



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities \(SEND\)](#), HC 1248

Tuesday 23 May 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 23 May 2023.

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Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Miriam Cates; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Nick Fletcher; Kim Johnson; Andrew Lewer; Ian Mearns; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 42 - 107

Witnesses

[I](#): Claire Coutinho MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing), Department for Education and Alison Ismail, Director for Special Educational Needs and Disability and Alternative Provision, Department for Education.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Claire Coutinho and Alison Ismail.

Q42 **Chair:** Welcome to today's session, which is our second non-inquiry session on the 2023 SEND and alternative provision improvement plan. We will be hearing evidence from Claire Coutinho, Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing at the Department for Education, and from Alison Ismail, the Director for Special Educational Needs and Disability and Alternative Provision at the Department for Education.

If I can get straight into it, Minister, do you feel that the measures in the SEND and AP improvement plan go far enough to meet the unprecedented increase in demand for SEND provision in the education sector?

Claire Coutinho: You are right to highlight the increasing demand. What we know at the moment is that about 16.5% of the school population have some form of special educational need or disability. About 4% of them have an EHCP, but what we have seen over the last few years is a rise in complexity of cases and a rise in general need through, in some parts, better diagnosis, for example, of autism.

What we are doing through the changes is a systemic reform, and that includes making sure that we have improved teacher training, more specialist school places and specialist school provision, and that the whole system is working more closely together. I think that everyone here with constituents they talk to about this issue will know that the children who are trying to access education often will have a health and care need as well, and those parts of the system must work together. I do think that we have put in place a set of reforms that looks at that overall picture to make sure that it is going to work properly for children and young people with SEND.

Q43 **Chair:** In terms of the funding for the sector—I recognise that the Government can say that they have pretty much doubled high needs spending—there are still significant challenges. I was talking to a school in my constituency about the challenge of delayed funding, where they get an EHCP for a child and identify a specific need for one-on-one support, but then do not necessarily get any additional funding to pay for that one-on-one support until the next term.

We also have, in our local authorities, huge high needs deficits. I was briefed by Worcestershire County Council yesterday about the fact that if we look not even at the group of councils in the safety valve, but at the next level—the group of councils in the delivering better value plan—you have 20 tranche 1 local authorities with a cumulative deficit in high needs of £377 million against expenditure of £1.3 billion. That is an enormous deficit to be running. Are you confident that the plans that you have set out and the funding that is available will meet those needs?



Claire Coutinho: We have set out, as you say, an enormous increase in funding. The high needs block has gone up by 50%. In 2024-25 it will have gone up by 50% over the last four years. We have taken schools funding to real-time historic highs. Additional needs funding has gone up as well. We are also spending £2.6 billion, for example, on things like specialist school places. A lot of money is being invested in this area.

What we want to do through the reforms is make sure that it is being spent well. I spend a lot of my time talking to parents and families—I have done in my constituency, because I represent a seat that has had a high increase in need—and one of the things that you see in the areas where you often get high deficits is that some of the system has broken down. You do not get the early identification, which is very important. For lots of children, if you do not get in early and support them at that time, their needs can escalate. What starts off as maybe a struggle with reading—maybe dyslexia, for example—can escalate into quite severe mental health problems at times if you do not get the system right.

This system is about making sure that we have properly supported every single part, but also making sure that we are moving to early identification and are improving what is ordinarily available.

Q44 **Chair:** I think we discussed in our last session the importance of early identification, particularly for speech and language need, and the benefits of that.

Claire Coutinho: Yes.

Q45 **Chair:** What was the reasoning behind the Department for Education's refusal to publish projections on how the planned reforms in the SEND and AP improvement plan will reduce demand for EHCPs? Or do you believe that they will not necessarily reduce demand for EHCPs?

Claire Coutinho: Overall, I think that they will, because we will have that early identification process and get more support ordinarily available in mainstream schools. I can give you an example. In one area that I was talking to recently, there has been a huge rise in EHCP needs for speech and language support for under-ones. I think that if that was ordinarily available in the early years—we are trying to improve that and help to support the early years with some of the particular challenges they are facing—you would not expect so many children to be going into the EHCP system. I don't know if Alison wants to add anything on this point.

Alison Ismail: As the Minister describes, we refer in the improvement plan to a hypothesis that if we make that pincer movement, if you like, between improving mainstream provision and improving what is on offer in specialist, you would start to see a decrease in the need for EHCPs. That should be a sign of the health of the system, but we were not projecting to a particular target as such.

Q46 **Chair:** There have been lots of initiatives over the years aimed at meeting demand and recognising the challenges in the sector. What we



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have not seen is any drying up in the proportion of children with identified special needs or the proportion of those requiring plans. It would probably be sensible not to target a specific reduction in EHCPs, given that that is the long-term trend that we have seen, but I think that there is certainly a concern and a suspicion out there in the sector that part of the motivation behind the plan is to effectively ration EHCPs. Can you categorically say that that is not—

Claire Coutinho: That is absolutely not what we are trying to do. Inasmuch as I want to prevent children from needing EHCPs because their situation has escalated, at the same time, there may well be children who are not accessing EHCPs who really should have them, and we can improve access there. This is not about targeting a particular reduction; it is just about improving the system so that you can get better outcomes for SEND people.

Alison Ismail: The other thing to build on that is that we see the upwards trend across the piece, but it masks significant variation between areas and, in fact, in some cases within areas. Much of what we are trying to do here is to improve consistency and transparency for everyone's benefit.

Q47 **Chair:** The Committee and its predecessor heard compelling arguments that, following the SEND review, change was needed as swiftly as possible. I understand that you are seeking some further evidence and data gathering, but why not focus on what can be improved right now?

Claire Coutinho: There is a lot that we are doing at the moment. As we have spoken about, we have increased the amount of funding going into this area considerably. We have also started building the specialist schools; I think we have 93 schools built so far and we have another seven opening in September. We know that mental health is a major issue and we are already rolling out mental health support teams in schools. We are already increasing the number of educational psychologists in the system. There is a lot that we have already acted on. Some of the things that we are talking about in the wider set of reforms are quite intricate. They involve vulnerable children and young people with often complex needs. We want to make sure that we are getting those systemic changes right.

Q48 **Chair:** Do you have anything to add, Alison?

Alison Ismail: Not as such. I will just clarify that when we mentioned the high needs block funding going up 50%, it is to 2023-24 rather than to 2024-25.

Q49 **Chair:** Thank you. One of the things that I think is welcomed in the plan is the standardisation and digitalisation of EHCPs. How quickly can that be done and what steps are you taking now to make sure that that can be done effectively across the country?



Claire Coutinho: This was welcomed when we consulted on it. I know, when I talk to parents and families, that the weight of the paper that they carry around, in terms of the bureaucracy, is something they would really like to see streamlined.

There are two separate parts to that. One is the standardised template, which is the slightly simpler bit to tackle, so we will do that first. The next bit is the digitisation. Some areas are already doing this and that will take a little bit more time, because we want to consider how to get everyone to the right place. We are looking at a digital standard as opposed to trying to make everyone move to the same system, but we need to make sure, for example, that we are not excluding people who cannot access things online very easily, and that we are not having a form or a digital standard that is overly simplified and is then preventing the flexibility that you might need for certain children and young people. We are aiming to do all that by 2025.

Q50 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you, Minister. I will keep banging the same drum that I have banged before. We have 16.5% of children who are in the special educational needs cohort. We are putting huge sums of money into it. You just said that we are going to build specialist schools and things like that. Should we be putting huge sums of money into finding out why we have so many children with special educational needs? Do you think that the additional care funding that you have put in, which is going to reduce the one-to-one care of a parent with a child going into a group setting, where that could be four or five children to one adult, will have an effect on children who will later be classified as having special educational needs?

