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Summary

Effective services are those informed by the customers’ voice. It is more important than ever that we make sure the resources we do have are placed where they are most needed. This was an opportunity for children, young people and parents/carers to tell the council what is important to people growing up in Somerset with an autism and/or communication need and therefore inform the Action Plan that accompanies the new Somerset Joint Autism Strategy.

We developed a range of methods for people to engage in the consultation between January and February 2014, by online survey, paper questionnaire, and face-to-face discussions. Thanks need to go to all those who helped with enabling the children, young people and parents/carers of Somerset to have their say and take part in the survey. Whether it was by promoting the online survey, distributing or supporting completion of paper questionnaires – it was greatly appreciated. 91 children and young people responded, 143 parents and carers, and 65 schools.

There were two conflicting strands emerging in opinions concerned with the immediacy and the future. Parents desire a society where their child can fit in, and both be accepted and access a wider community willing to make adaptations. Parents also desire a happy child whose needs are being met immediately, until wider society makes adjustments then it is felt specialist provision is required.

Children and young people were happier where their friends and teachers understood their condition. Friendships are very important to young people to help them fit in and establish a sense of belonging, and bullying reinforces (mis)perception of their differences. Parents raised problems being heightened by a lack of both understanding and acknowledgment of what is ‘normal’ for an autistic child compared to their peers. They feel staff need to seek to understand the condition and the implications that not doing this throws up during the school day.

Awareness of services and training courses available seems to be patchy, with many parents commenting on having to self refer/request rather than a lead professional signposting to other related services. A menu of options easily accessible to both parents and professionals is key, and particularly notable here is ensuring and understanding of the thresholds or criteria for accessing the service and why.

Until a fully autistic friendly society is achieved autistic children and young people face anxiety in many day to day situations. Whilst there is a need to attempt to reduce the prominence of these situations, there is a need for training in coping mechanisms and managing anxiety and resulting challenging behaviour.

The key messages have been reflected in the priorities of the Somerset Autism Strategy for Children and Adults. And a group made up of key people including parents, schools and charity representatives are using the survey information to inform future planning of services as part of the Action Plan for the Somerset Autism Strategy for Children and Adults.

Where did we start from?

Children, young people and parents/carers have a right to comment on services they receive and tell us what is important to them and this must be given due weight (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the UK in 1991). The Somerset Autism Strategy for Children and Adults sets out the priorities Somerset County Council and NHS Somerset Joint Commissioning Team (407 in total). Flyers were handed out to parents and carers via the Children's Commissioning Team took young people through the survey face to face. The survey was also reopened for a month to allow more schools to take part in having their say.

How did we consult?

How did we involve people?

To maximise our reach, we developed a range of access points for people to engage in the survey between January and February 2014. Parents and carers had the option of an online web based survey, an electronic copy to download and either upload or post the completed version, or a hard copy with prepaid envelope that could be requested by either telephone or text message.

Children and young people had the same options but also with a text version and a visual version depending on need. Schools had the option of only an online web based survey.

The survey was publicised via a letter to all parents/carers with a child or young person who has School Action Plus funding or a statement for autism (407 in total). Flyers were handed out to parents and carers via the Children with Autism Outreach Team & Short Breaks activities, Somerset Parent Carer Forum and local support groups linked to the Forum. Flyers were also distributed at the Taunton Odeon autism friendly film screening. Links were put on the Somerset Parent Carer Forum and Somerset Parent Partnership websites and Facebook pages, and @somersetcouncil twitter feed.

National Autistic Society, Somerset Autism Community Network, and Compass Disability Service were informed and some offered to share with their stakeholders via newsletters, websites or other appropriate routes. Schools were notified via Post and email circulation to SENCOs and SAPHTO/SASH/SAHSP executive officers, with the Autism and Communication Service also reminding on their visits.

Due to low response rates visits were made in the final fortnight to some mainstream schools with a high number of pupils with autism and the Children’s Commissioning Team took young people through the survey face to face. The survey was also reopened for a month to allow more schools to take part in having their say.

Children, Young People, Parents and Carers

tell us what it is like having autism and/or communication needs in Somerset.

