Years children continues to grow yearly.

Number of Requests by Year and Age Group



Early Years and SEN Support

SEN Rate | Walsall has a higher rate of identification at Early Years compared to statistical neighbours and national averages



Walsall has a higher rate of identification at Early Years (2- to 4-year-olds) than the national average; whereas it has a similar proportion of 5-16-year-olds pupils with SEN needs, when compared to the national average.

Access and Inclusion key stakeholders reflected that this highlights the focus they place on being a service for 0-25-year-olds.

We are working with health partners on early identification. We have already seen an increase in two year olds being identified as having SEN Support. We are working with health colleagues to design a 0 to 2 year old pathway.

Number of children with SEN Support. Source – Walsall school census October 2023.

Data	Schools					
	Nursery	Primary	Secondary	Special	PRU	Total
SEN Support	45	3,826	2,783	0	49	6,703

Age breakdown for SEN support:

Age	No. with SEN Support	% with SEN Support
0	0	0.00
1	0	0.00
2	12	0.18
3	98	1.46
4	297	4.43
5	437	6.52
Total	844	12.6

3.3 Funding and Support available for Early Years Children in Walsall with SEND (SEN Support or an EHC Plan)

Our overriding outcome is that the children who have the highest needs identified at birth or prior to entering education are supported by adults and professionals to ensure they are equipped with appropriate provision and transition to start school. Alternatively, settings can proceed to statutory

assessment by gathering a carefully planned graduated approach, involving professional advice. This should demonstrate actions taken over time to meet the child's needs. The LA are working with SENCOs to ensure robust understanding of the graduated approach, removing some of misconceptions that have been established and making sure that early and correct identification is a strength within the 0 to 3 years pathway.

Team Around the Child

"Team Around the Child" (TAC) plays a pivotal role in Walsall's approach to early years support and offers a multidisciplinary model designed to deliver a holistic support system for children with SEND or those in need of additional help. The TAC approach ensures that the educational, health, and social needs of children are met in a comprehensive and cohesive manner.

At the core of the TAC approach is a child-centred focus, where every decision and action taken by all the professionals involved is aimed at promoting the child's well-being, development, and educational achievement. The approach recognises parents and families as experts on their child's needs, actively involves them in the decision-making processes, and allows their insights and preferences to help shape the support plan. The TAC model ensures multi-agency collaboration to provide a comprehensive support network around the child and identified needs. This team may include teachers, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, and social workers.

A support plan is developed collaboratively by the team to address the child's needs across different areas of development. This plan is reviewed regularly reviewed and adjusted to reflect the child's evolving needs. Walsall ensures that effective communication and coordination is central to team members with regular meetings and updates ensuring everyone is informed of progress or changes in needs or circumstances. The TAC approach empowers the child and family with knowledge, skills, and resources to promote development and well-being.

Walsall have seen many benefits of the TAC approach. This system has been well embedded for several years and the Early Years SEND team have much experience in offering holistic support. The Team Around the Child process is recognised as a central mechanism for accessing Walsall's statutory assessment pathway.

SEN Inclusion Fund (SENIF)

The SEN Inclusion Fund is for two-, three- and four-year-old children in school nurseries or private and voluntary settings including childminders, who are accessing their early education entitlement. SENIF will focus on emerging and lower level SEN i.e. where a child requires some provision in addition to or different from the settings usual graduated approach to help children learn. This funding is a one of payment of £800.

Disability Access Fund (DAF)

Disability Access Funding is for any three or four year olds who receive disability living allowance (DLA). This funding can help providers make their settings accessible to children with special needs. The funding can help providers make reasonable adjustments to their settings. They could purchase specialist equipment and or seek specialist training that would help them meet the child's needs. This funding is paid at a rate of £800 per term.

Health Needs

Where identified additional needs are health based, providers are encouraged to engage with available health professionals for help with supporting those children, i.e. school nurse, health visitor, GP's and to actively make referrals to Early Help where appropriate.

