

LOCAL AREA CASE STUDY

In Wakefield, we are strengthening mediation as part of the SEND AP Change Programme to improve outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. Disagreements between families and local authorities can sometimes lead to stressful and costly tribunals, so we are focusing on making mediation a more accessible and collaborative way to resolve issues quickly and fairly.

Aim

Families of children with special educational needs often face disagreements with local authorities about the support their child should receive, and these disagreements can sometimes lead to tribunal hearings, which are stressful, expensive, and take a long time to resolve. Mediation offers a way to work together and find solutions without going to tribunal, but many families didn't know about it or didn't feel confident using it, and services varied depending on where you lived.

This project set out to change that by making mediation easier to access, more consistent, and more helpful for everyone involved. Our key aim is to improve the process so that families and local authorities can resolve disagreements in a more positive and collaborative way, reducing the need for tribunals and helping children and young people get the support they need more quickly, without unnecessary stress or conflict.



What We Did

To make this happen, we introduced new roles, including a **Dispute Resolution Officer**, to strengthen staffing and provide dedicated support for families. We reinforced our communication strategy and delivered enhanced training for **SENART** staff and health colleagues to ensure everyone involved understood the process and could support families effectively.

We worked closely with our mediation provider to identify gaps and improve data collection, so we can plan better and monitor progress. We also focused on timely management of mediation cases and introduced improvements to make follow-up work easier after mediation.

Training and workshops were delivered successfully, helping staff feel more confident in supporting families. We also built strong working relationships with partners such as Wakefield and Collis, which has been key to improving outcomes.



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Impact

The changes we introduced have made a real difference for families. This year, more families chose mediation instead of going to tribunal, which means disagreements were resolved more quickly and with less stress. In recent months, we have also seen more issues being sorted out even before mediation takes place. This shows that our early conversations and better communication are working.

Parents have told us they feel listened to and supported, and local authorities have noticed stronger relationships with families. We have also made it easier to follow up after mediation so that decisions are put into action quickly. Staff training and workshops have given teams the confidence to handle disagreements in a positive way.

Behind the scenes, we have improved how we plan and track progress by creating a new Dispute Resolution Officer role, strengthening communication strategies, and working with our provider to improve data collection. These steps help us manage cases on time and make sure families get the right support as soon as possible.

Although there are still challenges, such as the rising number of appeals linked to limited SEND provision, we are making real progress in reducing conflict, building trust, and helping children and young people get the help they need sooner.

Challenges

We have seen a rise in appeals, often linked to the limited availability of specialist SEND places, which creates pressure on placements and leads to more disputes. We are addressing this by improving communication with families and focusing on a step-by-step approach to resolve issues earlier. Demand for placements remains high, and while we cannot always meet this immediately, better engagement with families before mediation is helping to manage expectations and reduce conflict.

Next Steps

We will continue to review decisions to understand how many cases go to mediation and why, so we can intervene earlier.

We plan to strengthen family engagement before mediation, improve communication, and provide ongoing staff training to support families after decisions have been made.

Our goal is to keep building trust, reduce appeals, and make sure every child gets the right support as quickly as possible.