January - April 2014
The aim was to hear from people spanning the whole range of autism and communication needs; however methods to identify and inform those with lower needs proved more challenging. Responses from parent and carers listed their children in the following categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children and young people</th>
<th>Online survey - text</th>
<th>Complete responses</th>
<th>Incomplete responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent and carers</td>
<td>Online survey - text</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paper survey - text</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paper survey</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schooling</td>
<td>Online survey</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>193</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following numbers of responses were received across these methods:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnosis:</th>
<th>Level of educational need:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism spectrum condition</td>
<td>164 (none)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and communication difficulties</td>
<td>48 (additional needs) (School/Early Years Action)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awaiting assessment and diagnosis</td>
<td>10 (high needs) (School/Early Years Action Plus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement of SEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The qualitative data from free text boxes was able to provide some depth and explanation to the quantitative data. Analysis of the questionnaire responses was provided by the online survey system Invome, with those returned electronically already on the system and those returned by post entered manually onto the same system. Inovem then allowed data capture by spreadsheet for qualitative data analysis, and tagging for content analysis.

The non-completion rate was still present for offline versions suggesting the length of survey or other reasons may have also been present.

- **Variety of staff** – the non-universal nature of the survey meant usual publicity methods were limited, it was essential to use existing networks of those already having face-to-face contact with parent/careers or children and young people with autism. Central co-ordination from the Children’s Commissioning Team was important but the Service Area’s input was absolutely essential. For this to be effective ownership of the survey needs to sit within the Service Area.

- **Timings** – the timing was prepared in the run up to Christmas and was postponed due to the busy time of year potentially hindering completion. However not only is the time of year important but also the length of preparation prior to going live. As identified by the need for face to face, a larger period of preparation time is needed in the run up, to be able to publicise amongst stakeholders and plan meetings or events to help directly support children, young people and parents/careers to complete the survey.

### What helped to gain effective engagement?

Some lessons learnt of things that worked well (or things that didn’t work so well) during the consultation allowing greater engagement included:

- **Face to face** – Children and young people’s responses were greater and more detailed where a supporting adult encouraged or helped them to complete. An independent self completion survey is not necessarily the most appropriate method for those with communication needs – and both time and resources are absolutely key for any other form of completion and cannot be underestimated.

- **Online / Offline** – Use of the online survey was greater than that of paper. However, for children and young people despite the minority, a large number of responses (40%) were completed offline (many within schools) and compared to quality of response given, this suggests it was more effective method of completion, perhaps given the needs described in face to face. In addition, despite using a preview feature prior to publishing there were some technical difficulties in the online survey and a large proportion of the parent/carer incomplete responses were over the first weekend before those errors were reduced. A high response rate anticipating a +/-10.5% margin of error at 95% confidence level.

- **Diagnosis** – Children and young people’s responses were greater for those with autism and communication needs than those directly notified but this number is unknown. 20-50% is a typical response rate and as such for the children and young peoples element the survey anticipates a +/-5.05% margin of error at 95% confidence level, and the parent/carer element of the survey anticipates a +/-6.6% margin of error at 95% confidence level. These are both reasonable and suitable for use in informing the planning of services. The schools element with an original response rate of only 6.1% (5 incomplete and 11 complete responses) meant results could vary +/-24% at a 95% confidence level and therefore could not be taken as an accurate representative statement. The survey was re-opened and extended for schools for an extra month to encourage completion to a level that can be utilized. In that time, it submitted were many responses from schools that had already completed the survey so those answers were combined with their original answers to remove any statistical bias, resulting in a 24.7% response rate anticipating a +/-10.5% margin of error at 95% confidence level.

### What did they tell us?

**Children and young people**

91 children and young people responded to the survey. 72% were male and 28% female which is a slightly higher response rate from females than we would expect compared to the autistic population (41: ratio of male to female). The age profile of responses is similar to that expected.

### How did we analyse what they said?

The questionnaires provided a variety of tick box questions to be able to pull off quantitative data, with a free text box for further comments or suggesting ideas that would improve their responses (e.g. ‘are you happy in school?’/yes/no, If yes what makes you happy?’/If no would make you happy?).

The qualitative data from free text boxes was able to provide some depth and explanation to the quantitative data. Analysis of the questionnaire responses was provided by the online survey system Invome, with those returned electronically already on the system and those returned by post entered manually onto the same system. Inovem then allowed data capture by spreadsheet for qualitative data analysis, and tagging for content analysis.

**Schooling, from a children and young persons perspective**

82% of children and young people said they receive enough help at school. Where more help was needed children and young people expressed they often didn’t know specifically what help, just ‘more’. Several stated they require help playing with toys. And a few specify subjects in which more help is needed were raised such as science. 97% feel they have someone they can talk to when they need help. 29 mentioned only school staff (their teacher, teaching assistant or key worker), 10 mentioned only their parent or a friend, and 21 recognised a mixture of family, friends and school staff.