Family Hubs and Early Help

The early help offer in Walsall has undergone significant developments over the last 2 years with Walsall's Early Help Partnership Strategy, Approach and Response to Children, Young People & their Families. This is focussed on getting the 'Right help' at the 'Right time' to families. Children are supported by a multi-agency early help offer that enables them to access a range of support and services when they need it.

Walsall's Early Help Offer includes:

On-line evidence-based parenting programme available for all parent/cares living within the borough, including:

- Understanding your child
- Understanding your child with additional needs
- Cygnet programme
- Supporting your child with autism

Family Hubs were launched last year offering support to Walsall families through four locality hubs. Each hub has a SEND Early Help Practitioners based within the Family Hub. The 'Best Start in Life' strategy for Family Hubs is a robust offer that includes early intervention in Speech and Language development for 3-4 year olds from dedicated professionals assigned to the family hubs. The 0–5-year-old offer continues to be developed within family hubs with a view to 95% of families benefiting from speech and language home learning support by March 2025.

Early Years SEN Team

The Early Years Advisory Team comprises of three Early Years teachers and three Learning Support practitioners, who all play a pivotal role in ensuring that children in Walsall receive the best possible start in education. The Early Years Teachers act as Area SENCos supporting Early Years settings as per the SEND Code of Practice.

- providing advice and practical support to early years providers about approaches to identification, assessment and intervention within the SEN Code of Practice
- providing day-to-day support for setting-based SENCOs in ensuring arrangements are in place to support children with SEN
- strengthening the links between the settings, parents, schools, social care and health services
- developing and disseminating good practice

The strategic initiatives and support systems introduced by the Early Years Advisory Team during 2023 have improved inclusive early years education for all children with SEND. The Early Years Assessment Toolkit and the review of Early Years High Needs Funding have been pivotal in ensuring early identification, assessment, and support. By aligning these developments with the SEND Code of Practice and the Children's and Families Act 2014 (CAFA 2014), the SEND service have been able to implement a solid foundation for inclusive education that meets the diverse needs of children in our community.

The Early Years Assessment Toolkit

Throughout 2023, significant developments were made to support early years providers, particularly in the areas of SEND assessment and funding for children with SEND. The Early Years Assessment Toolkit was launched in February 2023, and has been a critical resource for early years practitioners. Its primary function is to facilitate the early identification and assessment of children's needs or potential SEND, adhering to the SEND Code of Practice's emphasis on a graduated approach to support. Settings are required to use the Toolkit when requesting support from the Early Years SEND team or when seeking additional funding. This has ensured a more robust and standardised approach to assessing children's needs and enabling tailored support strategies that align with the individual child's requirements.

There is an ongoing commitment to reviewing Early Years High Needs Funding. This has led to the implementation of a funding system which focuses on good quality provision being made from the earliest opportunity and ensures that requests for High Needs funding for children undergoing an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) assessment are supported. Coproduction and collaboration with Early Years Headteachers has been central to developing this effective funding system through forums and working groups.

Portage Offer

The Early Years SEND teachers facilitate a portage service that is focussed on getting 0-3 year olds with cognition and learning needs school ready. The child is assessed by the teacher and a programme of support is developed and delivered by the Learning support Practitioners to support parents with supporting their child with their learning. This service also allows teachers to assess whether an EHCP would be relevant for the child to ensure the resources will be available to support them in a setting and if this is the case an application will be submitted with the support of the parent.

Education Health and Care requests

Walsall have been exploring solutions to ensure children receive the correct support ensuring the graduated approach includes carefully planned cycles of assess, plan, do, review and utilises advice from professionals including Educational

Psychologists. Following on from the SEN support pathway, for the most complex children who may require an EHC plan, the SEND service have worked closely with partners in health and social care to ensure there are timely and effective routes to getting an EHC assessment. The TAC process has become central to this as well as early identification through health professionals such as paediatric doctors and health visitors.

EYSEND Working Group

A working group was created and led by SEND Service Manager and consultant primary Headteacher and includes wide representation from a range of providers. The intention of the group was to look at appropriate criteria to fund support for children with complex needs who do not yet have an EHCP, which could potentially be funded from the High Needs Block. This has been implemented throughout the financial year of 2023/24 but is dependent on funding availability and the level of available resources. The working group includes representatives from the Maintained Nursery Schools, the private and voluntary sector and from primary schools with nursery classes.

