



The Independent Helpline for Special Educational Needs

## **Annual Report for the period 1 October 2006 to 30 September 2007**

### **Introduction**

SOS! Special Educational Needs (SOS!SEN), having been granted formal charitable status on 9 December 2005, has increased its profile considerably, certainly since its inception in October 2002. Its reputation has grown to the extent that referrals to its Helpline now come from Lancashire, Lincolnshire and Kent, in addition to the traditional heartlands of Greater London.

It continues to provide a Helpline that operates principally from its offices at 35 Staines Road in Twickenham but also from the homes of a range of advocates who man the service. That Helpline provides help and guidance to parents whose children have special educational needs.

Whilst its core aims and objectives are unchanged, the flavour of those referrals has widened, reflecting the increasing difficulty for parents to obtain Legal Aid, following the change in legislation that took effect in April 2006.

### **Objectives**

The objects of SOS!SEN are the relief of carers and children with special educational needs within the London Borough of Richmond-upon-Thames and the South of England, but not excluding other areas in England and Wales where the needs arises, by the provision of information, practical assistance and advice and such other exercises as the trustees shall deem necessary with a view to meeting the educational needs of their children and improving their conditions of life.

### **Advisers to SOS!SEN**

Bankers: NatWest, Teddington  
Solicitors: SEN Legal Ltd; Fisher Meredith

### **Links with other Charities and Organisations**

Historical links still exist with VIPs in SEN, a Twickenham based organisation that supports parents whose children have special educational needs. And close working links continue to exist with MAPS, a charity in Kingston who help parents of children on the Autistic Spectrum.

Contact has also been established recently with Network 81, a charity based in Suffolk, who offer a similar service to SOS!SEN. Whilst there are minor differences in the way support is provided, the aims of each organisation are almost identical and closer links could emerge over time.

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In all cases, these links enable all parties to benefit from research each carries out and from the experience each gains.

### **Summary of main activities and achievements**

The SOS!SEN Helpline still remains the chief source of enquiries from parents. During the year, around 3,000 calls were fielded, of which about 1,200 of which were completely new referrals. However, increasingly, the charity's email address is being used, bringing in many more queries from anxious parents. Over 10,000 emails were dealt with during the year.

Many of those who contact SOS!SEN had queries that could be dealt with quickly but others became Cases where the parent/carer needed more specific help in obtaining more appropriate provision for their child who has special educational needs. On occasions it has been possible to resolve these either with the school or the Local Authority's SEN Department. But in other cases, it has been necessary for the parents to take the Case to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST). SOS!SEN is committed to supporting parents through the entire process.

### **Meetings**

SOS!SEN continues to run Workshops for parents and other interested parties. These Workshops typically address the obstacles and pitfalls that parents face when they are not happy with their child's provision and/or the school they are currently attending. Speakers at these Workshops are experts in the field of SEN and the sessions usually include a Mock Tribunal; the Workshops highlight the practical elements of the journey through which parents have to travel.

In addition, many smaller meetings have been held that address more specific elements such as Statement writing, drawing up Reasons for Appeal and preparing Case Statements.

### **Fund Raising**

Obtaining Grants continues to be difficult, since most major funders look to support particular projects, rather than to adopt a particular Case or family. Consequently, during the year, SOS!SEN has held a variety of fund raising events such as a Sponsored Walk, a performance by a Drama Group, a Pop Concert, a Quiz, not forgetting the smaller, but no less significant, activities such as coffee mornings and having collecting boxes in local shops. Income from the two major Workshops held during the year produced much needed funds.

Converting the charity's offices in Twickenham to establish a Children's Clothes and Toy Shop is proving to be a real success. Only opened in September 2007, it is

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already proving very popular with families with young children, since there is no other charity shop locally that sells things specifically for children. And what is more encouraging is that initial signs are that income from the shop is going some way to meeting the office rental.

Total funds raised during the year were 60% up on the previous year, reflecting the increased fund raising activity. But, more importantly, and using some of the charity's reserves brought forward, SOS!SEN was able to double the amount it was able to use to support parents pay for professional fees. SOS!SEN continues to provide the advice it gives without charge and its policy remains that no charge is made for drawing up Reasons for Appeal, writing Case Statements or representing parents at Tribunal.

### **Conclusion**

SOS!SEN remains committed to supporting parents and carers to get the right support and the best educational setting for their children. Formally establishing the Helpline Office, and building the attendant infrastructure, has absorbed a large chunk of the charity's reserves. Despite this, 86% of its expenditure was spent providing direct support to those families who sought the charity's help during the year. As always, the amount able to be allocated in this way is directly proportionate to the funds raised; the more that is raised or donated, the more children will benefit.

Martin Dean  
6 February 2008