Claire Coutinho: I think that the childcare offer that we are putting forward will be helpful. We know from our SEED analysis that some level of childcare help can be helpful in terms of attainment for children. As for the rising need, there are a few areas where we have seen big rises. Autism is one—ASD—and there is mental health and wellbeing, and speech and language. Across those areas we are doing quite a lot of work. I would say that speech and language is something that we have seen arise post-pandemic. We are working on a programme that works with parents—a home learning environment programme called “Chat, play, read” to help enrich the home environment and support parents with their children’s speech and language development. We are also working, for example, with the NHS and setting out best practice guides and things like that. We have tried to examine why that need is rising and how we can best support each area.

Q51 **Nick Fletcher:** Andrea Leadsom is focusing on the 1,001 days. I think that we need to advance that—I have spoken to Andrea several times about this—because the actual interaction between a baby and the mother, just playing peek-a-boo and talking to them, has a huge effect on their cognitive development over the first two or three years. Do you think that we should focus on that when we know there is evidence that



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that happens? Yet we seem to be wanting to spend more money on special educational needs schools. We seem to be spending it in the wrong area— that is what I am trying to get at.

Claire Coutinho: I think that there are some separate things going on there. First, if you are thinking about mental health, which I think is what you are pointing towards, there are lots of different factors. I am very interested in resilience, and your point about making sure that we are thinking about the wellbeing and resilience of children is very well made. I think there are different factors that have effects. One is, for example, being online a lot; the effect of online bullying, for example. We know that particular things have a stronger effect on mental health. I have not seen anything that says that children spending some time in childcare, enabling mothers who want to work to work, has the effect that you are talking about. As I said, as we look at all those areas where need is rising, and we are trying to look at why that is happening and what we can do in terms of prevention as well.

Q52 **Nick Fletcher:** I think that it would be a worthwhile piece of work to look into this in huge detail. I know that it is not easy to build a school, but it is a fix that we seem to have. We build a school and we can see that we have done something, but I think that the money could be spent better. Is it something that you could do a piece of work on?

Claire Coutinho: In which respect?

Nick Fletcher: In respect of why 16.5% of children are categorised as having special educational needs. Why are we seeing such a huge increase in this? Surely we should be looking at that.

Claire Coutinho: As I said, we are already doing quite a lot of work on the biggest areas of increase. We are doing a lot of work, for example, on speech and language, particularly around the early years. In terms of ASD as well, there has been a lot of thinking. We work very closely with the Health Department on that. In mental health and wellbeing, we are trying to do the preventive work, and we are working with our colleagues in the Health Department on prevention and making sure that we have the right support for mental health needs in schools, as well as looking at whole school environments and that support.

Chair: I think it is worth pointing out, of course, that the SEND and AP plan is looking at the whole school-age spectrum. It is not just looking at the early years. It is looking all the way through, and many children have their special needs identified at the end of primary or even into secondary school. It is a wider issue than just looking at early intervention but, of course, early intervention is important.

Q53 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Minister. You have mentioned a couple of times the significant funding that is going into the sector, but we know that in the past 13 years, we have seen a significant amount of funding taken out of the sector. Local authorities like mine in Liverpool have lost



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63% of their central grant funding. I just wanted to know whether you could say whether the funding replaces that or goes anywhere near replacing the amount of funding that has been taken out of the sector in the last 13 years.

Claire Coutinho: In terms of the SEND system, the funding will go to schools through the grant and the additional needs funding. Both of those have gone up and, as I said, mainstream schools funding has gone up to record highs. The second part of that is the high needs block funding, which, again, has gone up considerably. In addition, we are building more specialist school places and putting more into the system. I would definitely say that the whole system around SEND has seen an increase in funding overall.

Q54 **Kim Johnson:** You did not really answer the question about whether it balances out what has been taken out, but that is okay.

This question, though, is about national standards. We know that there has been some criticism of the evidence that the Government have on identifying whether the national standards on SEND will improve with the new plan. Could you tell me when you envisage the national format on national standards coming into place?

Claire Coutinho: With national standards, we are trying to address the inconsistency in the system. I have visited different areas around the country and talked to families and young people, and what you will often find is that what is happening in one place is not necessarily happening in another. That is what we are trying to target with the national system, to try to end that postcode lottery.

The way we are going to do this is by setting up a steering group. We are going to work very carefully with experienced people—people who have lived through the experience either as a parent or as education and health leaders—and talk to lots of sector experts. We want to co-produce these national standards. An example might be something like the sensory environment. We know that in some areas they might have a very high-quality approach to improving the sensory environment for someone who is struggling with that particular area and in some areas they might not. We want to learn from best practice and make sure that as a minimum we have quality standards that are consistent across the country. I don't know if Alison wants to come in on that.

Alison Ismail: It was just to emphasise your point about co-production. In the development of both national standards and the practice guides to go alongside them that we have also committed to, we are determined to factor in working with children and young people and their families at every point to test those for effectiveness. That picks up on the previous point from Mr Fletcher about talking to families, which obviously includes fathers and other carers as well as mothers, at every point, not just in the early years and at schools, but all the way up to the 25-year mark.

Q55 **Kim Johnson:** Could you say whether you have a timetable for this



consultation exercise and whether it would involve people from the teaching profession?

Claire Coutinho: We are setting up a steering group this year. We want to have a significant proportion of the national standards up and running by 2025. As in everything, with all parts of the development of the reforms, we are talking to education leaders, health leaders and sector experts, which is what we have done the whole way through. I think that in our consultation responses, there were thousands of people we spoke to and who responded to the consultation from right across the piece. That is what we are committed to doing.

Q56 **Kim Johnson:** Being able to improve the sector requires a workforce and we know that there are major issues at the moment in recruitment and retention—not just SENCOs but right across the board, in speech and language and psychologists. Can you say a little about what the Government are doing to address those fundamental issues?

Claire Coutinho: Yes. This is a very good question. The work that the specialist workforce does is incredibly important and we know it can be transformational. For example, educational psychologists, as we know, has been a challenge because of the increase of need. We have been training more educational psychologists since 2020 and it takes, I think, about three years, so the first additional cohort should be coming through in September. Alison might want to correct me on that. Even as of November 2022, we were spending an extra £21 million, I think, to train another 400 educational psychologists. We have been doing that for some years to try to increase the amount of people in the system. We are looking at how we can best retain educational psychologists as well.

Secondly, the speech and language therapists, SALTs, and occupational therapists are, again, incredibly important. The whole reforms have been published hand in hand with the Health Department and as part of that we are going to do a specialist workforce joint strategy, which will look at how we can make sure that we have enough specialist expertise in the system. We have already set out some plans to, for example, increase the bursary or the grants that they get to make it more attractive and to encourage people to come through as well. Alison, would you add anything to that?

Alison Ismail: I think that is right on the specialist workforce, but just in answer to this question, we are also aware of the huge importance of the broader education workforce and, indeed, the health workforce. I am thinking of teaching assistants, mainstream school teachers and, indeed, school heads and other leaders who play such an important role, particularly special educational needs co-ordinators—so our new offer, for example, on the SENCO NPQ. All the training we are offering through the universal services contract is also aimed at making sure that the non-specialist workforce is well equipped to support children and young people with SEND and an AP.



Q57 Chair: Can I just ask one supplementary on that before I hand over to Flick Drummond? As you said, this is about the huge importance of the specialist workforce and particularly teaching assistants in special schools, where they need much higher proportions of one-on-one support and so on. In the past, when the Government have funded pay increases for teachers, they have not always funded them for teaching assistants. Do you recognise that that creates a huge pressure on our special schools when it comes to funding issues? Is there anything that can be done about that in future to ensure that the pay rises for non-teaching staff are included when it comes to any central funding settlement?