3.4 Where we are now – Our Key Achievements

Creating a 0 to 2 Identification Pathway – complex needs from birth (CNFB)

We have been working in collaboration with our health and social care partners to design a 0- to 2-year-old identification pathway which is now in operation. Paediatric doctors, children with disabilities teams and health visitors now have a seamless pathway where they can confirm any child born with complex needs, or where complex health needs are identified in the first 12 to 18 months. This raises a flag to the EHC team, although would not necessarily trigger a statutory assessment. The health professionals gather information about the child throughout their initial stages of development. This is stored with the SEND service, until such a point when the health professionals or education professionals decide that an EHC plan would be required. At this time, the SEND service uses all the known information to begin to draft the plan. This makes the process succinct and efficient ensuring that the child does not need to wait to benefit from the EHC plan.

Implementing a Early Years Inclusion Framework for 3 to 5 year olds

Walsall's Inclusion Development Lead (IDL) has overseen the co-production and implementation of the 'Early Inclusion Framework'. The Early Inclusion

Framework outlines Walsall's local area approach to improving setting-based support, pathways and provision for children and young people with SEND. This programme of improvement incorporates a range of resources, tools and training opportunities which support the implementation of a coherent and consistent Graduated Approach.

Central to the framework is the Baseline Provision Audit, which facilitates shared professional learning and development. It enables the SEN/Inclusion Team to grasp the challenges local schools face in meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND, pinpointing best practices and areas requiring additional support. Another key component is the Ordinarily Available Provision Guidance, expected by the local authority to be accessible in educational settings. This guidance benefits all learners and outlines strategies linked to the four areas of SEND, aiding professionals in crafting personalized plans that escalate in intensity according to need. The framework also includes the SEN Profile of Need Guidance, serving as a profiling tool to better understand individual needs and the level of provision required. Additionally, the Walsall SEN Support Plan outlines how resources and services can support a child or young person, encouraging educational settings to use this document for requesting statutory needs assessments. The High-Quality Teaching Audit aims to improve the consistency of teaching skills and confidence, fostering an inclusive environment for learners with SEND.

To foster collaboration and sharing of best practices among SENCOs and Inclusion Leads, the framework has introduced termly SENCO Forums, a dedicated SENCO Forum Teams Page for ongoing support and communication, and the SENCO Triad Programme, which encourages peer-to-peer collaboration to enhance inclusive practices. Furthermore, a recent review of the EHC Plan Annual Review process has led to the introduction of actionable checklists and a pre-recorded training video to guide SENCOs and Inclusion Leads through this process, ensuring a streamlined and effective approach to supporting children and young people with SEND.

Implementation of Revised Early Years High Needs Funding Systems

In response to a review of High Needs Block spend levels and increasing demand for specialist places for primary and secondary age children, a strategic decision was made to cease high needs funding for non-EHCP children in early years in September 2022. The context behind this decision was around sustainability, as per the financial data below. In the academic year of 2022/2023, over half of the allocated funding had been spent or committed within in one term, leaving a significant shortfall for the remaining two terms. This level of spend was not sustainable within the overall funding available within the DSG. In addition, it was noted that a high proportion of children who had the Early Years high needs funding went on to receive an EHC plan at a later stage. The EHC pathway is a 0 - 25 system and, the SEND service recognised that children should be identified as early as possible if they may need a statutory plan to start school, ensuring that correct outcomes and provision were in place before starting school. In Walsall, the spend against the Disability Access Fund (DAF) and SEN Inclusion Fund (SENI), which should

be the two main sources of additional funding to support children with additional needs, was consistently low. Settings relied on the High Needs Funding to secure additional support instead.