85% of children and young people say they are happy in school. 21 mentioned the chance to spend time with friends as a reason. And suggestions to improve happiness in school included facilitating opportunities for socialisation within school but out of lessons.

*Suggestions to improve happiness in school included facilitating opportunities for socialisation within school but out of lessons.*

Constructive suggestions of ways to help children and young people with autism feel happier in school were less serviceable in a mainstream setting and included cancelling lessons, easier work and more playtimes! However, whilst all children and young people would probably desire more playtimes, those with autism and communication needs have different reasons due to the autistic experience.

### Reasons for not being happy in school

- *I am not the only child with Aspergers Syndrome at school and more understanding by lunch staff and teachers of what this means to me is very important, I don’t mean to be different and sometimes difficult, but life is frustrating*.

**Conclusions**

Constructive suggestions of ways to help children and young people with autism feel happier in school were less serviceable in a mainstream setting and included cancelling lessons, easier work and more playtimes! However, whilst all children and young people would probably desire more playtimes, those with autism and communication needs have different reasons due to the autistic experience.

### Transitions

Only 50% of young people aged 15 and over knew that they did have a transition plan. Reasons given for not knowing were that the school would have a plan for students who are leaving school after year 11. Ten had a particular career or theme in mind, and eight wished to attend further or higher education and continue their learning. Although many wanted to know what information was needed (they don’t know what they don’t know) others were quite clear about not only needing information but support also. Information required by autistic young people to help make a decision includes practical information such as which courses are available where (including what additional support is available), and support includes visits of arrangements in attending new locations and settings until the young people are used to them. Some indicated that their school or college or both were planning to abide this, whereas some highlighted a strong need for it with a particular gap in their case causing anxiety and stress.

18 valued the support from either teachers or teaching assistants. 13 mentioned particular subjects they enjoy ranging from maths and science to art and music. Those in a Resource/Communication Base or Support Centre particularly valued the relaxed atmosphere, space to be quiet and one on one support.

**Physical and social environment**

92% confirmed there was somewhere they could go in school to be quiet, but comments indicate that whilst provision of a separate room is helpful, adaptations are needed within the whole setting for autistic children and young people to be able to participate fully, for example: 18 valued the support from either teachers or teaching assistants. 13 mentioned particular subjects they enjoy ranging from maths and science to art and music. Those in a Resource/Communication Base or Support Centre particularly valued the relaxed atmosphere, space to be quiet and one on one support.

- **Physical and social environment**

  - 18 valued the support from either teachers or teaching assistants. 13 mentioned particular subjects they enjoy ranging from maths and science to art and music. Those in a Resource/Communication Base or Support Centre particularly valued the relaxed atmosphere, space to be quiet and one on one support.

  - **Physical and social environment**

    - 18 valued the support from either teachers or teaching assistants. 13 mentioned particular subjects they enjoy ranging from maths and science to art and music. Those in a Resource/Communication Base or Support Centre particularly valued the relaxed atmosphere, space to be quiet and one on one support.
Parents and carers

143 parent/carers responded to the survey. The largest response was from those with a child who has a Statement of SEN, see Figure 2.

In terms of educational setting; 53 of the parent/carers noted their children attend mainstream school, 13 attend special school, 7 attend mainstream with access to a resource base, 3 are home educated, and 1 attends an off-site resource base.

The age profile of the children and young people the parents were reflecting on was similar to that of responses from children and young people except for a larger amount for 16+. In fact two parents had explicitly responded on behalf of ‘children’ aged 35+.

their experiences of a diagnosis with autism having left such an impact. This demonstrates the large effect growing up with autism and/or communication needs has and the requirement for effective services to prevent difficulty in adulthood.

Schooling, from a parent/carers perspective

When rating the help that a child receives at school only 10% of all responses were positive. However, only 10% of those attending mainstream school rated the help as outstanding compared to 74% of those attending special school. Similarly, 38% of those with no educational needs rated the help as unsatisfactory compared to only 5% and 10% of those with High Needs or Statements.

