

Co-production

Listening, learning and
looking to the future



About SEND Sensation

A local trusted partnership

Since 2023, SEND Sensation has offered Short Breaks community clubs and activities to families in Essex living with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

We work towards a future where every person is recognised, valued and supported to achieve their potential.

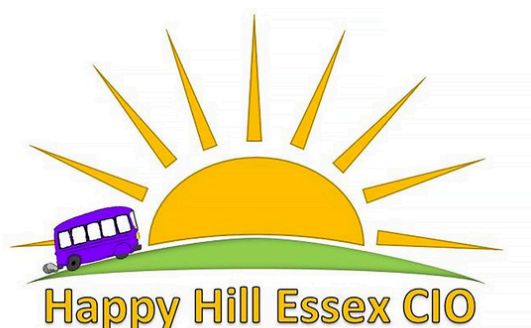
Working with partners across Essex, SEND Sensation brings together communities to offer families choice and empower children and young people to access opportunities.

How we work

#Local. We offer a choice of locations, venues and opportunities in Mid and North Essex through our partnerships.

#Accessible. We believe families should be able to navigate their local offer, access peer support and feel empowered to make informed choices.

#Positive. Working together, we raise awareness, encourage positive changes and promote inclusive communities.



InterAct



Disability
4SPORT



About co-production

Co-production is a term that is used to describe working in partnership by sharing power between people who use and deliver services.

The Care Act 2014 includes co-production in its statutory guidance. It's essential for partnerships like SEND Sensation to embrace co-production so that support and services are better for everyone.

It's all about bringing people together – children and young people who attend SEND Sensation activities, carers, parents, schools and support systems, professionals and of course, SEND Sensation partners.

There is a difference between co-production and involvement: involvement means being consulted, while co-production means being equal partners and co-creators.

Using co-production, we are able to plan and deliver support together. Co-production recognises that all of the people involved have vital contributions to make in order to improve the quality of life for people and communities.



The approach is value-driven and built on the principle that those who use a service are best placed to help design it.

The ladder of co-production

Co-production

Co-production is an equal relationship between people who use services and the people responsible for services. They work together, from design to delivery, sharing strategic decision-making about policies as well as decisions about the best way to deliver services.

Co-design

People who use services are involved in designing services, based on their experiences and ideas. They have genuine influence but have not been involved in 'seeing it through'.

Engagement

Compared to the consultation step below, people who use services are given more opportunities to express their views and may be able to influence some decisions, but this depends on what the people responsible for services will allow.

Consultation

People who use services may be asked to fill in surveys or attend meetings; however this step may be considered tokenistic if they do not have the power to influence or affect change.

Informing

The people responsible for services inform people about the services and explain how they work. This may include telling people what decisions have been made and why.

Educating

The people who use services are helped to understand the service design and delivery so that they gain relevant knowledge about it. That is all that is done at this stage.

Coercion

This is the bottom of the rung of the ladder. People who use services attend an event about services as passive recipients. Their views are not considered important and are not taken into account.



Core values of co-production



Everyone involved is an equal partner



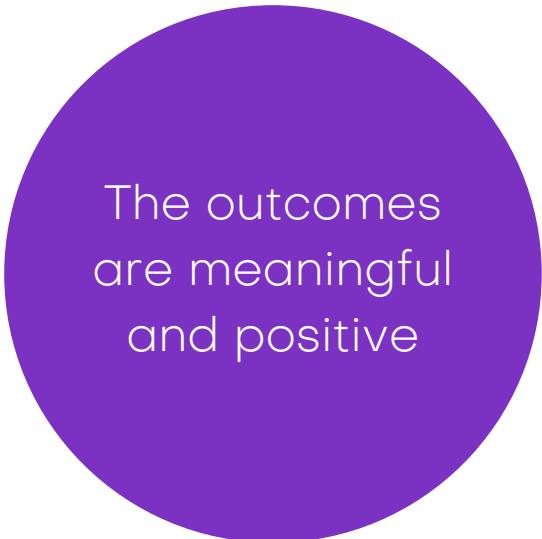
Decisions are made together



Everyone is involved from start to finish – planning, development and delivery



Everyone involved agrees on the same vision



The outcomes are meaningful and positive



Those involved are valued and rewarded

Key ingredients

The National Co-production Advisory Group talks about four ingredients that are really important for co-production.

Equality

Co-production starts from the idea that no one group or person is more important than anyone else, and everyone has skills, abilities and time to contribute.

Accessibility

Making everything accessible is the way to make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to work together in the ways that suit them best.

Diversity

Co-production should be as inclusive and diverse as possible. It is important to make sure that people from different groups are included, and especially people from groups that might not often be heard.

