

OxPCF Summary, Key Themes and Next Steps: EOTAS Listening Event 05.09.2024

The EOTAS (Education Other Than at School) session held on September 5, 2024, was facilitated by Oxfordshire County Council and the Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum, with support from the EOTAS/Personal Budget Support Group and SENDIASS Oxfordshire. This session illuminated several critical concerns, insights, and suggestions from parents and carers of children in Oxfordshire who are accessing EOTAS.

The discussions highlighted critical areas for improvement while showcasing the diverse experiences of families navigating this educational pathway. We appreciate the local authority's ongoing efforts and commitment to prioritising this issue, particularly in their aims to develop a clear policy and guidance. The feedback collected is vital for understanding the challenges these families face and identifying the necessary steps to enhance the EOTAS experience for both children and their caregivers.



To start off the listening event, a presentation was shared which focused on the experiences of 14 children and young people in Oxfordshire who either access or are considering education through EOTAS (Education Other Than at School). It was collated and presented by the Oxfordshire Parent Carers Forum.

Summary of the Presentation by OxPCF:

Key Points:

1. Pathways to EOTAS:

- 10 children have EOTAS, with others in various stages.
- Most required appeals or tribunal orders to secure their education outside of traditional schools.

2. Children's Ambitions:

- Children and young people who are waiting for EOTAS are generally more uncertain about their futures, while those at later stages generally are able to talk about their aspirations and have diverse goals such as becoming a robotics engineer, falconer, train driver, midwife, or running businesses.
- Hobbies and interests range from robotics, English literature, and gaming to foraging, cooking, and animal care.

3. Challenges Faced:

- Mental health struggles were common, often leading to school breakdowns.
- Distrust of local authorities (OCC) was prevalent among families.

4. Case Studies:

- Several examples highlight the complex journeys children faced, including issues including autism, mental health breakdowns, and difficulties in securing alternative education.

5. Positives of EOTAS:

- The children highlighted personal strengths and talents such as loyalty, creativity, independence, problem-solving, and passion for animals and history. Many also noted their improved well-being after transitioning to EOTAS.

The presentation underscores the importance of personalised support for these children and their families and reflects their varied experiences, ambitions, and needs.

Key Themes of the Listening Event

The recent listening event aimed to create a space for open dialogue and constructive feedback among participants. The insights gathered during this event are invaluable in shaping our understanding of community needs and aspirations.

Several key themes emerged from the discussions, each highlighting distinct perspectives and priorities:

1. Community Engagement and Participation

Many participants expressed a desire for more inclusive opportunities to engage in decision-making processes. This theme underscores the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment within the community.

2. Parental Voices and Trust

- A recurring theme was the need for parents to be listened to and believed by professionals. Parents expressed frustration over being gaslighted or dismissed and called for professionals to approach with a trauma-informed, curiosity-based lens.
- Frustration was also raised about clarity of communication, mixed messages and lack of clarity around many matters regarding EOTAS. A recurring example was regarding changing expectations around personal budget monitoring being applied retrospectively with no prior warning or communication with parents.
- There is a lack of transparency around decision-making processes, especially at panel meetings, with parents feeling excluded and left in the dark.

3. Crisis and Early Intervention

- Most families only reach EOTAS after a crisis, particularly for children with autism and mental health challenges. Parents emphasised the importance of early intervention, better support for Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), and building relationships with families to avoid crises. Stronger links between EOTAS policy and practice, EBSA and Alternative Provision were highlighted.
- Families report a constant feeling of threat of losing EOTAS provision which adds pressure on families, creating fear that their child will be forced back into an unsuitable school environment.

4. EOTAS as a Positive Pathway

- EOTAS is often perceived negatively by professionals, yet families believe it provides an inclusive, functional environment where their children can thrive. A paradigm shift is needed so EOTAS isn't seen as a last resort or failure but as a valid educational option.
- Parents highlighted that many children with EOTAS are academically able but struggle with trauma or mental health issues. Recognising EOTAS as a pathway to qualifications and success should be part of policymaking and reviews.

