HOUSE OF COMMONS

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Solving the SEND Crisis, HC 492

Tuesday 28 January 2025

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Mark Sewards; Caroline Voaden.

Health and Social Care Committee members present: Jen Craft and Joe Robertson. Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee member present: Sarah Smith.

Questions 1 - 34

Witnesses

I: Katie Ghose, Chief Executive Officer, Kids; Imogen Steele, Policy and Public Affairs Officer, Contact; and Amanda Allard, Director, Council for Disabled Children.

II: Tania Tirraoro, Co-Director of Special Needs Jungle; Jo Harrison, Director and Co-Chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums; Hayley Harding, Founder, Let Us Learn Too; and Agnes Agyepong, CEO and founder, Global Black Maternal Health.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Katie Ghose, Imogen Steele and Amanda Allard.

Chair: Welcome to the public proceedings of the Education Select Committee, in the first oral evidence session of our inquiry on solving the SEND crisis. I welcome members and our witnesses to the session. I also welcome and explain for members of the public present that we are joined on our Committee by guests from the Health and Social Care Select Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee. SEND is cross-departmental in the way that services are delivered and we have invited members who sit on a range of different Committees to join us at different times during this inquiry; we are glad that this is happening today. I now invite our witnesses to introduce themselves to us, starting with Imogen Steele.

Imogen Steele: I am Imogen. I am the Policy and Public Affairs Officer at Contact. Contact is a UK-wide charity that supports parents with children with disabilities and additional needs. We provide a wide range of support from helplines to projects and campaigns.

Katie Ghose: I am Katie Ghose. I am the Chief Executive of Kids. We are a charity that provides a wide range of support and services for disabled children, children and young people with SEND from birth to 25. We support families as well and we try to harness that grassroots expertise from the ground to influence policy. It is a pleasure to be here today.

Amanda Allard: I am Amanda Allard. I am Director of the Council for Disabled Children. We work with a wide range of professionals who support children and young people with SEND and provide a range of improvement support to local areas that are seeking to improve their SEND services. We work closely with DFE and NHS England. We also run the What Works in SEND Programme, which looks at system level what works across the SEND system for DFE.

Q1 **Chair:** One of the headline issues that speaks to the nature of the SEND crisis is the unacceptably long waiting times that far too many children have in getting an education health and care plan. Could you say what practical action is needed to reduce the waiting times for EHCPs, starting with you, Katie?

Katie Ghose: Sure. The first point is that we need to regear the system to earlier packages of support in those interventions in a child's life—speech and language support for a child who is reading or talking, occupational therapy for a child with global development delay to help them to walk. We need to couple that with open access for the youngest children with SEND to early years, where there is a real gap in provision at the moment and a gap in access.

We think that is a key driver to reducing the wait times for plans, because earlier inventions from key professionals means fewer people will need to get to the plan stage. We accept that is not a quick fix. We also have a good example from a local area where waiting lists from referral to diagnosis for autism were reduced from three years to 16 weeks. We think the learnings from that could also be used to apply to reduce EHCP wait times. That example, in Wakefield and Yorkshire, followed an Ofsted inspection where the three years was unacceptably high.

There are a couple of lessons from that. Partners worked together with parents at every stage and it was true collaboration. We had the senior commissioning people with the NHS therapy people with the local authorities, with the parents in the room. Together they redesigned the referrals process and made it much more robust. Instead of the to-ing and fro-ing and the stopping and starting, you were getting things right first time round.

NHS brought in extra capacity to support with assessments. The families helped to redesign the referral process, and things that were not working were rectified. It was not working in that situation for GPs to be the point of call for referral; they did not have all the information, so the partners upskilled the schools to do more of it. We think that there are practical lessons that could be applied to reduce waiting times for plans.

Amanda Allard: I will reinforce that. More generally speaking, the local areas that do better and have better levels of parental satisfaction are those that have fewer gateways before you can get some level of support, so support while waiting. We do not ever use the term "waiting well" because people don't, but making sure that there is some level of support and people feel held while they are waiting is incredibly important.

The other thing is minimising the number of children and young people who require a plan, so making sure that you have the right levels of expertise in school. As Katie says, it is access to specialist support for children and a school workforce that has been upskilled to deal with lower-level problems. We should be able to manage as a matter of course and not make children feel as though there is something wrong with them just because they process slightly differently or they have a slight delay, for instance, in speech and language.

Imogen Steele: I reinforce everything that has been said, particularly the need for inclusive schools. Contact is calling for SEN support to be put on a statutory footing, which would help with making sure that all of that support is in place in schools, so that there would be less need for EHCPs in the first place.

Also, we call for training on SEND law for local officials, so that early decisions are made correctly. Quite often we find that parents have decisions, go to appeal with no extra evidence, and the tribunal overturns. It is just that learning for local authorities so that they do not have to struggle to get that initial early support.

Q2 **Chair:** Amanda Allard, you alluded to support that could be provided to children and families while they are awaiting a decision for EHCP. I don't know whether you and other witnesses want to say anything more about what good looks like for that.