Of those that rated the help at school as outstanding, nearly a third included comments that this was following a move in schools and the previous school would not be rated similarly. Frequent comments included problems caused by a lack of understanding of the condition, or discontinuity in teaching assistants including lack of plans for covering sickness. Where the teacher is described as good fears are also often raised that continuity is unlikely to be maintained as the child moves through different classes and teachers as they move up the school. Where teachers are criticised it is often for misinterpretation of autistic characteristics as ‘bad behaviour’ due to a lack of understanding of autism, which distresses the child further when they are punished as a result.

When asked if their child/children were mostly calm and contented at school compared to home the responses were incredibly close – 76% mostly calm and contented at school and 75% mostly calm and contented at home. However these responses are from different situations; only 75% of those who responded Yes to calm at school also responded Yes at home. Comments and comparisons explaining differences include; storing anxieties up about school with it all being released at home, to the structure and pattern of the school day being more challenging to replicate in a non-school institutionalised setting. Many parents reference that whilst their child may be ‘calm and content’ at home, which is a positive for behaviour management; they are in fact socially isolated which is not so positive for emotional wellbeing.

Support and training for parents

A plurality of parents felt the support received was ‘Good’ for supporting their child to make educational progress, making learning a positive experience, feeling safe and supported and reassured. However, only 17% of the parents whose child has a Statement of SEN would not rate similarly. Frequent comments included problems caused by a lack of training and understanding of autism, which distresses the child further when they are punished as a result.

When asked what training was useful a frequent response was a need for raising awareness of the courses currently available. Comments were raised that parents find it hard to create the time for attending training, in terms of delivery of training, apart from the time factor already mentioned, suggestions included a mix of small group work to allow developing of support networks, and online to allow access at any time. A clear topic of requested training was managing anxiety and behaviour, or supporting children and young people with the emotional side of a life of autism. Several parents also noted that referrers of training were important particularly at transition stages, as the child’s needs develop so then techniques also need to develop or otherwise be reminded.

Staff effectiveness

When asked about the experiences of different professionals teaching assistants closely followed by teachers came out more positive (59% and 55% respectively rated as ‘Good’, with only 11% and 14% as ‘Unsatisfactory’). In comparison, Casework Officers, the Autism and Communication Service and Social Care Disability Service and FE/Post 16 Services were viewed more negatively (43%, 35% and 31% respectively rated as ‘Unsatisfactory’, with only 28%, 43% and 41% as ‘Good’). Frequent comments are logged about Casework Officers not being contactable, not responding and statements remaining out of date despite heavy parental involvement in annual reviews. However, as mentioned in other questions it really boils down to the skills of individual staff and a child can have positive...
involvement from a professional just as easily followed by negative involvement from a different professional depending on their individual skills, expertise and interests in the phase/timing of involvement rather than their professional denomination.

Development

When parents talk about either what has or what would help their child’s development, common themes emerge. The main one being need for both teachers to be trained and have a thorough understanding of autism and its complex forms and adapt/differentiate in the classroom accordingly, and for all staff in schools to have an awareness of autism and the child’s needs as they (attempt to) participate in school life outside of lessons.

Common blocking points or frustrations along with this include the statement and/or diagnosis process – centring around the children are not getting the appropriate support prior to or during this lengthy process. Knowledge or awareness of evidence gathering required can delay proceedings. The feelings mentioned previously are echoed again that special schools appear to cater for autistic children’s social and educational needs better than mainstream. Namely due to increased provision of direct support, a more accommodating physical environment, and full awareness from staff of the needs of the children and how to interpret their behaviour appropriately and respond positively.

Another area frequently covered is the need for support in developing social skills and having social opportunities in the wider community. Some parents recognise that their child’s educationally for life, but highlight these young people need more support in order to establish appropriate independent living skills and social skills to be able to form friendship and support networks in the community. With the Short Breaks and CAOT services were mentioned those were viewed very positively, although geographic proximity was a frustration for some. These services are needed for increased training to enable staff to lessen this impact.

Schools

As identified in the ‘How did we analyse what they said?’ section, with a response rate of 24.7% after the extension; the results are more accurate than the original response rate of 6.1%.

Schools are more confident with keeping children and young people with autism and/or communication needs safe, and preparing for transitions and educational achievement. They are less confident with providing the right physical environment, dealing with stress and anxiety and challenging behaviour. Several schools comment on a lack of physical space both in terms of providing a suitable quiet environment but also in terms of being able to break out and deliver individual interventions or manage challenging behaviour. Also several highlighted the fact that each child with autism is very much an individual and whilst they may be able to meet certain needs with one it may be less achievable with another, and indeed to meet the needs for one child over time as the needs change with maturity – although they insist principles are there. Comments also indicated they can meet the support needs of children identified as ASD2 but those at ASD3 are more challenging to break out and deliver individual interventions or manage challenging behaviour. Also, frequent comments are raised detailing positive involvement of pre-school involvement from a different professional as and when needed.