Recognition

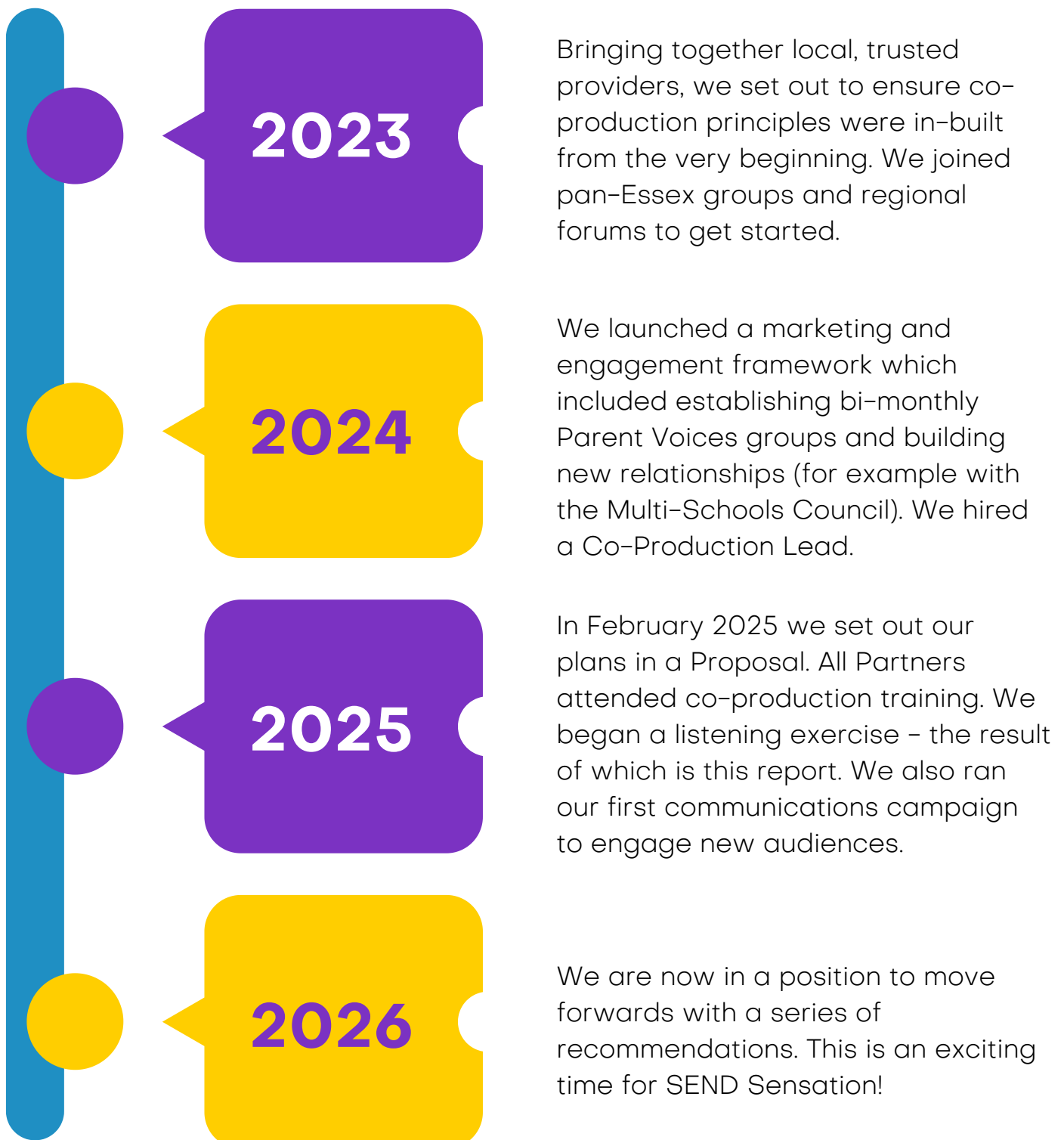
People are contributing their time, knowledge and experience to work together, so this should be recognised and respected. This should include paying people for their time and expertise, but the respect also comes from the more equal relationships that develop between everyone involved.

Moving towards co-production at SEND Sensation



Our journey so far

Since 2023, SEND Sensation has been working towards a model of co-production. We are passionate about listening to our stakeholders and ensuring everything we offer is informed by lived experience.



Listening and learning

About Parent Voices

Parent Voices is a bi-monthly group for parents/carers and families who are in contact with SEND Sensation.

We meet online and the sessions are relaxed and friendly, offering a safe space for people to share ideas and feedback.