Amanda Allard: It is access to things like short breaks. If you think about services that are universally targeted and specialist-led, making sure that there is access to universal and targeted support so that you end up on a waiting list for only the top layer of much more specialist support. Hopefully, because you have reduced the number of children who need to access that specialist layer, you have a much shorter waiting time.

There have been models—Katie alluded to one of the neurodiversity approaches. There are a number of different approaches to autism assessment and also to access to speech and language therapy that have gone along that kind of route, so that you have upskilled the universal workforce and made sure that parents have really, really easy access to first level support.

Also, importantly—I cannot state this enough—it is so important that you do not make parents feel dismissed. If you are going to send them to a

play and chat group, when they think that their child may have delayed speech and language, if the play and chat group does not work there has to be an easy cycle back round—an easy way for them to say, "That didn't work. Can you signpost me to something different?" The systems that work do that, and therefore parents do not feel fobbed off.

Imogen Steele: Amanda made a good point that to help children during this period of waiting you also must help parents. Currently, Contact's helpline cannot answer 30% to 40% of the calls we receive, just because we are inundated and the need is going up, so there needs to be more funding for advice lines. It is the same case with local organisations like SEND IASS. There is much more need than there is facility to meet the need.

That advice is important. We also run projects to give parents advice and support while children and parents are waiting, such as workshops in sleep or emotionally based school avoidance, and that really helps the parent to help the child. It is not a substitute but it helps.

Katie Ghose: I have two practical examples of help for people who are on the waiting list. One is a crisis intervention project in the same area, the Kids Wakefield awareness support project. This is a 12-week intervention programme when families are at risk of falling into crisis, to help with all kinds of matters, including the behaviour of their children. It is designed to prevent that deterioration and to help reduce the number of referrals on to CAMHS, for example. The cost is about £500 per family and 94% of the parents at the end of that period said that they no longer felt in crisis. It is the joint working that can make such a difference.

In Essex, three integrated care boards came together and commissioned a new service for young people and their families who are on the autism pathway or have just received a diagnosis, helping them with peer support, an autism hub with bite-sized resources, interactive webinars and signposting. It is building up the resilience and the ability of people. It was originally meant for people at the tail end of the diagnosis process, and through the co-production they have now developed it to be even more beneficial.

We think that the Government could, first, collect and disseminate the many examples of the can do and help people now on waiting lists. Secondly, we think that they could commission robust guidance to encourage and nurture. I am seeing good signs that some of this stuff is beginning to be commissioned because of the SEND emergency, but a lot more could be done.

Q3 **Chair:** We will come to the specific question of reform of SEN support in schools and whether it should be statutory or not in its framework, but I will ask you about SEN support as it is provided in schools now, which we know is inconsistent in mainstream schools and sometimes inadequate. Within the system as it is at the moment, what can be done to improve the consistency and the availability of SEN support in schools? Also,

would you think about the role of schools, but also the role of local authorities and of central Government in ensuring that consistency across the country? Amanda, you may like to start.

Amanda Allard: We need some national standards. There need to be clear expectations. Children, young people and their parents need to understand what they can expect to have as ordinarily available provision in schools, and schools need to be inspected against whether that level of support is provided. There needs to be accountability of schools, and possibly not just through the inspection framework. That seems incredibly important.

We must have a system where parents have confidence and feel that they have routes of redress if schools are not meeting their child's needs for SEN support. I now meet parents, which I never did before, who are saying to me, "My child should never have needed a plan. Their need should have been met within mainstream schools." It is such a long and expensive process for everyone to have to go through. We must get to a situation where we are not making parents go down that route when it should not be necessary.

Katie Ghose: For us, it is about inclusive education, and we welcome the Government's drive for inclusive education in mainstream schools to become a reality. For that to happen, the Department for Education should clearly define inclusive education. In the youth collective that we work with as part of Making Participation Work, supported by the Department for Education, this group of young people has come up with a treasure trove of practical ideas that bring inclusive education to life, so we want to see the Government open the doors and really listen to them.

Training was top of the list for them in the drive for inclusive education. It is training of all staff, top to toe in a school, not just leaving it to the SENCO to empower teachers to confidently adapt their practice and have the culture of reasonable adjustment under the Equality Act that we need to see take root in every school. One of the young people said, "What needs to happen is teachers having an awareness of SEND, listen, respect us, realise we are all different and need different things". One of them said, "Not seeing the non-disabled or neurotypical way is better, for example, speech over augmentative and alternative communication. Communication is the goal, not speech; mobility is the goal, not walking."

If we really involve young people, they have the answers along with parents, and that definition—the national standards and the definition of inclusive education—that would take us some way forward.

Imogen Steele: I agree completely. The current code of practice clearly outlines what SEN support is, and it is not being provided. SEN support in the last quarter of the year was the top topic on our helpline. Parents were saying that schools were saying that they could not provide SEN support. We say that there does need to be some accountability, some governance so that schools are providing that support, even if it is

currently within the code—that they are providing it now, and that they have the funding to do so. That is the key for us.

Q4 **Mark Sewards:** Thank you all for coming in today. Turning now to putting SEN support on a statutory footing, I have a couple of questions for Imogen and then for the rest of the panel. First, your organisation advocates putting SEN support on a statutory footing, as you said. What would that look like in practice?