Claire Coutinho: I don't know if Alison wants to add anything, but I would say that I recognise the challenge. Having gone to visit lots of specialist schools, you can see the ratio of teaching assistants that they have and the importance that they play, particularly in giving personalised support. I don't know if you want to add anything about the funding mechanism, Alison.

Alison Ismail: On the point about teaching assistants, which is of huge importance to children with SEND—as I often see, for example, on visits not just to special schools, but to mainstream schools—we acknowledge the issues around recruitment and retention. We did commit in the improvement plan to take a fresh look at the role of TAs in the SEND system, so I would expect that to pick up this overall picture.

Chair: Thank you. Kim Johnson has one more question and then I will hand over to Flick Drummond.

Q58 Kim Johnson: Picking up on the TAs, the number of TAs that we have in schools again has reduced significantly. I just wanted to pick up on the point about NPQs. There has been some criticism about the roll-out and the comparison between the national SENCO in terms of the number of hours allocated—600 hours training in NASENCO to an equivalent of 82. There has been some criticism about the academic rigour of the new qualification. Could you say a little bit about that?

Claire Coutinho: I would slightly challenge those numbers. The numbers for the NASENCO sometimes includes study time as well as taught time and the numbers for the NPQ hours can also be higher—I think up to about 125. Alison might want to correct me on that.

The NPQ is a highly respected qualification and it is going to be quality assured by the Education Endowment Foundation. It is going to be deeply practical and it has been broadly supported. It is something that we will work very closely with people on. Every time I go and meet a school and meet the SENCO, I see that the SENCOs are doing tremendous work to support people. They are a highly valued part of the system. This is just about creating a qualification that we think will be practical and which will help them.

Kim Johnson: They are doing a fantastic job, but I would say that a lot



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of them are trying to do the job with their hands tied behind their back because of the lack of additional resources that they need to support children going forward.

Q59 Mrs Flick Drummond: I would like to invite you to the Waterloo School in Waterlooville, which is a brilliant special school that I went to recently. I am moving on to funding, so just as a supplement to that, I then went to my secondary school, Cowplain, which would like to link in with that special school and create their own provision. Will there be extra money for schools like that—secondary schools that want to have a provision for SEND separate but within the school, if you see what I mean?

Claire Coutinho: I will let Alison speak on capital funding, but one of the things that we are doing for the first time is looking at the specialist school capacity and demand, particularly on the capital side. That is a piece of work that we will be doing, so I can imagine that in areas where you have a huge amount of demand, we will be able to look at what capital funding we can provide.

Q60 Mrs Flick Drummond: That would be very helpful. I will move on to my question, which is about the band. There has been a bit of concern about the new system of banding. I think that Dr Stravrou said there is a concern that it “undercuts the current legislation, especially that person-centred, tailor-made approach to provision”. Then Mike Hobday said, “There is a real risk that this could add an additional layer of conflict into the process, so a family argues about which band their child is in, as well as what support they receive.” I just want to hear a bit more about how it is going to work.

Claire Coutinho: Our priority this year is to look at the variation in pricing, which I think is a fair and reasonable thing to do. The way that we are going to go about that is through talking to seven different local authorities plus all the local authorities that are part of the delivering better value programme, which I think is 55 local authorities, as a start. We just want to get a sense of what that variation is like.

I completely acknowledge that there are children within the system who might have complex needs or would need greater flexibility, and I do not want to have any system that would deny them getting the support that they need to succeed. However, I think it is worth looking at if there are instances where provision is quite similar in terms of outcomes, but where one is much more expensive than the other. We should then be thinking about value for money, because overall, that means that you can provide more support to more children, which is a good thing. Where we are starting is just looking at that variation in the pricing structure and what is happening at different local levels. Alison, would you like to add to that?

Alison Ismail: I would agree about that aspiration for better transparency of how money is currently being spent. I would agree with the Minister that it is something that we are testing at the moment with a



view to landing in that sweet spot. We want that better transparency and more structured approach. Equally, we recognise that bands and tariffs would need to be flexible enough to take into account, for example, that there may genuinely be some local variation. There may be other providers that can deliver economies of scale. In terms of what you heard from Mike Hobday in March with his focus on deaf children, it is a relatively low incidence condition, with about 50,000 children. We will be careful through our testing to make sure that our approach is sophisticated enough to take that into account.

Q61 Mrs Flick Drummond: You are aware that the one-size-fits-all approach is going to maybe create more conflict and people are going to start appealing, and so on.

Claire Coutinho: I don't think for children with special educational needs and disabilities you can have a one-size-fits-all. In all parts of the system, you need to be able to think about some flexibility, because children, even if they have the same SEND, may have very different needs. You need to be able to accommodate that. However, that being said, I do think it is fair and reasonable that we look at different pricing to see where we can make sure that provision is value for money as well.

Q62 Chair: On the timeliness of the funding, if a child is sent into a different setting, they will be funded at a different level from day one, yet if a child has a higher level of need identified within their existing setting, that funding does not come in until the following term. Can anything be done about that with the wonders of modern technology? Could we not make sure that funding follows the need and follows the child?

Claire Coutinho: Schools get funding with an additional needs element, so that is the thing that gets corrected annually. You are right that there is a lag in that. We do have, for example, abilities within the local authority system to give discretionary funding. We also find with specialist schools that they are funded at the beginning of the year for the amount of places that they have, so then if they do not have a place filled and a child comes in later, they will have still got the funding for that.

However, that being said, it is worth us looking at all these things, as need is rising. We are, for example, looking at AP funding as well. That is another part of the system where I think it is worth exploring how we can make sure—I think that the last time I was here I was talking about early years funding as well—that the system is as flexible as possible to respond where you have different rises, in terms of the pupil population, within different settings.

Q63 Ian Mearns: On that process, though, schools themselves are incurring costs in having to deal with the children's needs before they even get an EHCP. They have to be part of the process of helping to prepare the education, health and care plan, often having done an awful lot of the initial assessment. For them not to get the funding at all until the



following financial year seems a bit punitive from that perspective. Can we not amend legislation so that immediately on being awarded an EHCP, the child's school would then get the funding dated back to the start of the previous term?

Claire Coutinho: There is potential for discretionary funding within the system.

Ian Mearns: Local authorities do not have it, though.

Claire Coutinho: On the whole, the way that the schools funding works is that you look at additional needs, which will include proxies that correlate highly with incidence of SEND. FSM, for example, has a high correlation. That is taken into account in the overall funding metric when we look at which schools get additional money.

But you are right. In all parts of the system, it is about trying to work out how you can have the most flexible approach so that people, where they need specialist support, where they need personalised support, can get their costs back as quickly as possible. That is definitely something I have an ambition to do, which would be helpful in all parts of the system.

Q64 **Ian Mearns:** It has to be said that the whole process of trying to get an education, health and care plan for a child is really part of a big rationing process in itself. Headteachers quite often have maybe a dozen children in their care in their school, all of whom have a combination of difficulties, but the headteachers then have to make a decision about which child to refer because they know that the expertise and the professional help out there that they need, like an educational psychologist, does not have the time to deal with all 12. They have to deal with it one at a time, as it were. It is a massive rationing process from that perspective. Therefore, for them not to get the funding until the following year seems a bit out altogether, really.

Claire Coutinho: If you look at what we are trying to do in the reforms, it is to improve access. We are increasing the number of educational psychologists. We are trying to increase the access to specialist workforce. We are looking at things like better diagnostic pathways, for example, for autism and early years speech and language, and to make sure that what is ordinarily available in schools is also improved. One of the things that we know is that the likelihood of you getting an EHCP has a massive factor depending on which school you go to. The whole point of the system is trying to improve access and reduce variation, which I think will go some way to help to address some of those points.

Q65 **Ian Mearns:** You mentioned that you have stuff in train in order to prepare and train more educational psychologists, but the shortage is massive. You have talked about 400, I think. It is probably nowhere near enough.

