

## **Planned Agenda**

APPG on Autism – Education Meeting 12<sup>th</sup> September 2023

Time	Item
17:00 – 17:05	Opening remarks from the APPGA Chair – Sir Robert Buckland MP
17:05 – 17:15	Speaker – Parents experience of EHCP Process – Lisa Lloyd and Michelle Cox
17:15 – 17:25	Reflections on SEND and AP Improvement plan from charities – Jake Runacres (National Autistic Society) and Danae Leaman-Hill (Ambitious about Autism)
17:25 – 17:35	Discussion on actions to take on issue of EHCPs delays
17:35 – 17:45	Speaker – Autism Education Trust training programmes – Sarah Broadhurst
17:45 – 17:55	Discussion on increased calls for mandatory autism school staff training
17:55 – 18:00	Closing remarks from Robert Buckland
18:00	Meeting ends

The agenda was altered on the day due to votes in parliament meaning chair Sir Robert Buckland was delayed. The National Autistic Society's Head of Policy and Campaigns, Mel Merritt (MM) chaired the meeting until Sir Robert arrived.

We started with reflections on SEND and AP improvement plan from charities. This was delivered by Jake Runacres (JR) from the National Autistic Society and Danae Leaman-Hill (D L-H) from Ambitious about Autism.

### **Introduction (JR)**

- The Send and AP improvement plan was urgently needed as the SEND system is currently failing the over 180,000 autistic children in schools.
- More than a quarter of parents told us they waited over three years to receive support for their child, three quarters of them told us that their child's school place did not fully meet their needs.
- It is welcome, that the government recognises that work needs to be done, however we are concerned that the provisions and improvements in the plan are not enough to end the system-wide failings which are leaving autistic children and their families on the edge of crisis.

### **Educational Health and Care Plans (JR)**

- We are pleased that the plan included the proposal to introduce a new process for Educational Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). EHCPs are vital to getting the right support in place for autistic children in school. Without these plans, parents lack the legal footing to request reasonable adjustments, and cannot access personal budgets.
- We support the notion of a standardised, and digitised version of the EHCP process. We are also pleased that the Department for Education has engaged with the sector in the development of this, it is vital that the continuing work of the SEND improvement plan engages extensively with the charity sector, as well as involves the experience and views of disabled people.
- It is concerning, however, that this proposed process will not be introduced until 2025. As this fails to address the urgent crisis impacting families across the country. Statutory guidance dictates that after a request for an EHCP is made, it should take no more than 20 weeks to get the support in place yet according to the latest Department for Education figures, just 61% of plans meet this threshold.
- Without further action, disabled children and their families are being left without the support they need.

## **Training (JR)**

- Research by the National Autistic Society shows that seven in 10 autistic children and young people said school would be better if more teachers understood autism. We are therefore glad to see that the Government is committed to expanding training of new staff.
- The plan includes commitments to train up to 5000 early years special educational needs coordinators' and 400 educational psychologists. These are valuable improvements.
- However, these proposals do not go far enough. Without proper understanding from all school staff, autistic pupils are left without the proper support they need.
- National Autistic Society research shows that whilst 87% of teachers said they were confident supporting autistic pupils, only 14% of secondary school teachers had received more than half a day's autism training.
- Autistic children frequently tell us that teachers do not understand their needs, and this can lead to unnecessary exclusions, poor attendance and damaging impacts on the child's mental health
- Whilst we welcome commitments to additional training, we believe the government must go further and introduce mandatory autism training for all school staff.

## **Local Area-Partnerships (D-LH)**

- Welcomed the introduction of the nine local area partnerships as part of the change programme and will continue to work with DfE to evaluate the benefits
- Positive that it drew on the views of CYP & parents and that there was a commitment to co-production – thoughts of sector considered in changes, hope this continues.

## **Implementation of the Plan (D-LH)**

- In 2019, the National Audit Office report on SEND told us that the reforms introduced in the 2014 Children and Families Act were correct, but implementation had not been sufficiently funded.
- This is a story that we hear often, the guidance, and the legislation is often adequate, but the implementation and enforcement is lacking, often due to funding issues.
- The SEND and AP Improvement plan represented an opportunity to correct that problem. The plan could have introduced new responsibilities and duties on service providers. It could have provided extensive funding to deliver the reforms in the Children and Families Act. However, the plan

appears to be a downgrading of the vision outlined in 2014.

- We are disappointed that the government has not chosen to take this opportunity to transform the SEND system by delivering substantial funding and new legal requirements.

#### **Conclusion (DL-H)**

- There is much that we like about the SEND and AP Improvement plan. We are also supportive of the approach that has been taken to include charities in this work, and would like to see this approach continue throughout the next few years of implementation.
- However, we can speak on behalf of the SEND sector and in particular Autism charities in saying that we are concerned that it does not go nearly far enough to deal with the failings of the SEND system which is leaving families on the brink of crisis.
- We are urging the government to consider further measures, such as increased funding and the introduction of mandatory autism training for all school staff.

MM opened it up to a discussion for all in the room on any thoughts on the SEND and AP plan and what actions the government are and should be taken.

#### **Helen Anderson recounted the experience of seeking support for her son Gordon and herself:**

- They waited far too long for a diagnosis.
- Helen felt the council doesn't support to disabled people and they don't want to know about issues. Staff were often dismissive and insulting and insinuated that their child didn't have a disability against the better judgement of Helen and Gordon.
- Things are not put in place for autistic people. People make assumptions about people with hidden disabilities, and as a result they get treated badly.
- Helen believe teachers should do four years of training on different conditions before they become teachers. Autism centres should be built across the country, to get the resources, information and support to those who need it.
- Helen wrote to Dame Cheryl Gillan in years previous, and from there got a foot in the door with the National Autistic Society and engaging with the community. No one makes clear that things like this exist.

