

## **APPGA Meeting – 26<sup>th</sup> January 2022**

### **Welcome by Huw Merriman MP (APPG Chair)**

Thanked everyone for attending, stressed the importance of the work of the APPG especially ahead of the SEND review.

Spoke about the support for the APPG across Parliament, and the work that MPs do through their casework in supporting autistic people and their families, particularly children in education settings.

Need to make sure that autistic pupils are not left behind, highlighted the Left Stranded Report showing the impact of the pandemic - on mental wellbeing and the inequalities faced by autistic people.

### **Tim Nicholls - Head of Policy, Public Affairs and Research Partnerships at the National Autistic Society**

The Government is due to set out its proposals to improve the support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England in its upcoming SEND review.

Urgent reforms are needed for the 160,000 autistic pupils in schools in England (of whom 70% are in mainstream schools) to address the issues which have only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

During summer 2021, the National Autistic Society ran a survey of 3,470 parents and carers of autistic children and young people, and a parallel survey of 605 autistic children and young people in England.

Shared the following findings from the report

- A quarter (26%) of parents waited over three years to receive support for their child.
- Three quarters (74%) said their child's school place did not fully meet their needs – this has almost doubled since 2017.
- Only one in four parents are satisfied with the special educational needs support their child is receiving.
- Less than half of autistic children are happy in school.
- 44% feel their child's special educational needs are not being met in general.
- Seven in ten autistic children and young people said school would be better if more teachers understood autism.

### **Will Quince MP (Minister for Children and Families - Department for Education)**

Minister thanked the Chair and APPG for organising the session and inviting him. Spoke about his experience supporting children through his parliamentary casework.

Said that the upcoming SEND review, is an incredibly important step in supporting autistic pupils.

Noted that due to expected Parliamentary votes which clashed with the meeting he would have to leave the meeting to vote but would return as soon as able.

## **Dr Vaso Totsika (University College London) Presented on Analysis of School Attendance Problems**

Presented preliminary findings from study on school attendance in children with neurodevelopmental conditions a year on from COVID-19.

Known that prior to COVID, children with neurodevelopmental conditions had more difficulties than other children in attending school regularly. Data, including from the Department for Education, that persistent absence (missing 10% or more of available sessions) was approximately 11% of all children in England, but for children with SEND needs or those in special schools, identified as autistic through their EHCPs persistent absence is at higher levels.

This is not unique to the UK and similar studies have found parallels in Australia. Analysis of the data is still ongoing and results mentioned may change. The study looked at 1,076 children with neurodevelopmental conditions, (80% of whom were autistic), measured absence by asking which days in May 2021 the child was absent from school.

Absence is a systemic phenomenon rather than something for individual children. Categorised by type of absence, according to who/what instigates on the day -

- Ill health
- Child (refusal)
- School (exclusion)
- Parent (withdrawal)
- COVID-19

Key findings:

- Children with neurodevelopmental conditions are still finding it hard to go to school regularly
- Type of absence - child refusal and school exclusion were higher among students with persistent absence
- Schools were well prepared to cater for children with additional physical health problems, schools likely supported attendance for children with hyperactivity and where families experience difficulties of their own.
- Child anxiety was important for persistent absence and refusal but not for other types of absence.
- Positive parent-teacher relationship appears to reduce the likelihood of school absence, persistence absence, refusal and school exclusion.
- Covid impact is still felt in schools.
- Not all absence is the same: need to understand better and offer customised supports.
- Need to bridge the gap: unmet needs lead to anxiety in some children and externalising behaviours in other children.
- A focus needs to be on building bridges with families, as rewards will be seen across all areas.

## **Ieuan - Autistic young person spoke about his experience in education**

Diagnosed with autism at 4.  
Talked about misunderstandings between himself and teachers.  
Not being able to make connections with other students.  
Took until his GCSE's to finally get someone who could fully support him, helped to get him back on track so he was able to do his GCSE's and A Levels  
Hopes that those in education currently have a better experience than he did and that the barriers people face start to come down .  
Endorsed the recommendations of the National Autistic Society School Report  
The Ambitious About Autism Network requested to be able to meet with the minister to be share more of their experiences.