Claire Coutinho: That is the next cohort that we are training, but we have been training hundreds more, since 2020, to come into the system.



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I think our numbers from the school workforce census showed that there were 2,100 EPs in the system. I have seen higher numbers than that from other organisations. To give you a sense of the additional hundreds of people going in, that should be a large increase in the educational psychologist workforce. That has been going on for a number of years.

You are right to say that we need more. We have seen increased need. It is difficult to get a diagnosis. You do talk to parents and families who are waiting an incredibly long time, but that is exactly what we are trying to target by making sure that there are more educational psychologists in the system.

Q66 **Nick Fletcher:** I think that my next question has pretty much been asked, but that happens. I want to go back: you said you have 400 school psychologists. Have many do we have already and does that mean 400 further ones?

Claire Coutinho: In the last school workforce census data—Alison might be able to correct me on when exactly it was—I think we had 2,100 educational psychologists, there or thereabouts. I have seen through other organisations numbers that are closer to 3,000 for educational psychologists in the system, and maybe a bit over that.

The 400 that we are training is with money that was set out from November 2022, but since 2020, we have been training more educational psychologists to come into the system. Overall, as a percentage of educational psychologists, that should be more people coming through the system. I think the first cohort where we have additional people should be trained by the end of this year, so we should be able to start seeing more people being available to do the work as well. Alison, I don't know if you want to add anything.

Alison Ismail: Yes, according to the school workforce census that you mentioned, in 2021 there were around 2,100 educational psychologists, although we think that is probably on the low side for the reasons the Minister said. Again, we know that there is a real need here, but it is something that we are very much focused on.

Q67 **Nick Fletcher:** Doesn't that concern you that we need so many school psychologists?

Claire Coutinho: Educational psychologists help with the EHCP process. If you look at what is happening across the SEND system, rises in things like autism or mental health wellbeing, or speech and language, for example, sometimes do need extra support through the EHCP process. In some ways, I think it is a good thing that we have better diagnosis. For example, in autism, one of the big rises that you are seeing is better diagnosis of female autism. What was happening before was that you had a group of people who had an unmet need, who were possibly just struggling in the system, and they are now being identified and supported. In some ways, I think that is a better system.



Recently, we had international leaders who came over who talked to us about our system, because in lots of ways, we are more advanced than other countries in thinking about children with SEND and making sure that they can get good outcomes. Yes, I think it is a good thing, but we just need to make sure that if we are identifying and supporting people they are getting that support in a timely fashion and at the time they need it.

Q68 Nick Fletcher: Are they only going to be working with the children or are they going to be helping teachers and parents, too? If a child has a difficulty, obviously the teachers and the parents are critical to that child's progression, aren't they? Are the psychologists working with the teachers or are they only working with the children?

Claire Coutinho: We have different support. For example, for teachers, we are changing initial teacher training and the early careers framework and setting out best practice guides, starting on the three areas in which we know we have seen big rises: autism, mental health and wellbeing, and speech and language. We are also doing things like training people to be mental health support leads. We talked about the SENCO qualification and making that a very practical experience and a critical role in schools, and making sure that overall the workforce feels equipped. For example, we have a universal services programme that I think we mentioned before, which aims to reach 70% of FE colleges and schools to improve people's understanding.

It is very important that we make sure that, overall, the people in the education professions have a good understanding of SEND, but, alongside that, that they also have access to and work very closely with people with specialisms. That includes the EPs, for example. I went to a school recently that had one or two EPs they worked directly with to help inform the staff and to work with pupils, and it was a very close relationship, but also access, for example, to speech and language therapists and occupational therapists and everything like that. I think that both those sides need to work together to make sure that everything that is ordinarily available is improved, and also that you have better access to specialisms.

Q69 Nick Fletcher: You mentioned pupils and you mentioned teachers, but you didn't mention parents. Is there anything that can happen there?

Claire Coutinho: Parents are a primary focus of mine. As you may know, I am very interested in how we particularly support parents. We have, for example, the family hub programme. We are making sure that there is advice to parents on infant/parent mental health or advice to support parents where they might be struggling with their own mental health separately to that of their child. We also have programmes that are targeted at parents around speech and language—the "Chat, play, read" programme, for example. I am very keen to make sure that we are looking at things like parent carer forums, which we are very supportive of, and making sure that we have things like family support options



through the short breaks innovation fund, where you have a short break for the family so they can get on their feet. To have a child with SEND can be a huge joy but it can also sometimes be very hard, and we need to make sure that we are supporting parents and families as well.

Q70 Nick Fletcher: There are 75 family hubs, I believe, at the moment. Do you know when that is going to be expanded out?

Claire Coutinho: We are rolling it out. We are starting with trailblazers and we will be rolling it out to 75—so that is half—of the upper-tier authorities. The way that we are choosing those 75 authorities is based on deprivation and higher needs.

Q71 Miriam Cates: Moving on to parental choice, one of the measures in the 2022 SEND review was the implementation of the tailored lists to show parents what was available in an area and to allow them to have some choice. I can completely see the benefits of that. Resources will always be limited and it is unfair for parents to think that something is available and it turns out not to be. There are all sorts of problems with that, so I can see the practical benefits. However, some people have said that they feel that it will almost be an excuse for a local authority to reduce choice based on cost. How do you reassure parents that this is not about reducing choice?

Claire Coutinho: We are testing this through the change programme, and the way we are formulating it to test it is an advisory list. I think about it as helping to give parents better information. There are some parents who are very clued up, very equipped to navigate the system, although they will acknowledge that they find it a struggle, but I also speak to parents who sometimes may be struggling with their own literacy. They might have a special educational need themselves. In some of the evidence that we heard—I think you had someone give evidence to you who said, which I thought was a very nice way of explaining it, that it can be very good to illustrate choice, to set out what options you have for your child and to make that process easier to navigate. We will be testing it very carefully through the change programme, working with parent groups and making sure that we can put that vision at the heart of it.

Q72 Miriam Cates: I understand that the Department will be rubber-stamping these lists before they go out to parents. Is part of your process that you will check: is this really what is available; is this a limitation on parents; is this a fair reflection of what is out there? I am just seeking to reassure people who have that concern.

Claire Coutinho: I can reassure people that the way we will be checking is very carefully, very much in tandem with the parent groups, to make sure that it is working on the ground. We are proceeding with caution in the change programme with some of the parts of the system reform that are more complicated to make sure that we get the balance right.

Q73 Chair: On that, every now and again, children need a particular, very specialist setting. For instance, in my patch I have a non-maintained



special school for completely blind children and visually impaired children; it is a boarding school. There are children who are sent there every year, mainly through tribunals currently, when the local authorities have not been able to meet their needs. With situations like that, how can we ensure that that high-quality provision is available on this tailored list system? I guess on most bases, if we are just looking at costs of travel and at what is in the immediate vicinity, a school like that is unlikely to be able to attract pupils, and I know that the pupils come from far afield to that particular setting in my constituency. How will a setting like that fit into the system when these reforms are completed?

Claire Coutinho: I think there are always going to be children with complex needs in the system who will not be able to find the right placement on their doorstep. Overall, we are trying to improve local access to the right setting. At the moment, you do get people going in taxis very far away, when it would be much better for that child or young person to have somewhere that was closer that meets their needs, which is why we are building, for example, so many specialist school places.

You are always going to get some children whose needs, for whatever reasons, are complicated and they will need to travel to a specialist place. I want them to be able to do that because ultimately it serves us all well if their needs are being met. If you are thinking about it in purely financial terms—obviously, the Department for Education thinks about outcomes as well—it is about the cost over a lifetime of not being able to meet people’s needs, and doing that early on is very important as well. We need that flexibility, whether through the tailored lists or other parts of the system, for children with those more complex needs.