### **Jo Minchin Co-chair of the APPGA advisory group:**

- As an autistic parent with autistic children. Getting the EHCP to be followed is really difficult and comes down to people who aren't trained and a lack of funding.

Many in the room shared similar stories of difficulties raising issues at school with teachers, fighting to get the disability report and getting an appropriate school place. Always having to fight and finding local authorities are not interested in helping. There is a lack of support and signposting.

Sir Robert Buckland MP arrived

### **Sir Robert apologised for being late due to votes in parliament and opened by giving an overview of his own experience and why this is so important**

- Familiar territory for me. I was involved in Children & Families Act in 2014, and development of EHCPs.
- As a parent of an autistic child, has lived and continue to live this. The stories of parents are vital – without that we can't make the system better
- EHCPs were an improvement but there are still too many issues.
- The realities for many families and parents are stark and deeply worrying.
- We need strength of provision to get EHCPs, but also for them to be properly implemented.

Sir Robert then handed over to Lisa Lloyd (LL) and Michelle Cox (MC) from the campaign group SEND Reform who reflected on their experiences of acquiring EHCPs and getting support for their autistic children.

### **Lisa Lloyd**

- Here as a parent of two autistic children, one at mainstream school and one at a SEND school. On behalf of Finley, and all other autistic children who wouldn't be able to be here. It would be too much for him.
- Journeys most places cause distress, no one can see he struggles.
- He is verbal, reads and writes and began school advanced for his age.
- He wasn't disruptive so he was overlooked, until year 2 when he was no longer able to mask at school.
- Applied for an EHCP unsuccessfully, school helped gather evidence for another year. Told by the SENCO they would have to let him fail in order to get the EHCP.

- Once they finally got the EHCP, he had access to support and sensory rooms and more one to one support.
- Now is happy, confident but two years behind.
- Why are we waiting for children to fail before we implement support?
- Recognise that we have been one of the lucky ones, many are refused for EHCPs. No care is given to the mental health of children. The knock-on impact is more school avoidance, no qualifications
- Autistic children shouldn't have to battle, they should be able to thrive in an environment that works for them.

### **Michelle Cox**

- Here as mother of two non-verbal autistic boys
- Found the process of getting the EHCP easy – both got plans within the 20 weeks. However, getting the support after that was far too difficult.
- Eldest son now attends an 'incredible' SEND school. But was left in limbo for a year whilst getting a place.
- Mainstream was unable to meet his needs, even the SENCO had little experience with complex needs. Classroom was full of risks.
- The idea of 'inclusion' was for him to use a separate door. Advised to keep him home from school from sports day as he wouldn't be able to participate. Felt relieved that her son didn't understand what had been said.
- Learnt Makaton at home, working hard to implement what son needed. This wasn't replicated at nursery – felt like she was teaching them how to support.
- Youngest son at the local SEND school that can meet his needs. Despite all of this, case was rejected at provision panel – on the basis that it was an 'inefficient use of resources'. Being written off, going back to panel this month. If accepted the waiting list could be two-three years, this could mean he could be out of correct provision for seven years.
- Provision is impossible to access even for those with significant needs.
- Families struggle with wider consequences – not knowing if or when a place will be provided, the strain placed on family relationships and finances.
- Son is thriving in his SEND school, unlike in mainstream.
- EHCPs work for children like mine but only when they are implemented by staff who understand and have the resources to meet the need.

- SEND Reform group have started a petition calling for reform to fix the SEND system that has gathered 83,000 signatures in just a few months. These are not unique cases.
- The proposed reduction plan for ECHP will be devastating for children and young people
- Chronic underfunding is the major issue.

**Sir Robert gave reflections on LL and MC stories:**

- So frustrating to fight to get the EHCP and then you find the provision isn't there.
- Recommendations in the NAS Education report are important for examples, the good practice of Cullum Centres and setting up an autism school places task force. These are worth saying, and worth acting and give a platform to campaign on, to make sure that the scarce resources that there are being used well.

Sir Robert opened this up again to a discussion for those in the room to feedback.

**Contributions from those in attendance included:**

- Even once they've got a tribunal ruling, the shortage of special school places – both locally and nationally means the trauma of tribunal, isn't the end of the fight.
- Parents aren't given the information and support they need, they are not trained professionals.
- Teacher training in the past had nothing on autism, or additional training whilst being a teacher.
- There are examples of places getting it right – all staff trainings, including governors. Not just funding, it's also the attitudes. A lottery of staff and experiences.
- There is only a small budget for special education needs, and there is so much demand.
- Forcing children into the wrong setting that isn't right for them is not inclusion. Needs are not being met which leads to exclusions.
- Takes local leadership and vision as well as the national framework and vision.

**Sarah from Autism Education Trust (AET)**

Due to time constraints we were not able to hear the speech from Sarah Broadhurst on AET training programmes.

Sarah instead read an impactful poem from one of AET's young experts,

**Sir Robert concluded the meeting:**

- What we need to take from the meeting is not just that everything is terrible, but also looking forward to do something concrete to change the system.
- The recommendations from the National Autistic Society Education Report, and the work of the Cullum centres gives us something to rally around.
- The APPGA will write to government about the meeting, to hold them to account and ask for more. Asking for something that will make savings.
- Thanked everyone for coming, especially to parents who shared personal testimony in the surroundings.