Our aim is to understand the parent and carer experience more, identify what is working well, build trust and gain insights into what could be improved.

We run each session with four principles in mind:

- Confidentiality
- Respect
- No blame
- Active listening

Each session lasts between 1-2 hours.

We know that every experience is unique, and by coming together, we hope to learn and improve.

Our journey so far

In the past year, we have hosted seven Parent Voices groups online. We had 23 attendees at these sessions, however some parents and carers attended multiple sessions.

“Was great to talk to other parents...
Thanks for the initiative Laura and all the best for the parents here”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

We visited a Disability4Sport session and spoke to two parents about their experiences of being involved with SEND Sensation. We also visited parent support groups and spoke to people at Essex Local Offer Roadshows.

Our attendees were both men and women, all parents of children or young people with SEND. We had a diverse group of people from differing backgrounds.

Some attendees also offered professional insights, as they work in the SEND space.

Learning



Learning

Through our Parent Voices groups, visits to Partner organisations and through our network, we have been learning about what matters to the parents and carers who are involved with SEND Sensation.

Themes

Access and choice

The SEND world is an ever-changing one for parents and carers, yet the desire for better access (and accessibility) is constant.

We heard that parents would like more provision during school holidays, better timed activities (i.e. not just after school if they don't attend the venue where an activity is taking place) and more quiet opportunities.

Parents would like to see more support for high level needs.

“Parents need respite and children need confidence.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

Parents would also like more choice, including access to activities at weekends and during holidays that suits all needs.

“We need weekend stuff.”

– Parent at Disability4Sport session, 2025

“...during school holidays everywhere is so busy

– [my child] doesn't enjoy crowds of people...”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

Access to the right educational support was important to the people we spoke to.

“My son had that feel of bullying when he was in mainstream a year ago, we no longer feel that now in special setup.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

Parents did not want to make a choice between their child's education and their wellbeing.

“A lot of parents commit to emotional development/regulation over academic achievement etc”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

It was also important to parents that the clubs and activities offered by SEND Sensation were not always educational in nature.

“...they need socialisation – make it fun!”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

Furthermore, parents would like SEND Sensation to be more visible to improve access. This includes an enhanced social media presence, clearer language and accessible branding.

The SEND ‘tax’

Living with any long-term condition is expensive, and cost was a barrier for many families in accessing regular SEND activities. Families can be priced out of activities, for example if they do not have transport and need to take a taxi.

“Children can spend 5 minutes or an hour somewhere – can be very expensive for just 5 minutes.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

Parents also discussed various free opportunities (i.e. days at the zoo organised by SEND Sensation), which were very welcome but often difficult to book onto. There was confusion around what is available, for example access cards or discounts for carers.

Navigation

Parents struggle to navigate the SEND world, including using SEND Sensation. Finding information and understanding eligibility can be challenging.

“Parents need a one-stop shop.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

Parents find it overwhelming trying to differentiate between the various elements that make up the Short Breaks offer, including SEND Sensation activities and clubs, caravans and beach huts.

There is also multiple booking systems involved in the Essex SEND service delivery and this is frustrating for parents.

“Too many sign-ups!”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

Removing the fragmentation would be a step in the right direction, but if this is not possible, creating clear communications would be beneficial.

“Being easily accessible is a must.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

Changes to provision also impact families regularly. Having adequate notice about any planned changes to what is available is important.

“SEN children really struggle with change, but always the group who have their services pulled.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2026

Training and understanding

There is a strong appetite for training and support for providers of SEND activities, particularly mainstream venues such as cinemas and swimming pools.

“Difference between ‘SEND’ session and ‘quiet’ session.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

“We need mainstream providers to be truly SEN aware, not just say it because it looks good on marketing.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2026

There is an opportunity for SEND Sensation to offer lived-experience led training to address these issues, while also supporting organisations to build their knowledge and confidence in delivering SEND specific activities.

Visibility

While SEND Sensation has grown our visibility in the past year, there is still work to do. Parents want more proactive marketing and engagement, particularly on social media and with schools.

“...always have to look for you...”

– Parent at Disability4Sport session, 2025

Several parents spoke about engaging more with schools and targeting not only SEND schools, but mainstream schools as well.

“Advertise to schools and link with SENCOs.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

Diversity

Some parents face additional barriers due to cultural stigma or lack of representation.

“I stayed in the house for 7 years without support, then realised it wasn’t working – I don’t want other mothers to live like this.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

It is important to reach out to our communities in a culturally sensitive way and to be aware of difference, including language barriers.

“Language needs to be used that I can understand – I had so much fear about the term ‘special needs’.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

Parents want inclusive language, representation and peer-led support.