Imogen Steele: What would it look like in practice? Elements of the code of practice, where SEN support is currently explained, like the graduated approach where schools have a duty to assess, plan a review, would be put on a statutory footing. Instead of words such as "should", they must do it so it will no longer be just statutory guidance but primary legislation. That would mean that schools would have a duty to provide that. With that we are hoping that more EHCPs would be reduced, because we are seeing schools saying now, "We don't have the funding to provide SEN support."

There is a trend where schools, not parents, are applying for EHCP assessment. There is the idea that parents are wanting EHCPs for schools, so it would mean that schools have a duty to provide it and it would lessen the vagueness with which it is provided. At the moment, schools have a duty to review SEN support at regular intervals. What "regular intervals" means is very unclear, so that is what we are thinking. We see it as an amendment or an addition to the Children and Families Act.

We are asking for nothing more than is in the code, but just that it has a more solid legal ground and, as Amanda said, the route of redress is especially important. That would give parents a route of redress because we are also suggesting that the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman widens its remit to include schools, so that schools can be held accountable and investigated for the SEN support they provide in cases of failure. It is important that parents have that button that they can press when they believe that their children are not getting the support that they are legally entitled to, although by doing that we are hoping that schools will do it automatically because they would have a duty to do it.

Q5 **Mark Sewards:** That is very helpful. There was a lot in that answer, but it is about taking the code of practice and putting that into law, essentially ensuring that schools all follow that by changing words like "should" to "must".

Critics have suggested that any change in the law in this way would increase the bureaucracy—increase the workload on schools. What do you say to that?

Imogen Steele: I say that we are not suggesting taking all of the code, just a few elements like the graduated approach, and schools should be

doing this now. In theory, if the system was working properly, it should not add any bureaucracy to the system; it would just allow for an accountability system to be followed and ensure that schools are doing their duty. It would also potentially take some of the pressure off the LAs, because schools are asking for EHCPs, and LAs could go back to them and say, "Have you done your SEN duties?" which at the moment are very vague. Obviously, in times of financial pressure, because they are so vague they are the first things that are reduced. It would safeguard the SEN support so that it is still there even in times of austerity and we don't end up in the current state where, to get any kind of assessment, most parents are being told to get an EHCP needs assessment. That is not what the original Children and Families Act intended, so it is kind of a resetting of the system.

Q6 **Mark Sewards:** That is very helpful; thank you, Imogen. Katie and Amanda, do you have any views on putting SEN support on a statutory footing? If so, what do you think it would look like in practice?

Katie Ghose: We support this as one practical change to regear the system towards early intervention and the provision of smaller packages of support. What would it look like in practice? It would mean a five-year-old or a six-year-old having more chance of being supported with their development at that age, rather than being forced to wait until they were seven, eight or nine and the issues had become worse. For us, it is about regearing of the system.

Amanda Allard: It is part of a package of support, but looking very carefully at the interdependencies. We need a system that is enabled to cope and be confident coping with a much broader range of needs than we currently have, so it is also making sure that schools feel supported. At the moment, some schools are resistant to taking children in. You don't want a system where, if you just did the statutory support on its own, without ensuring that there were mechanisms that measured schools against inclusivity, you might end up with schools that were even more resistant to accepting children with SEND. You have to think about those interdependencies

The other thing that I am keen on is making sure that it is not just down to parents. Imogen is right that you need a red button for parents but, ideally speaking, we would have a system where it is not simply down to parents to say when things are not going right, and there are checks and balances.

Q7 **Mark Sewards:** In short, yes, you would agree in principle that putting SEN support on a statutory footing is a good thing?

Amanda Allard: It needs to be looked at very carefully, but we need a way of ensuring that children's needs are met at an earlier point in time.

Q8 **Jess Asato:** Katie, we know that Kids has developed a SEND community navigator model to support parents and carers of children with SEND to

navigate SEN support systems. Could you expand on how this model works and its potential to be replicated or scaled up? Could you also tell us how health services interrelate with this model, particularly with those children who might have complex medical needs?

Katie Ghose: The Kids navigator model offers a trusted professional who walks alongside the family. They are a rounded point of support and contacts, and they can signpost and support in all kinds of ways. In one example, the family was stopped leaving the home because of difficulties in dealing with their child's behaviour. We were able to support through being the point of navigation where the parents were trying to find the right nursery for their child with SEND. They are fantastically rounded and tailored in the support that they give, and it can be form-filling on benefits, signposting, and all kinds of things that the family needs at that point. The results from the pilot in the Midlands and in Hampshire have been excellent in coming in at £616 per family for an intervention.

You asked about the potential to be replicated in scale. We think first of all, as part of the Government's expansion of early education, we will see many more nurseries. For nurseries to break the gap that we have at the moment of babies and toddlers with SEND not being in nurseries, family support will be key. We trialled the Kids navigator model in an inclusive nursery and we found a real uptick in the number of children who were going into mainstream primary school when they might have been thought to have been going to a special school. We think that one of the reasons for that is that the navigator has been alongside the family and alongside the nursery, helping with that. That has potential to be replicated and scaled in the early years.