### **Will Quince MP (Minister for Children and Families - Department for Education)**

Apologised for disruption due to votes and clashing commitments, Minister offered to attend again to host another Q&A session.

Took Questions from the meeting chat:

*How will you through the SEND review make sure that local authorities are implementing the Children and Families Act?*

Investment in mainstream is part of this, early identification and support.  
Biggest criticism of the previous reforms and the current system is accountability.  
Looking to strengthen this in the SEND review. How the system can be held to account.  
Talked about how heart-breaking leuan's testimony was, how his parents had to fight - minister doesn't want any family having to fight. So many families can't.  
Improvement of accountability  
Happy to meet with leuan and the group.

*How will the SEND Review look at support for children who don't meet the threshold for an EHC Plan?*

Too many parents feel they need to fight the system for an EHCP, they shouldn't have to. The support should be there.  
Making sure the support comes down,  
It could be more units in mainstream settings - if the right setting is mainstream and that's the right place for the child then the support needs to be in place.  
Where the need is special provision - we have to do this as well.  
Key is transparency and accountability.  
Need to remove the inconsistency around the country - parents anywhere should be able to see clearly what they are able to access from school and local authority

Closing Remarks:

Encourages those who are passionate and experts to feed into this.  
To try and get this into the best possible place, unable to please everyone but want to get people to feel this is the right direction to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

## **Alison Worsley - Director of External Affairs, Ambitious About Autism**

Importance of having autistic voices front and centre, everything she will talk about is drawn from Ambitious about Autism's work which centres the voices of children and young people.

Wealth of information in the report (NAS School Report) on the impact the system and lack of support is having on autistic young people.

8 years on from the Children and Families Act in 2014, some of the scale of the challenge bears repeating:

163,000 children with a primary need of autism.

35,000 new referrals for diagnoses for under 25s to the NHS last year

A growing challenge, and we have to do better for autistic people in our schools.

A need for well rounded, supported and enriching school experiences.

What they have and what they want are different - they just want their basic rights - to be able to feel okay in school and be able to progress.

Right support in the right places and was glad to hear the minister to say this earlier.

Local school - government is saying that every school should be a SEN school

Said the question needs to be what needs to change to achieve that vision.

There's a lot of shared values in the sector - parliamentary colleagues will expect to see coalitions and partnership work on this moving forward together

5 things based on the recommendations of autistic children and parents as well as drawing from research:

### To make the quality of send support a limiting Ofsted judgement

Getting the accountability into the system. Believe that schools shouldn't be able to get good or outstanding unless their send support is good or outstanding. Until all schools see themselves as quality providers of send support, Autistic children will be disadvantaged

### To track and publish SEND spending at all levels

We need to know how spending is being used so we can see where it goes and where it would make the most positive difference

Requiring publishing on SEND spend and what it is used for.

Increased funding for increased need.

### Publish inclusion not just exclusion guidance

Minister said in first introduction, schools not always taking an inclusive approach.

Exclusions of autistic children doubled in the last 10 years.

No national level and leadership directing thinking of inclusion

High level expectations that including children with SEND in the job of every school.

### Strengthening health and care duties in the Children and Families Act

Families of Autistic children with health need, can't get the additional support that they need. Parity across Education, Health and Care

For Education Health and Care Plans to become Employment Health and Care Plans after education to provide support all the way through.

Support all the way through,

we lose all the gains people make in school and further education when this support ends at the moment Autistic young people are leaving education and looking for work.

Only 21.7% of Autistic adults are in employment, the lowest of any group of disabled people.

Need to support young people with that final lift into the world of work.

Many more things that could be recommended, we believe those are part of this as well. But these are the 5 things that autistic children and young people are saying through their work.