5. Flexibility and Personalisation

- Parents called for flexible pathways, suggesting EOTAS be tailored to the evolving needs of children. Annual Reviews (ARs) can be stressful for families, especially with the fear that their child may be forced back into school.
- The importance of personal budgets was stressed, with families requesting that personal budgets align with the AR process and reduce delays in receiving services.

6. Mental Health and External Support

- Mental health is at the heart of many EOTAS packages, and support services like MindJam were praised as essential to many families.
- The inclusion of external coordinators and psychological support for both the child and the family was highlighted as a crucial need for effective EOTAS delivery.
- Concerns were raised about inconsistent access to services, such as CAMHS, and safeguarding support within the EOTAS framework.
- There appeared to be a clear gap in Social Care support for families.

7. Professional Training and Accountability

- Professionals, including EHCP Casework Officers and external partners need more training on trauma, neurodivergence, and the intricacies of EOTAS. Building relationships between EHCP Casework Officers, children, and their families was seen as a way to reduce stress and prevent inappropriate consultations.
- Regular multi-professional meetings were recommended, with all voices (parents, professionals) being equally valued.

- Greater support, monitoring and accountability process are necessary, but they must not limit flexibility of packages and of professional networks to adapt swiftly to changes in direction of a child's package or replacing provision that is no longer appropriate or available.

8. Transparency and Communication

- Parents requested greater transparency from the OCC panel process, including who sits on panels and their training. Clearer communication around changes in policies and procedures was also flagged as a significant need to reduce anxiety among families.
- Silence from authorities was seen as problematic; families need to be communicated with regularly to understand where they stand in the process. Particularly when one stage ends, this needs to be communicated clearly to parents/carers e.g. non-school attendance systems and processes.

Introduction to Key Questions Addressed

As we explored the experiences of families navigating the journey toward Education Other Than At School (EOTAS), we posed several critical questions aimed at understanding the process and its impacts. This feedback was collated sensitively and accurately particularly by Dee Sitric (CEO of Autism Champions), who supported the group in the room, ensuring that the voices of families were effectively represented. The insights gathered provided valuable perspectives on what constitutes an effective and supportive pathway for children requiring alternative educational arrangements.

What Does a Good Journey Towards EOTAS Look Like?

A **positive journey towards EOTAS** is characterised by early identification of the child's needs, proactive intervention, and collaboration between professionals and families. This journey avoids crises by offering **timely support** and focusing on **relationship-building** with families and children. A good pathway involves transparency, **effective communication**, and respect for the parent's insights into their child's needs. Parents stressed that it should not feel like a last resort but rather a **well-considered and structured** option with the child's well-being at the forefront.

What is the Biggest Impact of a Successful Journey Towards EOTAS?

A successful journey towards EOTAS allows the child to **flourish in a supportive environment** that acknowledges their unique needs. Families reported that once EOTAS was in place, their children experienced:

- **Increased self-esteem** and engagement in learning.
- **Reduced anxiety** and better mental health outcomes.
- The development of **new skills** and confidence.
- Improved **academic performance** once the stress of school was removed.

It was noted that there are some EOTAS packages working well in terms of progress of the child or young person, multi-agency working, safeguarding etc.

At What Point Could Something Have Changed in Your Child's Journey?

Many parents identified **transition points** or **early warning signs** that should have triggered **earlier intervention**. Common feedback pointed to the following:

- **Lack of support during transitions** between key stages or schools, where children often started to struggle.
- Early signs of **school avoidance** or **anxiety** that were ignored or dismissed.
- Missed opportunities for **mental health support** before a crisis occurred.
- **Over-reliance on punitive measures**, such as exclusions or detentions, that worsened the situation instead of offering help.

What Could Have Been Different?