Q74 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** I was going to ask that as well, particularly within a county. Maybe they have to go across county, so it is quite difficult in terms of funding, and they often have to fight for funding. Will this help with tailored needs, or will it give expectations to the parents that they are going to get a place very close to their home rather than putting their child in a taxi for an hour or so, as is happening in some of my area?

Claire Coutinho: That is the ambition. The reason that we are building more specialist school places is so that people have more localised support that meets their needs. With the tailored list, I would expect them to be putting forward places that they can reasonably offer to those parents. I would not expect them to put something on the tailored list to a parent that they could not then deliver. To the Chair’s point, I want to make it clear that we want to have enough flexibility within that system for children who might need to travel further because they have a particular need that cannot be met closer.

Q75 **Ian Mearns:** Flick, would you mind if I ask a supplementary? You have mentioned 90 special schools being built and there are 150 upper-tier local authorities that have an educational authority role. Have you done a scoping exercise? I think that 90 schools additionally is welcome, but if



you have done a scoping exercise, how many do we need?

Claire Coutinho: We are doing a scoping exercise now, which is looking at the capacity of specialist schools and looking at demand. That is part of what we will be doing. We are already building a lot more specialist schools—we have already started the £2.6 billion programme and it is under way, like I said. Schools are up and running. More are opening soon. We announced an additional 33 alongside the reforms, but that scoping exercise is happening.

Q76 **Ian Mearns:** You are doing 90, not having done a comprehensive scoping exercise, so how do you know that the right schools with the right specialisms are going in the right places?

Claire Coutinho: We know that we need more, and the way the rounds work is that local authorities bid for a specialist school and then there is a bidding process to see what exactly is best needed in that area. The piece of work that we are doing is working across the whole system to look at the capacity of specialist schools and demand. I do not think there is any question that we knew that we needed more, which is why we have already started that programme.

Q77 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** On the dreaded Ofsted—well, no, it is not the dreaded Ofsted, because I am a former Ofsted inspector and I think that Ofsted is wonderful, but I mean from a teacher’s point of view. What it is saying is that there are not enough specialist Ofsted inspectors in SEND, not just in specialist schools, but in mainstream schools. Are we going to be training up more teachers or more inspectors to come into the inspection regime so that they can help?

Claire Coutinho: I will bring Alison in on this one because the training is for His Majesty’s Chief Inspector, and there is a complaints process if people feel that they have not had the inspection that they want. It is important that we have the overall inspection in the right place.

Two changes that we have made, which I think are important from a DFE perspective, is that, in 2019, we changed the inspection process for all schools, so that you cannot be a good and outstanding school unless you are getting good outcomes for your children who have special educational needs, which I think has been a very important part of improving the mindset that we need to address needs across the whole system.

Secondly, the area inspections have changed to include all parts of the system locally. Instead of just inspecting the local authority, you will inspect every single part of the SEND system, which, again, is to try to get more of that coherence through the system.

Q78 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** You really do need specialist inspectors to make sure that the SEND is adequate rather than just having a normal inspector because, as we have been talking about, it is a very different type of education.



Alison Ismail: As the Minister says, on the point about the background and qualifications of inspectors, that is a matter for HMCI, although one we are obviously very willing to explore further. I would echo what the Minister said. Both the area framework on SEND, which we are just getting online now, and the mainstream schools framework do have SEND very much at their hearts, such that not only are the outcomes achieved by children with SEND paramount in forming that assessment, but the experience of them and their families is sought out and taken into account, whether or not the inspectors themselves have a SEND background. I think that is an important part of the picture.

Q79 **Mrs Flick Drummond:** Okay, but you will be pushing Ofsted to train up more? Ultimately, whether the reports are adequate in looking at SEND lies with the Department for Education, doesn't it?

Alison Ismail: It is something that we can definitely look into as to the make-up of inspector teams.

Q80 **Chair:** Can I just follow up on that? You both mentioned outcomes for children with special educational needs. One of my frustrations when I was in the Department was that it is fairly straightforward to identify outcomes for mainstream schools by looking at achievement, progress and measurements. It is much more difficult to demonstrate what the outcomes should be and what the metrics are, when asking for money from the Treasury, to show progress being made in special schools and the specialist system in general. Given that this is an area of increasing spending and an area where we keep having to go back to the Treasury to ask for more, what do you think the outcomes should be that we are using to demonstrate progress in the specialist education system?

Claire Coutinho: This is a very good question and I really care about making sure that we get the outcomes and data right. We do have information, for example, on whether you are going into employment and education and further training. We have surveys of parents and young people's experiences. We have some information.

I would love to see something that measures progress, because the thing that you need to remember—which is what makes it so difficult to do, but I am very cognisant of this—is that it is a very individualised thing, in terms of providing specialised support. It is not that you want everyone to get necessarily to exactly the same place. You just want to make sure that you are getting progress for people. I can think of a school that I went to that was taking on boys with SEMH. Some of them were doing incredibly well. Some of them may not have got quite the academic excellence that, of course, we would love for them, but they had come a huge way from kids that basically were not going to school at all. We need to get that right in terms of how we can make sure that we are rewarding schools and recognising their expertise when they are achieving huge progress for children and young people.

Chair: I think that it is crucial to get that right. From what you were



saying, though, part of it is around engagement and attendance. In the last session we had on persistent absence, one of the concerns was that special schools were seeing about 40% persistent absence, which is obviously a concerning rate. I absolutely accept what we were told—that there are valid reasons why children in special education are more likely to be absent—but it does seem that part of that needs to be about how we support engagement and retention.

Mrs Flick Drummond: It is also a reason that people are taking their children out of school and home educating them because of that very thing, yes.

Q81 **Anna Firth:** Continuing with the theme of accountability, another reason to focus on the number of children with special educational needs and increasing spending is the need to consider what mechanisms are being considered to ensure that partners who fail to meet their statutory obligations are being dealt with robustly. Can you elaborate on that?

Claire Coutinho: Yes, I think you are right. We have the Children and Families Act, which sets out parents' rights. We have not changed that at all in any of the reforms. We have updated the way we inspect local authorities. We now have an area inspection, which will have a CQC inspector, for example, inspecting care. That is going to put parents' and children's experiences of their dealings with the system more at the forefront. It will look at timeliness and things like that, to try to take that much more systemic approach.

We also are going to bring forward local inclusion dashboards by the end of the year. That will be able to give us a much more data-driven look—to address an earlier point—at what is happening area by area. We will also be asking areas to come up with local inclusion partnerships and local inclusion plans, again looking at the overall system of support. So often when you go to different areas, they will say, "This bit is fine but it is the early years that is struggling here", or AP, or "We do not have enough specialist school places" or whatever it might be. Each area will have its different needs, which we will then be able to measure from the local inclusion dashboards and the plans to see whether they are strategically meeting those needs. That is another important part.

Then, when areas are not doing well, we already have a system where the DFE will step in. We have SEND commissioners, who can work with schools. We can also ask them to do certain things through improvement notices. We keep a very careful eye on that as to where areas are failing. We will be strengthening that ladder of intervention. Our SEND commissioners and the people that we have as SEND experts have all worked in the system and will go into areas to work hand in hand with them to improve things where they are going badly wrong.

Q82 **Ian Mearns:** Minister, we heard that the Government plan to include a stand-alone SEND subsection in level 3 early years qualifications. However, considering provision, recruitment and retention issues, what



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further steps will you take to ensure that the early years workforce is sufficiently equipped to care for children with special educational needs and disabilities?

Claire Coutinho: The level 3 improvement I think will be a very positive thing. It will include, for example, things like the SEND code of practice. It is also looking at things like speech and language, cognitive, how to use specialist equipment and things like that, which I think are important. I am very glad that that is going to be updated in that qualification.