Keep listening

During the past year, we have found there is a strong desire for SEND Sensation to involve parents and carers in our work.

“If you are not on the ground, you do not know.”

– Attendee at Parent Voices group, 2025

Co-production is important to the families we support, as is lived experience leadership.

Parents and carers in the SEND community value hearing genuine insights from people who ‘get it’. Listening to and sharing the voices of parents and carers is an important part of our work.

Recommendations



Recommendations

Improve access to clubs and activities

If possible, it would be beneficial to explore if SEND Sensation can expand it's offering through Core Partners, particularly:

- More holiday and weekend activities and clubs
- More low-sensory options, like creative sessions or gaming

SEND Sensation has been working with community and mainstream providers in the past year and this is an area we can continue to grow in.

SEND Sensation should continue to negotiate reduced pricing / free carer entry to our events and activities.

One of the quickest ways to improve access would be to launch a new booking system and provide parents and carers with a 'one stop shop' for all SEND Sensation or Essex Short Breaks activities.

This may not be possible given all the Partners involved, but we can definitely support Commissioners to appreciate the complexity facing SEND parents in Essex.

Parents have provided names of organisations we could contact:

- Jump Street
- Air Hop
- Hawk Farm in Weeley
- Partyman World in Braintree
- Chelmsford Athletic Centre
- Witham Games Arena
- Blackwater Gymnastics
- Maldon Zoo
- Maldon Leisure Centre
- Signals Media Arts
- POP Essex
- Sports for Confidence
- Families in Focus
- Braintree Freeport
- Evo Inflatables

It would also be useful for us to engage with organisations that support diverse communities, such as RAMA.

Invest in communications and marketing

Investment in communications and marketing is an ongoing requirement, however there are some specific recommendations which will benefit parents significantly.

A new website

Investing and launching a new website would be beneficial for SEND Sensation to ensure we provide parents and carers with accessible, relevant support and information.

Targeted campaign to schools

Parents have told us we should engage schools and SENCOs much more than we currently do. We have undertaken some work around this (i.e. connecting with Multi Schools Council) but it's recommended we carry out a targeted campaign to all schools in Mid and North Essex within the next year.

Enhanced engagement

At the moment, our communications run smoothly but are not highly engaging.

We do not have capacity or resources to build them at present. However, this is an area we could work on in the future.

Enhancing our social media content and engaging more with audiences would be beneficial, as well as building our newly launched LinkedIn presence.

Parents told us they want us to challenge unrealistic expectations. There is a lot of pressure, especially on social media, to have the 'perfect' family life. SEND Sensation can reframe this narrative by highlighting the importance of 'rest days' and sharing real life stories that reduce stigma.

We need to continue using non-threatening, inclusive language in our marketing.

It would also be useful for SEND Sensation to reach out to organisations such as libraries and promote peer-led groups and parent networks more.

Offer high quality training

SEND Sensation is in a unique position where we work in partnership with many organisations. By developing a high quality training offer, we could be able to support these companies to improve their support, pricing and sensory considerations for families in Essex.

This could include webinars, on-site training, showcasing best practice regularly and building provider confidence.

Parents want reassurance the venues and providers understand the needs of their children and a quality mark or badge that shows they meet a high standard would be beneficial.

Embed lived experience

We have been working towards embedding lived experience at SEND Sensation and parents welcome this. We now require specific actions to champion these efforts, including:

- Ensure parents and carers with lived experience are represented on the SEND Sensation board
- Develop our Young Ambassador programme
- Consider diversity and cultural representation in all of our lived experience activities
- Develop a remuneration policy for lived experience involvement
- Continue to attend a wide range of events and keep listening
- Ensure we systematically record insights and close the feedback loop, so that those we engage with know we are embedding lived experience in a consistent, continuous way

It would be extremely beneficial for Partner organisations to become more involved in our co-production approach, from promoting Parent Voices groups regularly, attending these groups themselves and enabling SEND Sensation to host focus groups on-site at their venues, when appropriate.

Strengthen inclusion

SEND Sensation is an inclusive organisation, but we now have an opportunity to develop our cultural sensitivity.

“Need diverse voices – how are parents tapping into SEND Sensation and Short Breaks?”

– Attendee at Parent Voices
group, 2025

We can do this by reviewing our diversity policy and those of our Partner organisations, as well as supporting everyone we work with to be more inclusive.

Keep going

Parents want us to keep listening and learning. The SEND world is facing challenges and changes in the years ahead, so we need to keep working towards a model of co-production that puts lived experience at the heart of our offer.

