

Governor visit 4th November 2019, Gill Finch

Priority: Health and Wellbeing

Support for children with diabetes

Background

There are 4 children in school with diabetes whose condition and medication need to be constantly monitored and administered throughout the day.

As CHS is one of a number of schools in the county where the previous designation as MLD special schools has left them with no school nurse (and no likely access to a school nurse in the near future), the medical needs of the current cohort of children is met by a dedicated team of 10 TAs who all attended the meeting.

Some of the group have been trained by the specialist diabetic nurse and some by each other and some of the parents are extremely helpful, sharing books, guidance and advice they receive or buy.

The group of TAs are providing such exemplary medical support that they have been nominated by the specialist diabetic nurse for an award, recognising the quality of care they give.

The staff also commented on how well the children's escorts on school transport have committed to learning about their condition and monitoring and dealing with them during the journey to school, which could be a time when a child is struggling to balance their insulin levels; perhaps having had something like chocolate for breakfast.

Challenges

Some of the challenges the team discussed are:

Recruiting more TAs to share this responsibility can be challenging. The current group of 10 feels stretched to capacity. They described a situation where if a child in class is in crisis, and a diabetic child urgently needs support, then a difficult question of prioritising can occur. It can also be challenging to obtain a second trained person to support now that the 4 children (and their support) are in different parts of the school.

Accountability is a concern for every member of staff who undertakes this aspect of medical care. One of the team said 'We are this child's pancreas on legs'. All of the staff would appreciate a medical professional on site to whom they could turn for additional support or guidance, or to whom they could send a very poorly child in an emergency. Some parents are extremely supportive and can quickly get to school and take the child for expert medical help. Others work, and may not be available during the course of the school day. Consequently, the team's main focus has to be meeting the medical needs of these pupils, which is very different from the reason they took a Teaching Assistant role which was to support children's learning.

Additional pressure: Because each child is reliant upon one or two key workers who understand them, their medical needs, equipment and the warning signs associated with their condition, these workers feel particularly responsible to be present, even if they have a medical emergency or appointment of their own. Some staff feel unable to switch off from this responsibility and feel constantly vigilant and frequently anxious about issues connected to this additional responsibility. Some of the group mentioned 'being a healthcare assistant' and spoke about how worrying and demanding external visits and trips can be, whilst managing a child's needs. Lunchtimes can also be a challenging time to deal with insulin pumps and readings in a noisy, busy setting.

Following on

Staff are aware of the current inequitable allocation of school nursing capacity in the county's special schools. Karyn McMahon continues to attend meetings with the commissioner from the CCG and SEND team. So far the solution that has been offered is a telephone number of the school nurse based at Hexham Priory school. This will not help staff when they feel unsupported or have conflicting priorities in school; pagers may help staff to contact one another for urgent support.

The need for more equitable access to special school nurses was highlighted in the action plan that emerged from the recent SEND Inspection of the Local Authority by Ofsted. If no support is ever likely to be commissioned or forthcoming, the school is prepared to look at alternative ways of purchasing this support, but needs practical guidance.

Gill Finch accepted an offer from the staff to attend school and spend a day with them and some of the children they support, to log and capture 'a day in the life' of the staff and the children; the amount of time and expertise the role requires, and how much it impacts upon any other support they are able to give in a classroom.

I also agreed that it would be good to meet the parents (all but one of whom couldn't attend the meeting) to find out more about how much they value the team, and what this level of reliable, specialist, personalised support means to them. An additional meeting with parents has been arranged for Friday 15th November.

In writing this report for the governing body, we recognise and want to articulate the need for school nursing support to meet the changing needs of the current pupil population, to demonstrate the responsive medical support being provided and to start a discussion about how we can improve the quality of support for the wellbeing of both the children and the staff who care for them. The school is very fortunate to have such dedicated, professional staff willing to develop their skills and capacity in this way.