Comments raised references to not being able to access the provision for ‘Good’ and 20% ‘Outstanding’). The support least valued was the Resource Base provision which is ‘Good’ and 17% as ‘Outstanding’. Justifications mentioned staff now having a better understanding of his condition or seem keen to learn.”

“feel that with the right staff members at school he really thrives but with his class teacher … and one or two other class teaching and assistants they don’t seem to understand his behaviour and rather than calm him they aggravate him further. They don’t seem to have any understanding of his condition or seem keen to learn.”

Parents of autistic children need to talk more and 6 weeks holiday is a long time to keep kids amused, esp when they have little imagination and no friends to play with because they don’t have any.”

Transitions

63% of parents that responded found the transition review helpful. Comments from those that were found to be less helpful often focussed on the positive involvement of one party compared to a negative involvement from another party – for example the sending school preparing information that isn’t utilisé by the receiving schools, or the receiving school offering additional visits but the sending school not understanding the need for or actively supporting these visits. Where school moves then taken place, parents feel dissatisfaction the transition may also be less smooth with less effective involvement from one party.

Paperwork issues are raised again; with paperwork such as statements/plans arriving just before school holidays with little time for planning despite instigating the process early. Or plans being detailed but not carried out sufficiently. However parents are pleased to be involved and feel that, most of the time, they are listened to and their involvement is a key part of the process.

Frequent comments are raised detailing positive involvement of pre-school setting when transitioning to primary school, parents of younger children hope the transition to secondary school will be handled similarly.

“was offered to call at any time with questions and the teachers kept me informed of anything that would be happening. It was also based a lot on how my son felt and what he wanted.”

The negative comments seem to focus on referral and paperwork issues and delays, not being able to easily contact the team before the relationship is established, and a request for more time in comparison to that received by other SEN support services. Problems are raised with needing a medical diagnosis, and frustration that the diagnosis process is done by GPs/consultants who don’t see the child in school settings. There is uncertainty in who the team is for – a secondary school raising concerns that the team don’t support older children and a primary school frustrated that bases aren’t available until the child is in secondary. Two special schools suggest that the team is only for mainstream and that special schools are deemed to be ‘experts’ but in fact they still need specialist support. There are also frequent positive comments about the support from CAOT and one school requested a more formal link with CAOT and schools.

Opinions were divided in terms of whether changes should be made to the current arrangements of support available; 60% saying ‘Yes’ and 40%, saying ‘No’. The most frequent comments raised regarding issues mentioned the referral process particularly length of time between requesting and receiving support. In terms of ‘good ideas’ for changing the service, of those that provided them 40% focussed on the need to facilitate collaboration and sharing resources and ideas across both school clusters, phases and between mainstream and special. Several mainstream mentioned the benefits of having built up a relationship with the local special school to be able to ask questions as needed. 14% referenced the need for more training and CPD for both teachers and teaching assistants. Three schools raised the need to improve communications about what is available and where from.

“A sharing of resources from the resource bases, as I believe that some students benefit from mainstream schools but often the specialistmaterials eg social and communication aids ‘have to be either purchased or made for the individual schools, if there was a loan system this would save a great deal of money and time”

As training and awareness was noted by parents as an issue, it is interesting to compare that 48% of the schools that responded have accessed the service for staff support and 57% for staff training. Of those who rated it; 83% recorded the training as ‘Good’ or ‘Outstanding’ and only one as ‘Unsatisfactory’. However, as mentioned above, 14% have mentioned the need for more training to be available – all but two of those schools had not actually accessed training through the Autism & Communication Service. Perhaps this emphasises the importance of raising awareness of what is available and how to access it.