We think that the Kids navigator model has the potential to be replicated at key transition points—the tricky transition from primary to secondary school, and the post-16 transition when we know there is a cliff edge for disabled young people going into adulthood. A very practical way to do it would be to fund feasibility studies or trials for a 12-week Kids navigator model to be there in those transition moments. We think: support the settings with training and resources and support the family, and then you begin to have a winning formula for dealing with the SEND emergency.

Q9 **Jess Asato:** Amanda, could you talk us through some effective and actionable ways to simplify the SEND system, ensuring that it is more straightforward for parents, carers and young people to navigate?

Amanda Allard: How long have you got?

Jess Asato: Not that long.

Amanda Allard: The system as it is at the moment is complex and means that people need help to navigate it. That also means that it is not equitable, which is why I am so keen on making sure that we are meeting a broader range of children and young people's needs earlier. That makes sure that you are able to do that equitably, so it is not down to the parent

to highlight when there is a problem and to take the action to do something about it; the school or the early years setting can do that on their behalf. For me, that is the main thing. It is just making it business as usual in as many cases as possible.

When you have a child with more complex needs, it is about making sure that things like the Kids navigator model are then integrated with existing structures, like the statutory SEND IASS services that are in every local authority, and making sure that they have enough capacity to help those parents who need support navigating the system. They support with navigation across education, health and care and can support with things like care, education and treatment reviews as well as the EHC plan process, and can also make sure that parents have support if they feel their needs are not being met.

The other thing to do to simplify the system is to change the structures. At the moment we have a many-wrong-door policy in too many local areas, as opposed to a one-front-door. That is because of the different agencies involved, the different things that they commission and the arguments, quite frankly, that happen about who pays for what at that ICB local authority level. If we cut through that and insist that they commission local area services on a joint footing and it no longer becomes important who pays for what because it is ostensibly a shared pot of money, however they work that out—I could go into a lot of detail about that, but I won't—then you are not getting so much of that, "I'm sorry; we can't help you. Why don't you try them?", because the system has thought about the journey and the pathways for children with more complex needs. As I said earlier, we have to make it business as usual for children with less complex needs and that simplifies it automatically.

Imogen Steele: We support the navigator model and we see that there is demand. We do casework as well, which is very similar to the navigator model, in five boroughs in London. We work with professionals; we work with EHCPs. We really get to work with parents and rebuild the trust. A lot of parents don't have trust in the system because they have been trying to get in touch with local authorities, and they don't reply. They feel completely at a loss with the system.

It is rebuilding that trust with an independent person who can support them to go to meetings with local authorities and empower them as well so that, once they know about the law, they can then do that via peer support and feel like they can do it. We support the Navigator system. We would also like to see a system where it wasn't necessary, but at the moment it is very necessary to have that because it is a complex system that a lot of people cannot access.

Q10 **Caroline Voaden:** I would like to look at the professionals in schools now. Given the current shortages in relevant healthcare professions, do you think it is possible to upskill other staff in education settings to provide more basic interventions in these areas? The second part of the

question is: what steps do you think could be taken to improve the involvement of the existing health workforce in supporting children and young people with SEND? That is to anybody who would like to answer.

Amanda Allard: There are some really, really excellent models that have done this—approaches like the balanced system in speech and language therapy. It does not have to be the balanced system, but that model uses the clinical workforce to upskill the universal schools early years setting workforce so that they are able to provide universal and targeted interventions. In the areas that have done that we see a more empowered workforce who feel able to manage a wider range of needs. You have happier parents.

The same thing has been done with neurodiversity. With the Portsmouth model, school staff, early years setting staff, have been upskilled to deliver a neurodiversity profiling tool, so that that can be done and then interventions can be put in place. You don't have to go through the lengthy autism assessment or neurodiversity assessment before those measures are put in place.

What we have seen with the current system, and where clinicians are divorced from school settings, is you see school settings not feeling able to manage the need, but then also clinicians not able to manage the length of queue coming through to them. All that is happening is, schools or parents are just referring, and that interplay really can cut through that kind of approach.

What we really need is leadership. We need leadership from DHSC, saying that this is an approach that it expects ICBs to be putting in place. Because at the moment we have great bottom-up models and a lot of interest. We run a community of practice around the Portsmouth model because so many commissioners are interested in it because it seems to be really effective in cutting waiting times, and that is one of the requirements that NHS England has set for ICBs, but I don't think that leadership has come down sufficiently from DHSC for that level of expectation.

Katie Ghose: There are some great examples where people have been upskilled by clinicians in the medical professions to support children's medical needs. In one of our nurseries our staff were trained by the local nurses to support a child with a tracheostomy. They said it was the first in the county. There are these shining practical examples out there so that we can deploy healthcare specialists where only they can do something and give the confidence in the skills across the rest of our SEN workforce to be able to support the children.

To achieve that, I think there are some good examples out there but sometimes there can be a rigidity in schools, or an educational worry, or a fear that is stopping them from saying, "Talk to us, let's find a way to support a child with these health needs." Healthcare is an essential

enabler for children with SEND to be in education and stay in education, and that is why it must be a joint initiative.