Parents shared that early intervention and a more collaborative approach could have made a significant positive impact on their child's journey. Key suggestions included:

- **Enhanced Training for School Staff**

Increased training on mental health, neurodivergence, and emotionally based school avoidance for school staff.

- **Effective Multi-Agency Support**

Earlier and better-coordinated involvement of services like CAMHS and educational psychologists, with an embedded, unified approach.

- **Flexible Schooling Options**

Recognition of varied learning environments before considering EOTAS, with improved links between EOTAS, EBSA, and Alternative Provision policy and practice.

- **Transparent Decision-Making**

Improved communication and transparency, engaging parents as equal partners in decision-making processes.

- **Alignment of Personal Budgets and Annual Reviews**

Ensuring personal budgets are closely aligned with Annual Review outcomes.

- **Greater Utilisation of the Third Sector**

Increased involvement of third-sector organisations to support families and services.

Next Steps for Oxfordshire County Council to consider

The session clearly outlined the **need and desire for co-production** between families and the local authority to create a more supportive EOTAS pathway. Moving forward, the following steps were proposed:

1. **Establish Regular Feedback Channels:** Create a structured process for families to provide feedback on their EOTAS experience, ensuring that their voices are heard and that their concerns inform decision-making.
2. **Co-Produce Solutions:** Work directly with families in **co-designing the EOTAS framework**, involving parents, young people, and professionals at every stage of the process to ensure policies and practices reflect the real needs of those affected, maintaining flexibility whilst providing structure, monitoring and accountability.
3. **Enhance Communication and Transparency:** Implement clearer communication channels between the local authority, professionals, and families, with transparent timelines and processes, including updates on policy changes or service availability.
4. **Training for Professionals:** Develop **mandatory training** programs for all professionals involved in EOTAS, with a focus on trauma-informed practices, neurodiversity, and mental health support.

5. **Mental Health Support Expansion:** Work with **CAMHS** and other mental health providers to expand access to mental health services for children in EOTAS, ensuring consistent, high-quality support.
6. **Social Care** – review of their role and appropriateness of their support for these families.
7. **Flexible, Child-Centered Approaches:** Foster more **personalised educational pathways**, allowing for greater flexibility in how EOTAS is delivered to meet the evolving needs of each child, including better utilisation of the Third Sector.

Conclusion

The session highlighted several key areas for improvement:

- **Enhanced Parental Involvement:** Building trust and fostering greater collaboration between parents and professionals.
- **Early and Flexible Intervention:** Implementing proactive measures to address issues before they escalate into crises.
- **Reframing EOTAS:** Viewing Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) as a valuable educational pathway rather than a fallback option.
- **Consistent Training and Communication:** Ensuring the local authority provides ongoing training and maintains transparency in decision-making and policy updates.
- **Co-Production and Dialogue:** Developing a more inclusive and supportive EOTAS framework through continuous dialogue between families and the local authority.
- **Ongoing Parental Involvement:** Keeping parents and carers engaged in shaping the key themes identified, which will guide the development of future policies.

Agreed Next Steps for all parties

Following the listening event, OxPCF and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) have collaborated to review the feedback shared during the event, which is summarised in this document.

Policy Update:

The EOTAS policy is currently in its draft stage and is being reviewed by Oxfordshire County Council, including the direct leadership team. It will be presented at the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee in November.

As discussed at the listening event, the policy has been drafted solely by Oxfordshire County Council. While the Oxfordshire Parent Carer Forum (OxPCF) had the opportunity to provide feedback and formally raise concerns about its potential impact on families, the process is not co-produced. This update is shared for your awareness before the policy is distributed more widely.

Guidance Update:

Oxfordshire County Council remains committed to ongoing collaboration with families and will be forming small working groups focused on the following themes:

- Personal Budgets
- Safeguarding/Early Intervention
- Coordination of Packages
- Monitoring/Oversight of an EOTAS Package
- Training and Development

A possible date of 13th January is being considered for these discussions. More information on these groups and how to get involved will be shared soon.