We are also looking at making sure that there are more early years SENCOs. We are training 5,000 extra early years SENCOs, a programme that has been very well received. When I go and talk to nurseries, one of the things they ask me about is making sure that they are equipped to deal with the children that they have in their settings.

One of the first best practice guides is going to be on early years speech and language because that is one of the biggest rises in need that they are facing. What we want to do is make sure that we are bringing together the best evidence on what interventions work so that they can feel confident and equipped that they have that information.

We are looking at a lot of different things in SEND and the early years. I think it is very important and it is something that I am personally very passionate about. So often, if you can get that early intervention right, you can also do tremendous things in outcomes.

Q83 Ian Mearns: What is the timescale for the recruitment and the training of the 5,000?

Claire Coutinho: That is currently under way. As part of our pandemic, we had a recovery programme—the early years recovery programme. We have been training people in speech and language already, which is a £180 million programme that we put in place to try to make sure that people could catch up from the pandemic. Some of that work is already ongoing.

This best practice guide is something that we are going to start work on now. We have said in the reforms that we will set it out by 2025, but I would obviously like to do it sooner if I could. We want to make sure that we are not reinventing the wheel, that we are working with people who have the best practice to make the best possible guide for people.

Q84 Ian Mearns: Have the 5,000 been fully recruited? Have there been any recruitment issues in getting the 5,000 trainees?

Claire Coutinho: That is training people who are already in the system. We have had a great demand for it so we have not had a struggle in recruiting people within the system to train as SENCOs.

Q85 Ian Mearns: Is there a decent regional distribution of those trainees?



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Claire Coutinho: I don't have that to hand. I will have to come back to you, unless Alison has that information.

Alison Ismail: I don't have it either, I'm afraid.

Ian Mearns: I think that would certainly be interesting. It would be bad if it was all concentrated in a few geographical areas and other places were being left behind, as it were. We are trying to avoid that, aren't we?

Claire Coutinho: Let me come back to you on that point. We also have another programme that we are working on in the NHS, which will be a pathfinder programme around early years speech and language. As part of that, we will be looking at geographical spread as well.

Q86 **Ian Mearns:** Why are the Government no longer committed to the involvement of relevant professionals in the health visitor-led two-year-old checks?

Claire Coutinho: I would have to go and speak to my colleagues at Health about that particular point, but I would be happy to do that and come back to you.

Ian Mearns: Okay. We will come on to other stuff later on, but health-related issues obviously can have impacts on children's educational prospects. Therefore, I would have thought there would be a deep, constant liaison with the health service and its Ministers regarding the educational outcomes and educational prospects because of the problems of shortcomings in the health service.

Claire Coutinho: We published the entire SEND reforms with the Department of Health, and we are going to be chairing our implementation board with the Department of Health. I think that you are right: the education and the health and care sides go very much hand in hand. That is why we have produced all these reforms in tandem with them.

Chair: It cannot do any harm that your Secretary of State came from the Department of Health, where she was working on the other side of this, wasn't she?

Claire Coutinho: Exactly.

Q87 **Mohammad Yasin:** We have heard that neither the SEND sector nor the families they work with are supportive of the "mandatory" aspect of mandatory mediation. Why are the Government still committed to its implementation?

Claire Coutinho: With mediation, in the change programme we are going to be testing out mediation to get towards a high-quality mediation set of metrics. That is what I am very committed to. At the moment in the change programme, we are not testing mandatory mediation. It is



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important that we get to a set of qualities about mediation that give people confidence and trust.

Overall, however, I think mediation is a very good thing. If you look at where it happens voluntarily at the moment, 75% of those cases do not end up going to a tribunal and they are resolved through that mediation process, which can be quicker and cheaper. Some families do spend money on the tribunal process. It can be easier to navigate. I think that high-quality mediation can improve access for redress, particularly for parents and families who, for whatever reason, are less able to navigate a system.

It can be an important part of the process, so we are very committed, and in the change programme, we will be testing high-quality mediation.

Q88 **Mohammad Yasin:** Thank you for that. In the review that took place in 2022, there was minimal support for this, and respondents felt that it would lead to further delays in providing a child with SEND support. In the March 2023 session, the witness Mike Hobday from the National Deaf Children's Society labelled it "neither ethical nor practical". Tim Nicholls stated that it was not the way to stop things from breaking down and going to tribunal. Why do you think it is a good thing and those experts think that it is not?

Claire Coutinho: As I said, I think that mediation is a good thing and most people, when I talk to them about mediation, do think that high-quality mediation is a good thing. Where people sometimes get anxious is about mandatory mediation. That is why, in the change programme, we are testing how you get to a consistency in high-quality mediation across the country.

Overall, if you ask people whether they think mediation is a good thing—I think it can be much quicker than the tribunal process. We have to acknowledge the reality that there are backlogs in the court process and sometimes it can be a long time to get to that tribunal process. Being able to get people to the support that they are happy with more quickly, which meets the needs of their child and, in some cases with mediation, with less bureaucracy for that family to undergo, can only be a good thing. I do think it is a good thing to test high-quality mediation. As I said, when I have talked to various different stakeholder groups, parents and families, most people agree with that.

Q89 **Chair:** Minister, you have talked about the change programme a couple of times. Can you remind the Committee how long that change programme is expected to run for?

Claire Coutinho: That will be running until 2025. It is a £70 million programme and we will be testing, as I said, some of these more intricate changes as part of that through a group of regional expert partnerships to make sure that we get a full sense of how things are working in different parts of the country.



Q90 **Mohammad Yasin:** What steps are you taking to ensure that families have sufficient support and understanding of their legal rights, and the current legal situation, when testing the mandatory mediation programme?

Claire Coutinho: This is an important point. On mediation, we are not changing anyone's parental rights. Across the system, parents having the right access to support is crucial. It can sometimes be a very bewildering process. People I have spoken to have talked about getting the diagnosis and then just not getting any support on what happens next.

We do have the SEND information advisory service. We also support parent carer forums across the country, which can be a very useful resource for parents. Crucially, and one of the things that I have experienced a lot on a personal level when I talk to people in my area, is making sure that we have the right training and guidance for caseworkers in councils because often that is one of the first points of contact for parents and families. Making sure they are getting the best possible advice from them as well is going to be very important.

To your point on mandatory mediation, we are not going to change any parental rights and, as with all parts of the change programme, we are working very closely with people on the ground where we are trialling it.

Q91 **Miriam Cates:** Back to mental health, I appreciate that, again, this is not your Department, so it is just a general discussion on it. There is obviously some overlap between SEND and mental health, as we have discussed. It is common knowledge that CAMHS is under pressure and has very long waiting lists. What we have heard, and what I have heard in my constituency, is that children who go on to the CAMHS waiting list with relatively low-level mental health problems that could be dealt with quite effectively end up getting to the point, because of the long waiting list, where some of them are quite severely ill, sometimes to the point of self-harming or suicidal thoughts. Clearly, had there been early intervention, it might have been possible to prevent them from getting that far.

I appreciate that you cannot comment on the Department of Health's funding for CAMHS and things like that, but what conversations are you having with the Department of Health about reducing waiting times? Is there any more innovative thinking about mental health first aid in schools, for example, that could deal with the majority of lower-level depression and anxiety before it gets to the point where children are quite seriously sick?

Claire Coutinho: This is very important, and the work that we are doing with the Health Department does cover mental health. We talk to them regularly about it. It is increasing the funding so that, I think, 345,000 children a year extra will be able to access CAMHS. However, you are right that we should be looking at what we can do in schools. We have been rolling out mental health support teams in schools and we are also



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training up people in schools to be mental health support leads, just as you say, so that we can deal with some of the emergent difficulties that young people are having.

I am also particularly interested in resilience and looking at how you can improve the overall wellbeing of children and young people, and looking at some of those additional stress factors, such as being online. Obviously, the pandemic has been challenging for people as well. I think that we need to look at all that preventive work, alongside making sure we have people on hand in schools to help.

