



APPGA Meeting on SEND Reforms

Date: Wednesday 3rd June

Time: 17:30-18:30

Location: Room N, Portcullis House

Attendance:

Alison Hume MP (Chair)

Lord Touhig (Officer)

Baroness Browning (Officer)

Minister Georgia Gould MP

Baroness Watkins

Shockat Adam MP

Hannah Spencer MP

Gideon Amos MP

Vikki Slade MP

Notes:

1. Welcome and introductions from the Chair, Alison Hume MP

Alison introduced the meeting and began with recognition that many members had conducted their own surveys and consultations with constituents in recent months. A survey by the National Autistic Society found that 8 out of 10 autistic adults don't trust the government reforms, so Alison is keen to discuss with the Minister how we can ensure trust is rebuilt.

Baroness Browning expressed concerns that while the government may provide more services, these will be very generic and not adequate in

supporting autistic people, particularly for those with low incidence but high needs who will only be supported at crisis point.

Alison suggests they ensure ambitions are high and that staff receive autism specific training.

Danae Leaman-Hill (Ambitious About Autism) suggested we ask about looking for further information holistic package around needs assessments and community inclusion.

Lord Touhig raised concerns around employment opportunities for autism. He noted the government has consistently responded around neurodiversity instead of specifically around autism.

Vikki Slade adds that current teacher training provisions are too short (half a day). The paper needs to be more explicit and the curriculum breadth more holistic. She's glad the curriculum looks more exciting, but not if it isn't specific.

2. Schools Minister Georgia Gould MP shares remarks on SEND Reforms and Consultation Period

Alison Hume welcomed the Minister, who apologised for being late as her previous meeting overran. Alison welcomed her engagement during the long consultation and summarised the previous discussion. She highlights that accountability must be better and the workforce capacity must be improved. She referenced the experiences of NAS' Young Campaigners, and the danger of lack of support, especially post-diagnosis. She adds that trust is a big issue, and while engagement has been good it is clear there is still more work to be done.

The Minister says she is keen for the meeting to be a discussion and has really valued the engagement from young people and families this far. She acknowledged concerns about not being understood by settings, feeling isolated from peers, families feeling powerless and the amount of energy they spend fighting, as well as the issue of female masking and gaps in understanding this.

She said that over a year of engagement has tried to understand these positions, with SEND reforms and wider education reforms hoping to move to a more holistically inclusive education system. She then outlined the "Experts at Hand" offer and mentioned they are expecting more information to come

out soon. The Experts at Hand offer will be supported by special schools, with the expert panel to provide greater detail on what this might mean.

The Minister adds that they are starting to shift more funding from the high needs block into mainstream budget. She acknowledged that people want to feel seen and understood. She also mentioned that teacher training is an idea coming from young people.

The Department for Education received almost 10,000 submissions through consultations and events, so the next few months will be about understanding the response but also going ahead with reforms such as teacher training and experts at hand. Teacher training will go ahead, informed by the Neurodiversity Task and Finish Group (TfG), with inclusion strategies from LAs being processed now. The Minister emphasised that she wants to do this with the sector and families and young people.

3. Questions and answers with the Minister: Chaired by Alison Hume MP

Baroness Browning expressed concern for how autistic children will be identified or be included in a wider neurodiversity framework. She explained that autism is different, has its own act of parliament and should be handled uniquely. It is a spectrum and the high-functioning, low-incidence are the ones very likely to spiral and should be protected.

The Minister said that she wants there be needs-led approach before diagnosis through a needs assessment through a newly developed model.

The Experts at Hand program would be deployed to lead interventions at the beginning of concerns/crisis, with the specialist layer the final stage of support through SPPs. She stressed that they are not lumping children together but focusing on needs

Baroness Watkins asked how the physical environment will be appropriate, highlighting areas in urban spaces with no green areas. She also mentioned that some schools, like academies, may try to opt out.

The Minister responded with new guidance on settings to be inclusive by design. This isn't just physical access, but acoustics and lighting. She also mentioned the proposal of universal inclusion bases at every secondary school and clusters of primary schools, with their purpose explicit in integrating into mainstream. She recognised that there are poor examples.

She also wants all schools to be in local clusters with specific bases for particular needs. This will include multi-academy trusts, who will be expected to participate.

The National Inclusion Standards will set minimum standards that will be upheld by OFSTED so others cannot opt out including through ISP creation. She then went on to explain the layered system. She acknowledged that the vast majority of schools want to be inclusive but don't have resources or expertise, and equally there are those that refuse inclusion though she agrees they will be changed.

Shockat Adam MP asked whether there is any early stage mechanism before the SEND tribunal, and how reforms might be able to support young people in their transition to employment.

The Minister acknowledged that the tribunal had previously been the sole route to appeal and has broken families. She said they hope to bolster mediation services and put more resources into schools so they can be more flexible and proactive. She also referred to the Disabled Children's Partnership suggestion of greater transparency and ensuring actions and reasoning are made public. On the topic of employability, the Minister confirmed they are creating new pathways with greater recognition of good practice, including working with Alan Milburn.

Gideon Amos MP asked about home schooling. He said that although the objective is getting more into mainstream, Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) is inevitable and can be a route back to mainstream education. He adds that the regulations will put a huge burden on families instead of supporting them. He previously proposed that families shouldn't have to pay for GCSE examinations and the response was that they would be given greater information instead.

The Minister responds that previous changes were due to safeguarding and ensuring visibility. She said that two things are true – they would want people to be in a setting, but there are also places for EOTAS. They are looking at EOTAS place within SPPs, and she admits they will need be part of the thinking going forward.

Danae Leaman-Hill asks what checks and balances will be in place to ensure eligibility criteria for specialist support are suitable before the restriction of rights.

The Minister's response addressed children's commissioner on system conditions, including using OFSTED and their own metrics. They also hope to work with local authorities to get a first draft for any inclusion

plans. The accountability measures for individual children still needs to be decided. It will be reviewed every year by the independent panel.

Lord Touhig asked about Wales providing example of schools that have units that focus on specific disabilities. He raised the issue of neurodiversity and how it is not always appropriate for pupils with different support needs to be included together. He gave the example of Fairshot café, who exemplified good practice on the issue of employability. He suggested they be used as mentors.

The Minister responded that the new system will be needs-led, and focus on individual needs as the route forward.

Alison Hume MP asked for further clarification on the definition of complex needs and if/when it will be published.

The Minister confirmed this will be done by the expert panel, and it will be made clear by SPPs.

Baroness Watkins asks how communication between health and education will be funded, citing the Experts at Hand program as an example.

The Minister responded that the funding figures to pay for Experts at Hand will come out of the education budget. They also hope to introduce a Speech and language apprenticeship.

Vikki Slade MP noted that autism diagnosis delay is up to 4 years in her area. She asked how the system can move away from being diagnosis focused when it comes to accessing support. She added that the base funding in non-deprived areas means those schools are unable to function and support additional needs without EHCP funding. She asked how the system can avoid relying on pupil premium.

The Minister responded that research into low level identification tools that will be included in the National Inclusion Standards, and this will provide clear guidance and tools. The next stage is Experts at Hand providing professional expertise. She said that diagnosis is still important, but that the education system should not rely on it, She acknowledged that these are important questions around health and removing the backlog.

Baroness Browning asked about the Autism strategy, as this was meant to aid in transition periods.

The Minister said she will get back to them.

4. Close and thanks from the Chair (18:30)