Q11 **Caroline Voaden:** I have had conversations with teaching assistants who want more skills around speech and language, for example, and finding the resources to upskill them seems to be very difficult. Online resources for them to tap into would be—

Amanda Allard: The models where this is taking place have been delivered with the existing clinical workforce. Given the shortage that we see in the therapy workforce, it is blindingly obvious. I am not saying that we might not need to do more than this, but this seems to work. There is a good range of evaluations that show that it works, so let's not waste time.

I understand that the health system always likes a randomised control trial, but children age while that process goes on. If we have something that really seems to work, let's operationalise it and make sure that we evaluate it as we go, so that if there are glitches we can iron those out along the way. If schools need resources because we are expecting more of them, we need to plan for that as well.

If you are upskilling teaching assistants to deliver a greater range of skills, you might need to look at enhanced placements. We need to think it all the way through, but be clear about what seems to work and get that into widespread practice.

Q12 **Caroline Voaden:** Given the current shortages in specialist teachers and special teachers and SENCOs, what measures can the Department for Education or individual schools implement to attract more specialist teachers or support and upskill existing staff, and how can the school system enhance support for SENCOs to help them effectively fulfil their roles and address the needs of students with SEND?

Katie Ghose: Starting with the SENCOs, we need to move towards a whole-school approach that from top to toe everybody in the school has SEND confidence. The training is essential so that it does not all fall on the shoulders of the SENCOs. We need to see basic SEND training, including the initial teacher training, improved. They are only getting two days of overall SEND training now, so that needs to be boosted. We think that this will be one of the biggest levers for delivering the Government's inclusive schools agenda. Practical training in how to navigate the system is important as well, so not just the theory of SEND.

A very practical way to support SENCOs, which is something that we do with Kids in schools at the moment, is group sessions of therapeutic interventions, LEGO therapies, draw and talk for children with SEND to support them with socialisation skills. That is shared responsibility with voluntary and community providers supporting schools and supporting the SENCOs, and we are seeing particularly good results from some of those therapeutic interventions. We think that sort of practical initiative

can support the overall school workforce so that it becomes everybody's responsibility, and everybody's confidence is boosted.

Chair: I will bring Sarah Smith in for a short supplemental question.

Q13 **Sarah Smith:** Yes, very short. Going back to the first question, do you have evidence or believe that there is merit in the co-location of services and how they are delivered between professionals from different sectors?

Amanda Allard: Yes. Going back to the balanced system, the Portsmouth approach, it is really important that schools are able to draw quickly. You have had your training as a teacher or a TA, but you have a child for whom those interventions don't seem to be working and it is incredibly important that you have easy access to more specialist, in-depth support.

Therefore, we are advocating for teams around a group of schools, at the community kind of hub footprint level, so that group of schools knows who the clinicians and specialists are. We think that should include the entire range—community health services, social care support, specialist teachers and other support from the local authority—so that they are all working together, and also school nursing, obviously.

At the moment there are children out of school because there are arguments about whether their medical needs can be met in schools. We think that kind of integrated model where schools are properly supported, and those services understand that that is their footprint and that is their delivery model, will really cut through a lot of the problems that we are seeing at the moment.

Katie Ghose: Co-located hubs definitely work and we should remember that children don't spend their whole life in school. It is absolutely essential that the charitable and the other providers who are supporting children with SEND at home and in the local community are working together with the schools and we have a holistic picture so that every child can thrive.

Imogen Steele: We also think that it is really important that everyone works together. It is great when we talk about upskilling to make schools inclusive, but we really want safeguards so that staff can call in the clinicians when necessary, and there is oversight by the clinicians, but it is mostly done by the upskilled staff. So it is not like a substitute for clinicians but it is joint working together. It is really important that the clinicians still review and are still involved.

Amanda Allard: One of the issues now, and why there is an issue around the retention of SENCOs, is that they are sometimes the lone voice in the school. They might put in place a really excellent strategy to support a child, which is then completely undermined by other teachers who have not understood that that child needs a reasonable adjustment.

Therefore, we think SENCOs must be on the school leadership team and, as I think Katie said earlier, they must not be a lone voice.

We think that there should be SEND champions in every department in a large school so you have the understanding and expectation spread. They can be a strategic voice and support the interplay and interaction with the wider support services that are supporting the school.

Imogen Steele: On that point—this may be skipping ahead—we also think it is very important that all teachers receive training in what the Equality Act requires and what reasonable adjustments are, so that they have an understanding of SEND law as part of teacher training. That would allow for more collaborative work with the SENCOs.

Chair: I ask everybody to be mindful of time. We have quite a few important topics that we want to ask you about, and increasingly limited time in which to do that.

Q14 **Jess Asato:** How can the current allocations and distribution of schools block funding and high needs funding be improved to ensure it effectively meets the diverse and evolving needs of children and young people with SEND? What measures could be implemented to promote greater transparency, flexibility and equity in funding?

Amanda Allard: That is a difficult question. We are planning some roundtables to try to unpick that a bit more. The money could not be spent more badly—that is not very grammatical, is it, but you know what I mean—than it currently is being spent. That means there is no money for early intervention and we are pushing children into requiring more specialist support. Therefore, we must find a way of continuing to support children with complex needs, absolutely, but ensuring that we are supporting at the earlier point of presentation.

