Chair’s Report

Firstly, thank you for taking the time from your busy lives to join us this morning. I trust the bacon rolls and coffee were at least some compensation. We must accept that many people believe they are busy. However, the lives of parents of special needs children and young people are distinct from other parents not because of the busyness but by the fact that most of it is not of our choosing. We do not choose to attend numerous meetings with school or specialist therapists. We do not choose to spend our free time, emailing and phoning, reading and learning to try to make a difference for our children and young people. The role of FACT Bucks is to make those who have the opportunity to lessen that busyness aware of the immediate impact which their decisions make on the real lives of families concerned only with the welfare of their young people. None of us seek to be angry, frustrated, depressed by the constant ‘battles’ which too many of us continue to face.

So what have we done in the 12 months to the end of March. Firstly, can I set out who ‘we’ are. Most importantly, we are all parent carers of SEND children of young people. We are also volunteers. Our accounts show that FACT offers a small hourly payment as compensation for time offered along with expenses but no one is getting rich on this charity. In addition, we do hire in admin support from an individual – the hub around whom we all spin. There are 5 members on the Steering Group, another 5 individuals who take responsibility for a specific topic/service area, and a further 15 sitting on one of the parent engagement groups.

In the year in question we attended between us at least 150 meetings. These vary from strategic bodies like the Children’s Partnership Board and Integrated SEND Board through operational groups involved with Local Offer, SENDIAS, CAMHS, Therapies etc, to Working Groups on diverse subjects including sufficiency, SEN Support, Short Breaks etc. We also attended 5 events organised by others; laid on 3 area forums and a training event. We will continue to attend as many meetings as we have people available and willing to attend as well as increase the number of Area forums to develop dialogue both with the Integrated SEND teams but also to offer opportunities for parents to meet the service leads with whom we engage on a regular basis.

So I have now been Chair of FACT Bucks for 5 years. In that time, my own SEN daughter has progressed from Year 7 to Year 12 and as our report sets out, the implementation of the provisions of the Children and Families Act have been and gone. Can I stand here and reflect on either a personal and/or role basis that things have changed for the better? Well perhaps to the surprise of our local area colleagues and despite the SEF on the strategy which we will shortly see, I honestly think I can. On a personal level, our daughter is in a setting where her needs are being met and her siblings are now able to be the challenging and delightful teenagers they have the right to be. Our reality is however, that it all came too slowly and at huge personal cost but I know that changes are being made that will address some of the things we faced and this solution came because it was finally coproduced with us and with our daughter at its heart.

As Chair, I am also very aware, by the lack of gaps in my diary, that there is a genuine and widespread desire in the local area to hear what parents have to say. We have attended 140 meetings since April. Strategically we are now recognised as a partner in the delivery of Children’s Services. At a micro level there are initiatives to improve key day to day activities, like communication and data delivery that are being coproduced and will bring some relief to the busyness. There will be a greater number of staff to bring processes within timescales that mean that decisions will be made more quickly and there will be more parent dialogue as staff have time to engage which should enable coproduced solutions that work.

Of course, there remain huge challenges. We do not have an effective offer for autism. We do not have a Speech and Language offer that is resilient enough. Our EP service is too weighed down by statutory assessments to provide schools with early intervention support. There are too many schools whose SEN support offer is pitiful if not outright discrimination. However, these are not just Bucks issues: they are national ones as well. The Education Select Committee’s report that emerged from the last days of the current Parliament concluded that the aspirations of the SEND reforms were right but that implementation has been too slow and too patchy – the subsequent review that is now underway will, we hope, bring greater clarity in key areas like Annual Reviews, the response involvement of social care and preparing for adulthood. We work alongside other parent carer forums to press for an updated Code of Practice that removes the vagaries that allow for too much variation and time wasted in process rather than provision to meet need.

Some parents ask me why I continue to bother as change is all too slow and the system seems to them to be focussed on resource availability rather than meeting need. I cannot disagree that on many occasions the level of frustration is high and the desire to curl up with a good book rather than comment on another draft Inspection prep document or initiate a conversation on an area receiving little attention like Preparing for Adulthood is all too tempting. Perhaps some change might come quicker if we glued ourselves to County Hall but whilst we will not step back from making the challenges known, we believe that more lasting change is achieved by being willing to share the task of finding a solution. So as long individuals continue to ask for parent engagement, we will go on trying to provide it. After all, it is our families who need it and together we can make it happen.