Q92 Chair: I recently spoke to my local health and care trust specifically on this issue because of the number of concerns that I have had raised by schools about CAMHS. They said that they reckon they are resourced adequately to meet adult mental health needs, but they were not clear on necessarily whether they had enough funding for children and adolescent mental health. They said that they thought that in order to clear their backlog what they would need is two more paediatricians, two more SLTs and two more specialists in another space that I have temporarily forgotten—fundamentally, about six trained professionals. It is not a huge requirement. I was quite surprised at how small a requirement that was.

Surely if there is ever a case for joint working between Departments and for pooling of resources, that is it—that Education and Health ought to be making sure that those CAMHS services up and down the country are adequately resourced with the relevant professionals. You have talked a lot about getting professionals trained up—educational psychologists and everything. Isn't there a real need for joint working to make sure that we can get rid of the backlogs, which, after all, then mean that children miss out on educational opportunities for years to come?

Claire Coutinho: I think this is right. One of the things that will be critical in the whole delivery of this is the work that we are doing with the Department of Health on the specialist workforce, so that we can do some joint planning around that, both sharing information on what we are seeing and making sure we have the right amount of people in the system. You are right to say that we have talked quite a lot about educational psychologists. Sometimes it is not an enormous number of people who can make a tremendous difference in easing some of the backlogs.

Q93 Ian Mearns: I have a supplementary on that one. I was at a meeting last night where there was a presentation regarding children's mental health in schools. It is sad to report that one of the statistics I saw there was that 200 young people of school age had committed suicide in the last recorded year and that young people with an identifiable mental health problem had gone up from one in nine in 2019 to one in six.

The inadequacy of child and adolescent mental health services is having a dramatic impact on the educational outcomes of far too many of our young people. Can we see some urgency in the liaison between the



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Department of Health and the Department for Education in rectifying this and making sure that solutions are being put in place early enough to prevent, first, these unnecessary and untimely deaths and, secondly, the epidemic in mental health problems?

Claire Coutinho: You are right to be concerned about mental health problems. I think that is widely shared across government in terms of what has happened, particularly with young people. I think that secondary school has been more of a problem in terms of mental health challenges.

We are working very closely with Health. Like I said, it is investing £2.3 billion to increase the number of children who can access CAMHS by about 345,000 a year. We are rolling out mental health support teams in schools and mental health leads. One of our first best practice guides for all professionals will be on mental health and wellbeing, because I recognise that this is a very concerning area, both for families and young people.

Q94 **Ian Mearns:** One of the other figures that I got, because there had been some fairly extensive survey work done, was that the average age of youngsters now presenting with identifiable mental health problems is between 12 and 13. The age range is coming down. I am wondering if that is something that the Department will particularly focus on.

Claire Coutinho: We are looking at everything. In terms of where people sometimes struggle at that earlier age in secondary school, transition can be very difficult, so we are sending out transitions guidance to help people with the best possible advice on how to do that. Sometimes there can be pressure around the exam years. There are a lot of challenges from, as I said, the online environment. I think that is a factor as well. Through the Online Safety Bill we are trying to target some of those risks there. Every age and cohort of children has a different system of things behind it, and we need to look at all that because it is, as I said, concerning.

Ian Mearns: You did say earlier that special educational needs and not having an early enough diagnosis or plan put in place can often be a trigger for mental health problems in young people.

Claire Coutinho: Yes, and part of what we are doing, for example, in the local inclusion plans—because like I said, in different areas, you will see different factors of why children and young people are struggling even though some things are the same. As part of those dashboards and plans, we will get a better picture area by area of what is happening and areas will be better able to respond.

For example, there was an area that had a real problem around the year 7 transition moment, which then put in place better guidance, working with local schools to make sure that was smoother. I think that is what you need—the very practical changes on the ground to make sure that



the whole environment for children and young people is better in order to be able to prevent some of the mental health challenges, as well as all the access we have talked about to CAMHS and to the support teams in schools.

Q95 Andrew Lewer: Moving from mental health to post-16 provision, the Government are still not making any movement towards opening up supported internships to young people with SEND who do not have an education, health and care plan. Lots of parents and carers and lots of key stakeholders we have spoken to have called for that, but there is no movement from the Government on it. Why?

Claire Coutinho: We are doing a pilot on it now, which was announced in the spring statement. We have doubled the capacity of the supported internship programme. I think it is a good scheme to help people get into work by giving them that extra support. Having talked to young people who have undergone a supported internship, the changes that they have had in being able to meet an employer beforehand and getting that additional support through the early process has had a huge effect on their lives. We are going to pilot it for people without an EHCP and I will be following that very closely.

Chair: Where is that pilot?

Claire Coutinho: I do not think we have announced where it will be yet, but I will be happy to update the Committee if we have something at this stage.

Q96 Andrew Lewer: If that led to an expansion of the supported internships, would you have a concern that the quality of the support would be diluted because you would be trying to do more for more people with the same budget?

Claire Coutinho: We have increased the amount that we are spending on supported internships. The doubled capacity, I think—Alison might correct me on this—has come with £18 million extra. We have increased the amount of funding that is going into it, and I would say that is money well spent. Having formerly worked in DWP as the disability Minister looking at Access to Work and other schemes to get people into the right employment that suits them in the right way, I think it is a very good place for Government to spend their money.

Q97 Andrew Lewer: One of my local college principals, Pat Brennan-Barrett at Northampton College, has expressed a concern that a large number of college principals and others have had about the move to T-levels and reductions of BTECs, and particularly the level 2 to level 3 transition and problems that they very strongly feel that will generate. A small but very important part of that will be young people of that age with SEND being able to progress. On the big issue there—which is coming to a head with college principals, but with SEND in particular as a focal point and an illustration of the problem—have you been discussing with the Minister



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for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education the particular problem that SEND young people will have with this as part of the broader emerging problem?

Claire Coutinho: I will bring Alison in to comment on this as well. The system for post-16 is very important. I have been to see places that are doing an amazing job, like Weston College in Weston-super-Mare. Again, I think that support, whether it is life skills or social skills or the right course to set people up into the workplace, is vital to make sure that you are getting good, long-term outcomes for children with SEND.

We do talk regularly with all Ministers in the Department for Education. We look at employment outcomes very carefully. I think there has been some nervousness around the rigour of T-levels and what that might mean for young people with SEND, but at the same time, I think that everyone would acknowledge that having a rigorous T-level system is important in terms of having the quality there. We have, for example, the transitional T-level programme to help people to get to that level of progress. We are doing other things, like flexing some of the requirements on apprenticeships around English and maths, which, again, we think will benefit young people with SEND in that post-16 choice.

Andrew Lewer: I do not think it is so much the rigour as the inflexibility of it and the difficulty of access in transition from level 2 upwards that it provides. Can you assure me that you have SEND in mind and are pitching that to the Minister in question?

Claire Coutinho: Yes, who is also very passionate about this area.

Q98 **Kim Johnson:** Minister, at an evidence session in March, the National Deaf Children's Society pointed to the lack of information available to disabled young people. It informed the Committee that after surveying the parents of deaf people aged between 14 and 18, only one in 10 received careers advice tailored to their needs, with a third getting no advice at all. Can you explain what the Government are doing to ensure that all young people with SEND have access to adequate information on their post-16 options?

Claire Coutinho: Careers advice is crucial. I have seen it work so well in particular areas. When you go into schools, whether it is a school for deaf children or a school for children with SEMH or autism or something like that, when they get specialist careers advice you can see the good outcomes that they have.