Action Plan



Action Plan

This plan outlines a series of actions that align to the recommendations in this report.

September – December 2026

Recommendation	Actions
Improve access to clubs and activities	1. Publish a simple 'How to access Short Breaks' guide: • Include eligibility, info about other Short Breaks offers and where to access that (i.e. caravans etc) and FAQs • Share via Partners, schools and digitally 2. Contact all organisations listed in this report by parents and begin a dialogue about partnership working
Invest in communications and marketing	1. Recruit a new marketing and admin assistant to lead this work 2. Launch a targeted campaign to engage schools in Mid and North Essex: • Build a contact list of SENCOs, Heads and school office managers • Create and distribute literature to all schools, including posters for reception areas and SEND bases and literature to distribute to parents

Recommendation	Actions
	• Ask schools to include SEND Sensation in their weekly newsletters / online information sharing systems to parents • Follow up each month with SEND Sensation news and updates to continue engagement beyond the campaign period • Improve social media presence 3. Build our LinkedIn presence
Offer high quality training	1. Reach out to all of our existing Partner organisations and offer SEND awareness training
Embed lived experience	1. Continue hosting Parent Voices groups 2. Share this report with our parents and carers
Strengthen inclusion	1. Develop a diversity policy for SEND Sensation and publish this on our website 2. Support all Core Partner to review their diversity policies and support development if needed
Keep going	1. Ask parents and carers for feedback on this report and amend as needed, then re-publish 2. Establish annual training for all Partners on lived experience, active listening and co-production

January – April 2027

Recommendation	Actions
Improve access to clubs and activities	1. Pilot new sessions with new Partners, based on the list in this report provided by parents
Invest in communications and marketing	1. Develop a new website for SEND Sensation • To include new timetable presentation (preferably a searchable calendar) • Accessibility-led design approach • Develop and publish a range of new content, including guidance for parents and carers on topics they want to know more about (i.e. Access cards, holiday activities that are SEND friendly etc) and information about other offers (not just SEND Sensation) • Test with parents, carers and Partners before launching 2. Run a campaign to elevate the voices of parents in Essex, drawing on their lived experience to reframe the narrative around SEND 3. Improve our social media presence by joining local Facebook groups and supporting all Partner organisations to promote SEND Sensation (provide assets as needed)

Recommendation	Actions
Offer high quality training	1. Develop a SEND awareness training offer for mainstream venues.
Embed lived experience	1. Publish a 'You said, we did, we're still doing' update 2. Agree a remuneration policy for paid lived experience 3. Build on our existing relationship with Multi Schools Council to engage young people, specifically inviting an ambassador to attend one of our Board meetings
Strengthen inclusion	1. Begin engaging with community groups, including hosting or attending 2-3 targeted outreach events 2. Train staff on cultural stigma and barriers to inclusion
Keep going	1. Continue to host Parent Voices meetings 2. Continue to gather regular survey and anecdotal feedback from all stakeholders 3. Begin recruitment of a Parent Advisory Group. This needs to be representative and include parents/carers from different areas, range in level of needs and consider cultural diversity

May – September 2027

Recommendation	Actions
Improve access to clubs and activities	1. Support core Partners to pilot quiet sessions 2. Develop a long-term funding case for Essex County Council, to continue offering SEND Sensation in the future
Invest in communications and marketing	1. Launch new website 2. Launch a targeted campaign to engage wider audiences, for example libraries and public spaces
Offer high quality training	1. Develop the idea of a quality standard / badge for local venues and organisations to obtain 2. Recruit parent ambassadors to support delivery of training and development of the quality standard, so that lived experience is embedded in our approach

Recommendation	Actions
Embed lived experience	1. Continue to host Parent Voices meetings 2. Continue to gather regular survey and anecdotal feedback from all stakeholders 3. Host bi-monthly Parent Advisory Group meetings
Strengthen inclusion	1. Publish anti-racism statement 2. Working with community groups, develop a targeted awareness campaign to strengthen inclusion
Keep going	1. Publish an update on progress so far, including quotes from Parent Voices groups, feedback surveys and the Parent Advisory Group

Looking to the future



Looking to the future

Co-production is a marathon, not a sprint. This report captures what we have heard since July 2025, but it is by no means a comprehensive picture of parent and carer experiences in Essex today.

It is imperative that SEND Sensation continues to invest in co-production. There is no 'one size fits all' in the SEND world – it's vitally important that we keep listening and learning.

It's about reaching decisions collectively, all having an equal voice in how things move forward.

With dedication and passion, we can keep working towards this.

We can keep climbing the ladder of co-production together.



#Local #Accessible #Positive

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