



**SNAP PARENT CARER FORUM**  
CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE

## **SNAP PCF Position Statement**

### **Additional specialist autistic provision within Central Bedfordshire to meet the needs of cognitively able autistic children and young people.**

#### **SNAP PCF role**

SNAP (Special Needs Action Panel) is a pro-active, independent forum of parent carers who all have children and young people with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND). As members of the National Network of Parent Carer Forums, we support the development of parent carer participation, a process in which parents work together with professionals to make improvements to local services. SNAP PCF act as a conduit for a wide variety of local professionals in their work with children and young people with SEND. SNAP's purpose is to improve the services provided for young people who are aged from 0-25 years old.

#### **Position Statements**

SNAP PCF will be publishing position statements as and when the need arises in order for our Forum to formally communicate our point of view on any issues that arise. These can be found on our [website](#).

#### **The issue**

SNAP PCF has noted a significant gap in the specialist educational provision available for children and young people with SEND within Central Bedfordshire.

Special schools offer provision for pupils with complex needs that is different from, or in addition to, what is provided within mainstream schools. A child or young person's need for a special school place is determined through the Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) process.

There are currently four special schools located within Central Bedfordshire, these are:

- The Chiltern School, Houghton Regis
- Ivel Valley School, Biggleswade
- Oak Bank School, Leighton Buzzard
- Weatherfield Academy, Dunstable

As of January 2020, there were a total of 680 pupils attending these four Special schools. In June 2020, Autism Spectrum Disorder was the primary need for more than 200 of these pupils, accounting for approximately 35% of the total. Social Emotional Mental Health was

the second highest need, with 135 pupils at the four special schools, accounting for 20% of the total pupils (Schools for the Future Consultation, 2021).

In October 2022 we were informed via the weekly Central Bedfordshire SEND News and Update email that there were 63 children and young people waiting for a suitable special school place to become available:

- 5 children in Early Years,
- 55 children and young people in mainstream
- 3 children and young people have Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS)

Of the 63 children and young people, 31 had a special school place confirmed for September 2023, but a further 31 have yet to find a place that meets their needs.

In addition, Central Bedfordshire Council have recently approved an increase in the number of specialist school places to 350 places at Additional Resource Provisions by 2024 and 1,300 places at Special Schools by 2026 to meet the needs of our children and young people with complex special educational needs. Some of these children and young people, however, will need a placement that offers more support and nurturing than the Autism Additional Resource Provisions attached to mainstream schools can provide. Yet their needs are not complex enough for them to be accepted at Ivel Valley, The Chilterns, or Weatherfield, or they need more than just the provision on offer at one of the specialised Social and Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) schools, such as Oak Bank.

Many of these children and young people are autistic and cognitively able, have Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) or a demand avoidant profile, or have other co-morbidities such as Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, or Sensory Processing Disorder which means their needs are complex. SNAP provided training on Elective Home Educating and EOTAS in February 2023 at the request of a number of our parent carer members. Eleven parents attended this training and all of them had at least one child who has experienced emotional-based school anxiety and/or trauma from their attendance at mainstream schools that have been unable to meet their needs or have used inappropriate strategies when trying to support them. Some of these children and young people have either been on a part-time timetable or are now not attending school at all. They have not been receiving the education that they are legally entitled to and are falling further behind their peers through no fault of their own.

Parent carers have reported that there is currently little to no provision for these children and young people within Central Bedfordshire and they are increasingly having to look out of county for an appropriate placement for their child or young person. This causes additional negative impacts due to the distances that children and young people are expected to travel to access an educational placement that can meet their needs. There are approximately 150 pupils with Education, Health, and Care Plans, managed by Central Bedfordshire Council, who attend a school outside of the county. 60 of these young people attend state-maintained special schools, and 25 attend independent special schools (Schools for the Future Consultation, 2021).

## The Cavendish School

For this report, we have looked at The Cavendish School in Cambridgeshire. Some Central Bedfordshire children are fortunate to be able to attend this school. If there were space available, many other children and young people could also benefit from this type of provision. We need a school such as this within Central Bedfordshire.