	£	£	% of budget
Budget – Financial Year 2022/23		1,091,922	
Actual Spend – Summer 2022	503,281		
Committed Spend – Autumn 2022 & Spring 2023	95,970		
Total Spend	599,251		55%

Through the IDL and Inclusion Framework, it was recognised that the majority of children with special educational needs and/or a disability (SEND) will not require specialist resources or additional staffing to be successfully included in a setting; most settings meet the additional needs of children very well. However, some children with ‘emerging or lower level’ SEND may benefit from some additional funding to further support their identified needs for a period of time. In order to meet future demand, the IDL worked with SENCOS and Headteacher to develop and launch the new graduated approach and ordinarily available provision specifically for Early Years settings. This has ensured that most children can have their needs met without high needs funding.

The initial impact to the removal of the EY High Needs Funding, was that settings applied for Education, health and Care plans for their most complex children. Although this created a spike in statutory applications, it was recognised that these children were complex, and the old system had simply delayed the start of the EHC pathway. The SEND service was able to meet the increased demand whilst retaining the timeliness and quality of EHC plans. High needs funding is a resource that is now used by settings to support during the statutory 20 week assessment process when an application has been made for an EHCP. Settings can apply for funding when an application for an EHC needs assessment is received and will end when a plan is agreed and finalised.

Linked working with health and Social Care colleagues

Health and the Local Authority have developed a Health EHC pathway known as ‘The Gateway’ where all EHC applications are considered, and quality advice is returned through the same route. This has proved pivotal in improving timeliness. Social Care are set to join the ‘Gateway’ ensuring this becomes an holistic approach. Health teams are starting to scope out a new project called ‘Little SEN Voices’ which focuses on the engagement and involvement of the lived experience of children with SEND who access the Child Development Centres.

A scrutiny of the Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) pathway is underway to explore the referral route through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

(CAMHS) for an autism diagnosis for under-fives with an aim to reduce the waiting times and understand the patient journey.

Both health and social care are actively involved in developing Walsall's 'Additionally Vulnerable Strategy' by linking together and joining known information to safeguard the most vulnerable children at risk from failure to achieve outcomes.

What we plan to do in 2024

- Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the Early Years Assessment Toolkit and the interim funding system to identify areas for improvement and ensure they meet the evolving needs of children and practitioners.
- Provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities for early years practitioners to fully utilise the Inclusion Agenda and understand the nuances of the revised funding system.
- Enhance collaboration with all stakeholders, including parents, early years practitioners, and local authorities, to ensure a cohesive and comprehensive approach to supporting children with SEND.
- Develop clearer and more open lines of communication regarding the assessment process and funding decisions to foster trust and partnership between early years settings and families.
- Continue to develop the funding pathways for Early Years SEND children to ensure the right support is being received at the right time.
- Develop the portage offer to include training for early years settings where the assessment and development of school readiness for children can be widened across Walsall.

4. *Financial information*

- 4.1 Whilst the content in this report doesn't have immediate financial ask, the growing demand of Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plan in the early years will have an ongoing demand on the overall high needs fund and place pressure on the dedicated schools grant (DSG)

5. *Reducing Inequalities*

- 5.1 Reducing inequalities for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and an Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plan is an essential commitment in inclusive education. It involves providing tailored support, resources, and opportunities to ensure that every child, regardless of their individual needs, has equitable access to a high-quality education. By prioritising early identification and intervention, fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment, and promoting collaboration between educators, specialists, parents, and carers, we can help level the playing field for children with SEND. Reducing inequalities for these children is not only a legal and moral obligation but also an investment in their future, empowering them to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society.

6. Decide

- 6.1 The committee may decide to request further information on the education outcomes of children within Early Years education aged between 0 to 5 with or without an EHC plan.

7. Respond

- 7.1 Any recommendations made by the committee will be responded to by the appropriate service area.

8. Review

- 8.1 The actions and outcomes within this report are monitored by Access & Inclusion SMT and Children's Services DMT and through a monthly performance board.

Background papers

SEND Code of Practice 2014

Early Years SEND Assessment Toolkit

Early Years SEND Assessment Toolkit progress record

Walsall SEN Support Plan

Walsall Early Help Strategy Approach and response 2021-2024

Walsall's Local Offer [Welcome to Walsall's SEND Local Offer | Send](#)