Katie Ghose: In our view, it should be ringfenced; money for children with SEND should go to children with SEND. That is a fundamental principle that should underlie any reforms that the Government seek to bring in.

Imogen Steele: We support that ringfencing. It is also important to note that the nominal £6,000 that schools get can cause a lot of confusion. We get a lot of calls from parents saying, "Why isn't the school spending the £6,000 on my child?" We know that that is not how it works, but the parents don't. That immediately causes distrust and frustrations and makes the system adversarial, so a bit more clarity around that would be great.

Amanda Allard: And multi-agency, just going back to that multi-agency pot, so that we can take those rounds out.

Q15 **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge:** I would like to consider the current and future models of SEND provision, in particular multi-agency working. Everybody around here is aware of the frustrations when it comes to

education, health and social care Departments working in silos and it is good to have members from the Health and Social Care Committee here today to take part in this session.

The first question goes to Imogen. What actions can be taken to ensure better, effective working between the different sectors? I have read that Contact proposes strengthening the Children and Families Act 2014 to place joint legal duties on health, social care and education authorities instead of education authorities alone.

Imogen Steele: For EHCPs in section F, which is where the special education provision is outlined, the legal duty to provide that provision is solely on the local authorities. However, that provision can also include any health or social care provision that educates or trains, yet the local authority is still the one that has the strongest legal duty to provide this. Therefore, if there was a joint legal duty, it would mean that there was more accountability on health, social care, equality and education.

It might also reduce the pressure on LAs. For example, it would currently be a duty on the local authorities to secure a speech and language therapist, whereas if it were made joint, health would have to make sure that they provided it. There is a current provision that makes it a legal duty for health and social care to co-operate, but it is obviously not being implemented. That might be because of the shortages that we have already seen but, yes, making it a legal duty might rebalance the scales a little bit.

Q16 **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge:** Katie and Amanda, you spoke of some shining examples of good practice—particularly Katie—the redesign of the autism referral process that cuts waiting times from three years to 16 weeks, and Amanda, the Portsmouth model ensuring that early years teachers have specialist training to identify neurodiversity at an early stage. Katie and Amanda, what actions do you feel should be taken?

Amanda Allard: I think the joint accountability that Imogen spoke about is right. We see now that all the sticks, if you like, operate on the local authority and there are just not those same levers for the ICB. So, when intervention happens, when a local area gets systemic failings, then the ICB will come to the table, but often it has not before. That is not helped by reorganisation, and I completely understand the pressures that are on health. You end up with visionary leaders doing excellent stuff—the kind of thing that Katie and I talked about—but the system isn't set up to make that happen, so it relies on people going above and beyond. Therefore, we need to reset the system so that the expectation is that these things happen, and that you work together in this way.

We have been working with local areas for 10 years now, since the Children and Families Act, supporting them to work jointly together. We have not seen many more examples of joint commissioning in that time than when we started out. People's level of ambition is still too low. What really makes a difference is a collaborative culture setting a shared vision

for a local area and then jointly commissioning against that shared vision.

Data is also incredibly important—measuring how what you are doing is changing and whether you are moving towards those outcomes. We don't mandate people to do that and we don't set the clear expectation of our leaders that that should be what they are delivering.

Katie Ghose: You are modelling joined-up working as a Committee. We have to see national Government, key Departments coming together and making a firm and robust commitment that health and care and education—all parts of the system—will come together to serve children with SEND and their families. All the different pieces of the puzzle have to be lined up—the legal duties, the resources, the skills and the support. That is what we need, but we need to see that drive from the top to support these lovely examples from the grassroots.

Q17 **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge:** Yes, absolutely. Moving on, I would like to ask about the current challenges faced by home-to-school transport for children with SEND. What improvements can be made to enhance accessibility, efficiency and overall experience for children and their families?

Imogen Steele: We currently have a campaign to close the loophole for post-16 transport, because obviously the law changed and compulsory education now goes up to 18. However, there is no law that says post 16 you have an entitlement to transport, and this leaves it to the discretion of local authorities and their funding, which has led to a postcode lottery.

Recent research showed that 65% of post-16 children could not attend school because of transport issues, and parents have to stop work to take those children to post-16 education. How can it be fair that the law says that young people must stay in education until 18 but they cannot get transport up to there? That is one of our big calls.

We would also like more scrutiny of local policies. We see quite often that children who are clearly eligible for transport because of their disability are refused or offered unsuitable transport. More inclusive schools would make it a lot easier for transport provision to be made because people would not have to travel so far. Then, equally, we must remember that there are cases that are complex, which will always need that extra provision and might require the extra length of transport. Those are the key issues we see and what the solutions might be for those.

Amanda Allard: We did a piece of work in the local area looking at the school transport system with them. One of the things that came up in that was that there does not tend to be a review. You can have a child aged four going in a taxi, which is absolutely appropriate and the right thing to do, but that has not been looked at. It is still happening at 16 and the possibility of independent travel training has not been investigated, so that child has not been prepared for adulthood. It is thinking about that.

The other thing is making sure that staff involved in home-to-school transport have had the training that they need to support children with complex needs, so that there is not an issue with their not being able to access home-to-school transport.