“I have an excellent relationship with the advisory teacher who is always very helpful and answers any queries I have.”
Emerging themes

Mainstream versus special
There were two conflicting strands emerging in opinions concerned with the immediacy and the future. Parents desire a society where their child can fit in, and both be accepted and access a wider community willing to make adaptations. Parents also desire a happy child whose needs are being met immediately, until wider society makes adjustments then it is felt specialist provision is required. Parents tended to be more positive about schooling when their child attended specialist provision, due to the increased understanding and levels of individual support. Children and young people’s comments on being happy in school also valued the relaxed atmosphere and individual support in non-mainstream provision. There was a strong desire across all responses for staff to seek to understand the condition and the implications that not doing this throws up during the school day. Of course, special schools do not have capacity to take every child and young person and this is where the special educational needs assessment process and statements comes in to identify and prioritise provision according to need. This process however holds frustrations for parents. There will always be disappointments when support is perceived as needed but thresholds are not met, and anxieties can run high. Opportunities for high levels of involvement once thresholds are met are appreciated but transparency of the impact of this is not so widely shared. Administrative processes are not as swift as desired often leaving parents in the dark, or otherwise feeling overly bureaucratic. If the administrative process for this can be run as smoothly as possible it would reduce some of the concerns raised. There were also concerns for the level of support received during the lengthy assessment process not being adequate, preventing effective early intervention and stunting development.

Social understanding and acceptance
Children and young people were happier where their friends and teachers understood their condition. Friendships are very important to young people to help them fit in and establish a sense of belonging, and bullying reinforces misunderstanding of their differences. Parents raised problems being heightened by a lack of both understanding and acknowledgement of what is ‘normal’ for an autistic child compared to their peers. Support in schools focuses on the educational side and less on the social side of life. CAOT provides a valuable service in this area but many parents/carers fear the day their child is too old for support, particularly as teenage years are proving socially challenging. The emotions expressed contain a mixture of frustration aimed at professionals who ‘should’ be more aware and disappointment at the public who ‘could’ be more aware. Parents are concerned about the social isolation that can be faced by their children if they stay within the haven of their home because people there understand them. Due to the structured nature, and it being a ‘known’ environment, children and young people also feel more comfortable socialising at school than in the wider community. The availability of teaching assistants or key workers to seek help from and smooth things over where necessary is also a factor in this. Only one young person was involved with the Promise Mentor service and yet the need for learning life skills and facilitating social opportunities, which this service can support in certain cases, was constantly referred to. It also brings into conflict the preference for securing special provision for education which is at odds to the desire to be able to participate in wider society. Until mainstream can understand autism and adapt, there will remain the wish to stay protected whilst desiring to be able to go it alone were circumstances different.

Awareness of support service
Awareness of services and training courses available seems to be patchy, with many parents commending on having to self refer/request rather than a lead professional signposting to other related services. Some were disappointed their GP did not direct them towards organisations that could help, and others were disappointed the school did not. Schools like to utilise existing relationships and not all seem aware of what is available to which services as well as to parents. Either way, a ‘menu’ of options easily accessible to both parents and professionals is key, and particularly notable here is ensuring and understanding of the thresholds or criteria for accessing the service and why. The Somerset Parent Carer Forum has developed a directory of services but whether this is easy enough for parents to find or user friendly enough might be worth considering. However, with developments under the Children and Families Act for a ‘Local Offer’ this will be considered not just for children with autism and communication needs but also children with any kind of special need.

Until a fully autistic friendly society is achieved autistic children and young people face anxiety in many day to day situations. Whilst many comments referenced the need to attempt to reduce the prominence of these situations, there were also several calls for training in coping mechanisms and managing anxiety and resulting challenging behaviour. Schools particularly didn’t feel adequately supported in this area. Such training would ‘oil the cogs’ so to speak in areas such as transitions and accessing opportunities in the wider community.

What will we do with this information?
The consultation has been conducted in parallel to writing the Strategy. The views gathered have been fed into the drafting process for the Action Plan supporting the new Somerset Autism Strategy for Children and Adults as they have been collated and summarised. A group made up of key people including parents, schools and charity representatives are using the survey information to inform future planning of services. In combination with stakeholders views (the organisations who work with children) and the outcomes data; the vision for and activities in the Strategy were informed, chosen and prioritised by the key messages emerging from all three.

Acronym Buster
Where acronyms are used in the text, the first time the acronym is written in full. However, a quick reference guide here may help:
CAOT – Children with Autism Outreach Team
PSFA – Parent and Family Support Advisor
SAHIP – Somerset Association of Headteachers of Specialist Provision
SAPHTO – Somerset Association of Primary Head Teachers and Officers
SASH – Somerset Association of Secondary Heads
SCC – Somerset County Council
SEN – Special Educational Needs
SENCO – Special Educational Needs Coordinator (a teacher in school)