### **Huw Merriman MP (APPG Chair)**

Autism strategy brings young people into this mechanism of change. Key is making sure that change is being delivered.

Took questions from the group to put to speakers.

Teacher Training - a recommendation from previous APPGA inquiry is that there should be training for teachers and headteachers with ongoing funding and this should be monitored by Ofsted.

*Question from Joanne: Schools need to be told to prioritise training, what experiences are the speakers picking up on this and is the training now occurring?*

**Alison Worsley** - Over the last 10 years a lot more training has been put in place for teachers and broader school support staff. Autism Education Trust (Ambitious About Autism and NAS) supported by the Department for Education has been supporting hundreds of thousands of professionals over that time. Training is only part of this, school staff need the time and space to embed this within their work. Understanding how they can apply training to create better outcomes. Need for a more coherent approach and sharing across and between local areas.

**Tim Nicholls** - Reflection, more training has been happening and it is the case that some schools and areas are working well. We don't have the consistency across the country. Government should set a goal that every teacher has autism training by a set date, not just new teacher but those already in the profession. It's what autistic children and their parents say would have the most impact. There is huge appetite from teachers for this.

**Ieuan** - from his experiences it differs completely based on what school you go to, and the individuals in those schools. Relying on one teacher or support worker. Thinks there needs to be more consistent approach to training, ongoing not just one offs.

*Zoe Parkinson: Who's fault is it that these children aren't able to attend school?*

**Dr Vaso Totsika** - not something that one person does. This is a system, and this is something that happens within a system. A range of factors contribute, and interactions between the systems. The failure is in the system, not with an individual.

*There are no EHCPs in Wales, why is this and what provision is there in Wales?*

**Tim Nicholls** - Children and families act is England only, as education is a devolved issue, In Wales they have brought forward the Additional Learning Needs Bill, which has brought in similar. Tiered support like a statement used to in England. Same concept.

*Hearing fantastic presentations but application on the ground is limited, how can we fix this?*

**Tim Nicholls** - different roles to be played by different people. Ofsted and the CQC doing their inspections should continue, what needs to happen is that when areas are given statements of action that they are resisted and acted upon and this drives something for the local area. For example, Department for Education could approach them and give them targeted support. Direct for what the local area needs to do well.

Work to be done to improve commissioning, how can government make sure that councils have the powers that it needs to to make things happen in their local area. Thinking about the kids that live in area rather than just children in a certain academy trust or set of schools.

**Alison Worsley** - mentioned two areas of accountability in her presentation, limited Ousted judgement and tracking spending and impact. Agrees with Tim on local area inspections, raises comments from the chat which ask about consequences and accountability following these local inspections.

*Question about the bridge to college, once school stops what are the options and support for autistic young people?*

**Ieuan** – In his personal experience, aspiration from school and careers support was quite low. Wasn't until later when he had that personalised support that he was able to complete his education and move on with his education. Some people around autistic young people have low aspirations for autistic people and this can really impact them.

### **Huw Merriman MP (APPG Chair)**

Grateful for all of the comments and questions.

This is a deeply important issue for MPs, from their personal experiences as well as helping their constituents through casework. This is why the APPG is so large.

Recommendations, govt have agreed to fold in to the strategy. Key now is to ensure things are done and we make sure that it is enforced. Implications where that doesn't occur.

There is obviously a need for more funding. Must allow the system to not just say there is not enough funding. We must always challenge to make sure that funding that exists is being spent well to help autistic young people.

A lot of focused in placed on specialist schools, and this should not be a reason for mainstream schools to be below the standards that we expect. Why can't a mainstream school provide the offer and what do they need to be able to deliver that.

A need to keep young people in the school system, there are far too many exclusions because schools have not made the adjustments to support a young person.

APPGA will hold the Minister to his commitments and continue to work to make sure that the government is working to improve the system for autistic children and their families.