Q18 **Sarah Smith:** We are going to talk now a little bit about the need for potentially greater accountability within the local authority in the system. Far too often in Hyndburn I get families coming to me at their absolute wits' end and there are often two big issues that come out of their individual cases. One is the problems with the adversarial culture that exists within the system and the other one is the lack of accountability, even if they can overcome the adversarial system to get the HCP in place. What would you suggest can be done to enable us to do both—reduce the adversarial nature of the system while increasing the accountability, particularly, of local authorities? Obviously, we have spoken a bit about what we could do with schools so that families get a better deal out of the system.

Imogen Steele: To decrease the adversarial nature, I would strongly suggest a lot more training for local authority officials on SEND law and what it actually means. That would provide for the right decision in the first place, because a lot of appeals are quite a low bar.

On accountability for LAs, Contact has suggested that there should be stronger Government oversight and intervention. It should be triggered by key data such as the tribunal statistics, how frequently LAs are at tribunal, how often they concede the day before the hearing. We are seeing a worrying trend of LAs using the tribunal to delay having to pay for funding in cases where they know that they will lose, and failure to meet timescales. We would like to see the establishment of public hearings and inquiries into local authorities who don't comply with the law, and that information should be publicised. That kind of public pressure might encourage them to make better decisions in the first place.

Katie Ghose: It is difficult because all the incentives are in the wrong place at the moment. The system is so deeply letting down families and young people, and so many of the behaviours are just delay, delay, delay and very adversarial, as you say.

There is the £100 million that is wasted on tribunals where the success is full or partly by families in a huge number of cases. One of the things is thinking about how to redeploy and have incentives in a better place to redeploy money so that it goes to good quality decision making early on, as Imogen said. I don't think this is an easy one to crack. Legal duties should always be met. That is why we put things in law to say that they should be met, but this is a big system change to overcome.

Amanda Allard: The local authorities that manage to be less adversarial have a really good relationship with the parents, an open door policy and a real understanding. It can be incredibly difficult when money is tight,

and a natural reaction can be to defend and guard that pot. Opening up and having pragmatic but realistic discussions about what we can achieve with what we have works a lot better in local areas.

Where intervention happens it works, but it is slow to create change and I think we need more training, as Imogen says, but that is at leadership level as well. The expectation that "We understand the law and we comply with the law" comes down from the top and is supported from the top. I would be nervous about putting more strictures on local authorities without having first broadened out that range of accountability. The solution is not simply in the hands of the local authority.

Chair: We have a couple of further questions from Jen on that theme.

Q19 **Jen Craft:** I am here guesting today from the Health and Social Care Committee. I have been incredibly interested in your thoughts around collaborative working—how that might look going forward. I did have a question about how effective current accountability mechanisms are in that space, and I think we have probably covered that.

The question that I am interested in is how you make those more effective, and what that would look like in practice. Would it be something like the mental health investment standard, where ICBs have to allocate a proportion of their spend to mental health care? Would you be considering something in those terms, an allocation of proportionate spend on early intervention or prevention—something like that? Or is it much more putting prevention perhaps on a statutory footing without being too prescriptive?

I am interested in how you would look at it for accountability. Is it looking at more outcome-based commissioning and tracking that? I think we can all see how you could be held accountable for any individual's outcomes, but it is how you look at it more holistically. We are entering the space of what happened because of this intervention and what could have happened without it. What are your thoughts on how you have the whole-system accountability that puts the onus on ICBs as well as local authorities?

Amanda Allard: We would like to see a requirement for ICBs to come together with local authorities to jointly commission. Obviously there is an expectation but it is strengthening that. At the moment, as I said earlier, it happens when people go above and beyond, so setting that expectation.

Outcomes-based commissioning is very important, and one of the things at the back of my mind with models such as the balanced system and the Portsmouth model is that you don't want the waiting list to come down and then the ICB to think, "We don't need as many therapists, then." You have to have a system that is sophisticated enough, and data that is sophisticated enough, to understand that if you have had a success in

this area, it is because of the activity that is happening here, and you have to be able to measure that across.

One of the things that is really striking when you work with the local area is when they share their data and they understand that these are our children, not your problem and my problem but our children, that makes a real difference. We have to be really excited about the fact that we are looking at a unique identifier and better data sharing across education, health and care. At the moment it is just not happening in the children's world and that is a significant drag on joint commissioning because we cannot track the spend and the money on individual children in the way that we should be able to do.

Imogen Steele: Contact agrees, and we suggest a possible approach with boards of representatives from health and social care and education to work together. These boards could be overseen by independent panels so that they hold each other to account to make sure that they all jointly meet their SEND duties—not just for EHCPs but for all inclusive provision.

Katie Ghose: We acknowledge that this does need resource, so we would expect the Health and Social Care Department to be seeking SEND money from the spending review in the way that the Department for Education would be. We need to be very explicit and be calling a spade a spade. At every single level we need to be building in the mechanisms and the structures so that the working together is a given, not an add-on.

Amanda Allard: You are absolutely right, Katie. We are begging for some real leadership from DHSC on this issue.

Q20 **Jen Craft:** Do you think that leadership is ministerial steer or are you looking for people who work in NHS England, for example, or at the ICB level, or is it throughout the organisation?