The Cavendish School is one of two settings within Cambridgeshire that are designed to meet the needs of autistic children and young people who are cognitively able. The Cavendish has a therapeutic environment that supports those who have experienced previous trauma within a mainstream setting, offering input from professionals within speech & language, occupational therapy, play therapy, art therapy, and an onsite educational psychologist.

The Cavendish School is a unique school for autistic students, where they celebrate diversity and aspire to remove the limitations and barriers that many autistic young people face within other traditional educational settings. Their vision “is to provide a safe and nurturing environment in which students can enjoy learning, achieve their potential and develop the key skills they need to thrive as independent, emotionally and socially confident young adults in an international arena.”

The school understands that both the young people and their families may have lost trust in education due to negative experiences within previous settings. They recognise that autistic children and young people struggle with anxiety and offer a range of therapies to address these issues alongside an academic education, thus providing a much more holistic approach for each pupil.

The inclusive and nurturing space provided for students at The Cavendish School, enables them to thrive in an environment that can fully meet all their needs (sensory, social communication, emotional wellbeing) whilst also allowing the students to develop independent skills such as self-regulation and self-advocacy.

The Cavendish School staff adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of the child or young person, giving students the opportunity to push their own learning boundaries; and where they are encouraged to be inquisitive and to reflect on topics by sharing their knowledge with their peers. Through the International Baccalaureate system, the students are supported to develop the 10 human attributes (to be a thinker, courageous, knowledgeable, reflective, balanced, caring, an inquirer, a communicator, and to celebrate difference), that is believed to be beneficial far beyond the school environment, to prepare them to become independent in the world outside of education.

### **Therapeutic Thinking**

Previously known as Steps, Therapeutic Thinking was initially developed by Angela Wadham, and is currently used in schools across Cambridgeshire, Reading, West Berkshire, Wokingham, and more recently Ealing. On the website <https://therapeuticthinking.co.uk/> it is described as a “philosophy”, offering the following as objectives of implementing Therapeutic Thinking:

- To support settings to develop a therapeutic approach to behaviour.

- To ensure all children and young people, regardless of any SEND needs, their emotional wellbeing or identified behaviour needs receive their entitlement to full-time education, balanced curriculum, and extra-curricular activities.
- To enable schools and other settings create an inclusive ethos and an accessible learning environment in which children and young people can actively participate.
- To enhance the ability and capacity of school's other settings, and the local authority to work in partnership to secure measurable outcomes for all children and young people.
- To improve the consistency and effectiveness of partnership working between schools, education settings and other agencies, leading to sustained quality outcomes.
- To reduce and ultimately eliminate exclusions by considering more inclusive alternatives.
- To ensure that resources are deployed equitably and transparently.
- To focus on securing a cost-effective approach and long-term value for money.
- To create clear channels of accountability which enable the effective monitoring of outcomes.

Used as a county-wide multi-agency approach within Cambridge local authority, it has resulted in a 90% reduction in restraint and restrictive physical intervention throughout SEND education. By developing a trauma-informed approach to positive behaviour management, the Therapeutic Thinking approach motivates the young person and builds on making them feel safe within their school environment. Staff model the importance of mutual respect, equality, and consistency to provide the young person with the role models they need to grow and be confident in understanding their own needs.

The Cavendish School uses a reward scheme called "RAVE about learning" which enables the students to experience success and to recognise their positive actions and growth. RAVE is an individual system created specifically for The Cavendish School which is broken down into four key areas of explicit teaching; Respect, Actions (considering and making positive choices), Values (displaying our core values which are the IB learner attributes) and Effort.

The school asks pupils to choose a range of activities that they would like to take part in as a reward for their hard work during the term, such as bowling, swimming, visiting the zoological society or local country parks – including a fun day at school as they recognise that many young people will find it challenging being offsite. This kind of system does not punish the students for negative behaviour, and instead actively encourages them to live their values, work hard, and see their own worth within the school and the wider world.

The figures from The Cavendish School below, show the number times that Central Bedfordshire Council have consulted with the school regarding a placement since it opened in September 2021:

- 23 consultations were held in total.
- Of the 23 consultations held, 21 were unique consultations, and 2 had been consulted twice.
- 2 consultations were accepted and resulted in placements at the school.

