

31 March 2020

Dear parent/carer,

We are aware that for families with children with SEND, this is a hugely challenging time and you are all trying to adapt to a different world. The challenge for all families is great at the moment, but for families with children with SEND, there are more complications each day, and we hope that you are finding ways to look after yourself, as well as your children.

You may have seen Vicky Ford (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families) [open letter](#) explaining in more detail the changes made due to coronavirus.

We want to let you know what changes you may see in our services during this crisis. We will try to keep this information brief but explain what we are prioritising and how this may affect you.

Meeting our duties under the Children and Families Act 2014 in the context of COVID-19

The Government have now passed the [Coronavirus Bill](#) which relaxed some of the legal duties around EHC plans and this includes changing the requirement on LAs to maintain the precise provision and allows for schools to now use their 'reasonable endeavours' (rather than 'best endeavours') to support your children.

We would like to reassure you that our SEND Operations team will continue to work at this time. We are, like most people across the country, facing the same challenges of reduced staff and reduced hours as many of our teams have their own vulnerable children and family members who need care. However, for as long as the Local Authority has sufficient staff available to work, the SEND Operations teams will endeavour to meet as many of the SEND statutory processes and timescales as possible.

Education Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs)

We are asking that schools and settings do not make requests for new EHC needs assessments at this time. An EHCNA is a thorough assessment of a child's needs and requires information from both health professionals and social care teams. We are not able to reasonably ask health front line staff at the moment for their time to contribute to assessments. We will of course review this on a regular basis.

Annual Review of Education, Health and Care plans

Your child's annual review may be due in the coming weeks. We would ask that you have a conversation with the SENCo at your school to make the right decision for your child. It may be that you choose to rearrange the meeting; it may be that you choose to continue with the review using online meeting technology. This most likely will depend on your own availability and the availability of the professionals who

support your child. Any of these options are appropriate under current circumstances.

Consultations for school places

We will continue to consult with schools about school places. However, we recognise that schools are working under very difficult situations currently and may not be able to meet the usual timescales. We have asked schools to respond as soon as is reasonably possible and we would ask you to bear with us at this time. We will do our best to keep you fully informed.

Useful information for parents

We understand that there are many sources of information at this time and it can be difficult to keep up with the latest information. We will be updating and developing the information on the Essex Local Offer each day with information and support for families.

<http://www.essexlocaloffer.org.uk/category/coronavirus/>

<https://nasen.org.uk/news/covid-19-important-information-and-faqs.html>

Working together

At this time, more than ever, it is essential that we understand how the current situation is affecting our families and the concerns of our families and young people. We will be working with the [Essex Family Forum](#) to keep them up-to-date with all developments and to make decisions wherever possible. We have received a list of questions from the Forum that have been compiled from families in Essex and we will be answering those questions the best we can on the Local Offer.

The SEND operations team can be contacted on:

Mid Essex (Braintree, Chelmsford, Halstead and Maldon): 0333 013 9949

North East Essex (Colchester and Tendring): 0333 013 7667

South Essex (Basildon, Billericay, Brentwood, Castle Point, Rochford and Wickford): 0333 013 4736

West Essex (Epping, Harlow and Uttlesford): 0333 013 9911

By us all working together, we can ensure that children and young people with SEND continue to receive the support they need during this difficult time. We will of course review all of this on a regular basis as the situation changes from day to day.

Best wishes and take care of yourself and your families during this time.

Kind regards

Clare Kershaw
Director of Education, Essex County Council