So 76% of SEND institutions are now part of a careers hub, as of January 2023. We do have The Careers & Enterprise Company, which has worked on specialist advice for children and young people with SEND when it comes to careers. This is an important area and I am keen to see what more we can do, but at the moment, we are working through the hubs and through the CEC to make sure that people have the best possible advice when they are talking to young people with SEND. We should also



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recognise the work of some of the post-16 organisations that are doing good things in this area, in terms of bringing in businesses and setting out those paths to employment, working out local schemes to make sure that their young people can trial working for different sectors, and all those kinds of things.

Q99 **Kim Johnson:** Again, are those hubs available regionally?

Claire Coutinho: I do not have the breakdown and I am happy to come back to you, but it is three-quarters of SEND institutions.

Q100 **Anna Firth:** We have been told that the new wave of special schools will not be enough to meet excessive demand, especially post-pandemic. What plans do you have to meet the demand? In particular, the number of resource provisions for deaf children in the country has fallen from 260 in 2016 to 230 in 2022. Is that something that you are aware of and that you are particularly going to focus on?

Claire Coutinho: In terms of resources, we have created a new apprenticeship with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education particularly around training for teachers of children with sensory impairment. We have done that working very closely with Mike Hobday. The important thing about that is that it will attract apprenticeship levy funding, which I think will be a good thing in terms of getting more funding for training those teachers. We have looked at that. I know that Mike Hobday has welcomed this and I think it will be a helpful step forward.

On the overall capacity of the special school system, we are doing a piece of work now, working across all special schools, looking at capacity and demand very carefully. Another part of that will come out of the local inclusion plans, where, again, each area will be asked to strategically assess the need that they have locally and then set out plans to make sure that they are meeting that need. That is an important piece of work that has not been done before and will, again, give us a much better idea. As I have said previously in the session, we know that we need more specialist schools, which is why we have got on and started building, with £2.6 billion, specialist schools across the country. We know that there is extra demand, which is why we are already getting on with it and also now doing this very deep analytical work to see what more we should do.

Q101 **Anna Firth:** Thank you very much. It is not completely your Department, but can I press you a bit on the question of deaf children? I have had a number of families come to see me in my surgery in Southend to say that there just is not the same provision for deaf children that there is for children who are partially sighted or even blind. Indeed, we know that guide dogs are now provided for children, which never used to be done before. In particular, they talk about extracurricular activities and holiday activities specifically for deaf children and their families. Can I ask you if you have any particular plans in that area, taking on board that this goes



across Departments, and whether you would take that away?

Claire Coutinho: Yes, this is a very worthwhile area to talk about. One of the things that we know we need more of is teachers, so that is why we have set out the apprenticeship plan, working jointly with Mike Hobday on that. On extracurricular activities, we are funding an improvement to wraparound support across the country. As part of that, I would be very happy to look at where we can improve support for SEND children as well.

The point about schools—which is sometimes a struggle, I know, having talked to some pupils myself—is wider teacher understanding about, for example, if you are playing a video to put subtitles on, and making sure that you are turning around to face the class when you are giving instructions so that people who can lip read can understand. Having that wider teacher understanding, whether through initial teacher training, early careers frameworks or some of the best practice guides we are setting out, will also be an important part to solve as well.

Q102 **Anna Firth:** When you just said looking at resources for SEND children, I think that you might have meant deaf children. For the record, could I just clarify that?

Claire Coutinho: I meant for wraparound support, which is a £289 million programme looking at all schools. I think that that would be worth looking at, how we can improve access for all SEND children, of which we can also look at deaf children.

Anna Firth: Thank you.

Q103 **Chair:** I think that the question I was going to ask around funding has already been answered, but just on the local inclusion plans, it is hugely important that these are got right, and that they come up with the right answers on what can be done through mainstream, through bases, but also through specialist provision. Part of the challenge in that respect is that when I talk to my local authority, or Worcestershire Children First, with which I am now engaging on this, it will say, “We have a higher proportion of children in specialist schools than other areas and therefore our starting point should be to provide more inclusion and more mainstream provision.” That may be right but then if I talk to my schools, they will all say, “There is a rising level of need and a rising level of complexity, and we have children who ought to be in specialist places but are not”. How do we ensure that we strike the right balance when it comes to understanding what the real specialist need is at every level? And then, how do we ensure that, given the reality that we have a school estate that currently exists and has all sorts of constraints around it, we are planning for the long term to address that specialist need and provide the appropriate places at primary and at secondary?

Claire Coutinho: This is what can sometimes be such a headache for parents and families, because the inconsistency and variation in the system is large. The two things that I think will have the most effect on



that is, first, the programme of national standards. You can set out, for example, a minimum standard. I think that we talked previously about a sensory environment, which could be provided in a mainstream school. Secondly, the other part is the local inclusion plans, which again will get each area to assess and meet their needs.

Once we have the dashboards, we will be able to compare area by area to see what is going on and get a better picture if we think something unusual is happening in a particular area. If you are standing out as saying, "We have a huge demand for specialist provision", we could go and look at why that is happening and make some of those area comparisons to give that judgment. I think that will be a very important part of seeing how we can better get consistency across the system and make sure we have the right specialist support going in the right places.

Q104 **Chair:** Will parent carer forums and organisations of that sort be consulted as part of the formulation of local inclusion plans?

Claire Coutinho: Yes, and the local inclusion partnerships will definitely have parents at their heart as well. I don't know if Alison wants to add to that.

Alison Ismail: I was going to make one point on your question about how we identify that aspirational sweet spot, the balance between mainstream provision and specialist provision. We have talked quite a bit about the £2.6 billion investment, and it is worth noting that that is obviously, in some cases, for opening new schools, but it is also for, where possible, increasing capacity where it is needed in existing providers. There are obviously still the constraints on the estate that you describe, but in some local areas that may be an important part of the picture where they have additional need, without actually opening a new school.

Chair: Yes, I recognise that. I should say for the record that I very much welcome the fact that we have seen some investment in my neck of the woods, with an all-through school in south Worcestershire and an autism base. Undoubtedly, there appears to be more demand for that out there, particularly, I would say, in primary special education. I have a fantastic primary special education school that is absolutely packed and full to the rafters and having to turn away children with real need because it does not have any room to expand. That is a significant challenge. Finally, I will turn to Kim Johnson.

Q105 **Kim Johnson:** This is the final question, Minister, about educational outcomes. The 2023 SEND and AP improvement plan aims to improve outcomes for all young people, no matter their need or where they live. Black and disadvantaged children are over-represented in AP provision, so can you explain how the Government will assess outcomes in the long term to ensure that this objective is realised and met?



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Claire Coutinho: We have information on long-term outcomes in terms of people going into employment and further education, what is happening there and where that tails off as well. That is an important part of the picture: what is your post-16 destination and has that gone well for you?

There is also, I think, a point about progress, which is something that I would love to explore. The provision for SEND children is to get them further along than they were—to get them as far as they can go to fulfil their potential. I do not think it necessarily is the same as measuring GCSEs for all children. It will be for some, but it won't be for all. Being able to have that flexibility in the system is something I would like to work towards.

I do not think there is an area that is doing this well on a country-by-country basis, and it is something that I have talked to my international counterparts about before. We are trying to push forward in this area, but at the moment, I think the best way is looking at post-16 outcomes and making sure that that is a good fit for you. However, I would like to improve the nuance of that.

Q106 **Kim Johnson:** Again, it would be interesting to see some data on regional variations. We know that in some parts of the country, particularly in the north, the north-west, the north-east and coastal areas, there are less opportunities for SEND to go to post-16. It would be useful to have some information on that. If you could send it to us, that would be great.

Claire Coutinho: Yes. One of the things that will help with that is the local inclusion dashboards, because we will get a data picture area by area as well, which will speak to your point.

Q107 **Chair:** What is the deadline for those local inclusion dashboards being produced?

Claire Coutinho: We are getting them up and running by the end of the year.

Chair: Very good. Thank you very much, Minister, and thank you very much, Alison.