- 14 consultations were rejected due to SEMH being the main presenting need, or because the child or young person was working at a lower cognitive level than that appropriate for the school.
- 7 consultations met the admission criteria; but places could not be offered as the school is currently full.

**We wanted to share with you two families' stories to support our position statement.**

### **Family 1 - M**

We have an 11-year-old Autistic/ADHD son, who is also diagnosed with dyspraxia, sensory processing disorder, anxiety, and a demand-avoidant profile. He hasn't been in full-time education since February 2022. He is currently on a reduced timetable at a mainstream middle school. He is accessing limited education for a maximum of 2 hours per day on a 1-2-1 basis with his TA away from his peers. He has been on this reduced timetable for nearly a year following the use of restraint on him by a member of staff when he was in full meltdown. This has had a huge impact not only on the education he is receiving but also on his emotional well-being, mental and physical health.

We requested a reassessment of his EHCP and experienced significant delays in the assessment process primarily due to a shortage of Educational Psychologists. The initial draft plan needed substantial rewriting with the help of SENDIASS. It was eventually finalised in September 2022. It was submitted to two local mainstream schools with an Autism Provision and three special schools, two within our local authority and one out of the county. The out of county school was The Cavendish School and they were the only special provision/school who were able to meet our son's needs out of those we consulted. However, they were at capacity and were unable to advise if a place would be available in September 2023. His mainstream school initially said they could meet the need and the provision requested in his EHCP. They have since decided they can no longer do this, and this has meant the LA have to find a school that can meet my son's needs.

Our son's case has been taken to a Placement Panel and it was agreed that he requires a specialist school rather than a mainstream school. Yet no special school within Central Bedfordshire can meet his needs. Further schools have been consulted in Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire, but they are also unable to support him and his complex needs. The Cavendish School remains the only school that can offer the provision he needs as set out in his EHCP. They offer a unique therapeutic environment and a curriculum/teaching methodology that is child-led and equally balanced between the holistic and academic needs of each pupil.

We have sadly had to decide to go to the Tribunal not only to get the name of the school changed in his EHCP but also to the content of his plan as well. Due to the current demand on the Tribunal Service, our case will not be heard until November 2023. We have also since been advised that because The Cavendish is a state-maintained special free school not only will the LA not be able to direct the school to take our son, but the Tribunal will not either.

We never envisaged we would be in this situation. This has had a huge impact not only on my son but also on my own mental and physical health, my friendships, my career, and our family

unit. I have had to give up my job as I have been unable to juggle our son's needs with all the reports, emails, phone calls etc, as well as meetings and appointments I have to attend. This has had a significant impact on our financial situation as well in the current economic climate.

It is incredibly stressful, not knowing if our son will have the school place, he is entitled to by the end of this school year is devastating. He is such a bright, funny, cheeky, loving boy who deserves the education he is entitled to. We feel completely let down by the system and are still no clearer.

### **Family 2 - J**

Our 9-year-old son has diagnoses of Autistic Spectrum Disorder with a demand avoidant profile, ADHD, Anxiety, and a specific learning difficulty of Dyslexia. He spent 9 months completely out of education and 17 months only able to access school for no more than 60 minutes each day.

In March 2021 following the January COVID lockdown, our son initially went back to school for the last two weeks of keyworker hours. This transition failed once all the children returned to school. Our son was in constant fight or flight and a heightened state of anxiety, even outside of school hours, which impacted all aspects of his life and ours. What hadn't been considered throughout our experience, was there was a deeply traumatised boy who was desperately trying to tell us that he was not coping. The emotional stress and worry over those two years took a huge toll on all our family, as well as on my mental health, and my physical health, so much so that I had to give up work which put extra financial pressure on our family.

It was agreed between us and CAMHS that there needed to be a gradual and flexible reintroduction to school. Unfortunately, the environment in the mainstream school was unable to meet our son's needs and a gradual reintroduction to school was unsuccessful.

In December 2021 the SEND Placement Panel agreed a specialist provision was needed for our son. They felt that an ASD provision was unsuitable for the age, ability, aptitude, or SEN of our son, and named an inappropriate SEMH school for September 2022. We believe that this place was offered due to a lack of provision for cognitively able autistic students within Central Bedfordshire. It was clear that our son's needs could not be met within a mainstream setting, however the specialist provisions within the local authority were also unsuitable, including SEMH settings that are not always appropriate for autistic young people. We explained that he needed a therapeutic environment, one that could nurture him, build on his self-esteem, teaching him to self-regulate.

We are incredibly grateful that our son started The Cavendish School in September 2022 and is thriving there. He is learning self-regulation skills, he is loving education, he has friends, and he is becoming more confident and independent every day. But most of all he is happy. Our son now attends school full time, even going to school in local authority provided transport. The Cavendish School has transformed his life, and ours.

## SNAP PCF position

[The Schools Place Plan was taken to Overview & Scrutiny on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2023.](#)

*“The demand for specialist school places for children with special educational needs and/ or disabilities (SEND) within Central Bedfordshire has risen significantly in the last 3 years. Forecasts undertaken annually since 2020 demonstrate that the number of places available have been insufficient to meet the demand both in terms of geographical location and type of need. In particular there were not enough places which are able to meet the increasing numbers of children with Autism Spectrum Diagnosis (ASD) and Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. The forecast Page 176 of 280 data is supported by the evidence presented by parents and carers, who have consistently raised concern about the numbers of places available. These views were captured in the extensive SEND Have Your Say consultation undertaken during 2021”* ([p176 full meeting pack Overview & Scrutiny meeting 17<sup>th</sup> January 2023.](#))

SNAP PCF strongly believe Central Bedfordshire needs an educational provision like that provided by The Cavendish School, so that there is local provision that is appropriate for children and young people whose profile of needs are too complex for an Autism Provision attached to a mainstream school, yet not complex enough for a more specialist provision.

Our members have told us that there are many children and young people are not receiving the provision and/or education they are entitled to as set out in their Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP). Many parent carers of those who are currently in a mainstream setting waiting for a special school place to become available feel the education being provided for their child or young person whilst 'in limbo' is minimal. This is having a devastating impact on them and the family unit. We have heard from parents who have had to leave their jobs, encountered financial difficulties, and become unwell themselves because of the stress that the situation is causing them.

## SNAP PCF Recommendations

- We would welcome a conversation with Central Bedfordshire Council to discuss our position statement.
- Our aspiration is to have a school within Central Bedfordshire that caters specifically for autistic young people who are more cognitively able, and we are asking that a scoping exercise be undertaken by the Council to see if this is possible.
- We are also asking that there be a review of the free school bid for an additional SEMH school in Biggleswade to consider the feasibility of supporting a provision alongside it that is like that offered by The Cavendish School.
- We would ask that Central Bedfordshire Council look at the feasibility of introducing the STEPS approach to behaviour management in all educational settings.

<https://www.cambslearntogether.co.uk/cambridgeshire-send/cambridgeshire-send-services/cambridgeshire-steps>

- We recommend that all the families who do not have a suitable educational provision for their child are contacted by the Council to ensure that a holistic view of their circumstances is being considered to make sure that they are accessing all of the support that is available whilst they are waiting for their child or young person to be provided with a suitable school place.

**Organisations that can give you either information, advice, or guidance:**

- IPSEA <https://www.ipsea.org.uk/pages/category/children-out-of-school>
- SOS SEN <https://sossen.org.uk/>
- Contact <https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/>
- Central Bedfordshire SENDIASS <https://cbsendiass.org/>

**Please keep in touch with us by following us on Facebook and Twitter, emailing us updates on your lived experience, completing our surveys and attending our events.**

1. Email: [admin@snappcf.org.uk](mailto:admin@snappcf.org.uk)
2. Phone: 07984 545044
3. Website: [www.snappcf.org.uk](http://www.snappcf.org.uk)
4. Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/snappcf.org.uk/>
5. Twitter: <https://twitter.com/snappcf>
6. Address: SNAP PCF, The Incuba, Brewers Hill Road, Dunstable, Bedfordshire, LU6 1AA