Amanda Allard: It comes from the top and from those expectations. I completely understand that the health service has its own crisis, but some of the things that we have talked about today are part of the solution. The way that we are deploying resources is also inefficient and ineffective in the health service. Leadership and visionary thinking is what gets us to the right place, not just for our children and young people but more widely in the system.

Q21 **Jen Craft:** You touched on tracking spend on individual children. Is there something in that about how accountability can follow from that? If ICBs have put *x* amount of resource into an individual, the onus is almost on them to make sure that that resource has been spent well. Maybe there is something on their own internal accountability. Tracking that spend better might be a partial way of following it.

Amanda Allard: You will sometimes hear people who run specialist units saying that the individual that they have most contact with in a local authority or an ICB is the accountant. Sometimes we pay for very high-

cost placements and then we don't interrogate the value for money that we are getting from them.

More important is just making sure that we understand how we are spending money and that we are spending it in the best possible way, and thinking through what the early intervention piece looks like. That is true for children with low-level needs, but it is also true for children with complex needs. We have children in tier 4 mental health units who, had there been community services to support their families, would not have needed to be there. Those tier 4 units are not always set up to meet their needs, and you get trauma added on top of the crisis that led them to go in.

Chair: I will move us on because we have another panel of witnesses still to come. A final quick question from Joe.

Q22 **Joe Robertson:** Good morning. Under Ofsted reforms, inclusion is being introduced as a new criterion for inspection. What should this involve with regard to SEND and how should schools be assessed on it?

Katie Ghose: Shall I jump into that one? There is a big opportunity here, linked in with the curriculum and assessment review, to have a much more expansive vision of what good looks like. It is not just the academic standards and the qualifications met, but it is a wonderful rounded, inclusive education. Very specifically, that means what I have called negative data—what is the level of exclusion of children with SEND from that school and what is the trajectory upwards from that? Then the positive data—what is the evidence of equal and adapted access to PE and sport support for children with SEND in the school? Those are examples of the inclusion criteria that we would expect to see.

Also, there is accountability and leadership. As with safeguarding in inspections, you are expecting top to toe of a school, everybody, including those on the frontline, to demonstrate safeguarding culture and practice. We expect the ability of the school at all levels to demonstrate confidence in SEND as well.

Imogen Steele: I agree. We again suggest that the inclusion criteria go off the law, so that everyone has an entitlement to a mainstream school, and they can access all the activities in that school. There should be an anticipatory duty for reasonable adjustments so that teachers should be making those reasonable adjustments, and particularly how schools support children with special educational needs to attend, rather than just focusing on figures for attendance. That is one of our main issues. How pupils and parents feel inclusion is going is really important to get that aspect as well.

Chair: I apologise that we are out of time and thank our witnesses very much for coming this morning to give evidence to us. I know that you have all submitted written evidence already to the inquiry. If there are any points of detail that you want to follow up on that there was not time

to get across today, please feel free to write to the Committee and we will take that into account as well. Thank you very much for being with us this morning.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Tania Tirraoro, Jo Harrison, Hayley Harding and Agnes Agyepong.

Chair: This is the second panel in the evidence session in our inquiry on solving the SEND crisis. I welcome the witnesses to our second panel. As you have seen, we are under quite a bit of time pressure this morning. A reminder that we have received and will take full account of written evidence that you have submitted. Please try to be as succinct as you can be in your responses this morning, and understand that if I move you on, in the interests of time, it is only because we have lots of really important topics that we want to ask you about. If we get too bogged down in any one of them, we will not get to the other things that we want to cover in public in the evidence session today. I invite the panel to introduce themselves to us, starting with Tania, please.

Tania Tirraoro: I am Tania Tirraoro. I am the founder and Co-Director of the Special Needs Jungle website. We write all about SEND and we do our best to hold the Government and everybody else to account. We have a small team there. I am the parent of two now adults with autism and ADHD. I am also autistic. I sit on a number of advisory groups for Government, such as Ofsted and Whole School SEND and so on, as a parent adviser.

Jo Harrison: Thank you very much for having me today. My name is Jo Harrison. I am a Director and Co-Chair of the National Network of Parent Carer Forums. Everyone that works for the forums are parents and carers of children and young people aged nought to five. I myself am a parent of two neurodiverse children, one who is thriving within mainstream on SEND support and another who is in an independent provision within EHCP.

Hayley Harding: Hayley Harding. I was one of the co-founders of Let Us Learn Too, a campaign group that was set up to try to ensure that parents' voices were fully heard by the previous Government, and obviously now. I also set up a local campaign group originally called Sutton EHCP Crisis.

Agnes Agyepong: I am Agnes Agyepong. I am the founder and CEO of an organisation called Global Child and Maternal Health. We were set up to put research back into the hands of black communities as leaders and change agents, really owning our data and our stories. Last year we published a black child SEND report, which was really about understanding the experiences of black heritage parents accessing SEND support for their children. As a result of that work, we have now set up the SEND Equity Alliance, which will be launching in March.

Q23 **Jess Asato:** Many parents and carers that I talk to worry that the people around their children at school do not necessarily have the knowledge or skills or training to be able to effectively support them. How can the existing training system be enhanced to better equip teachers to support students with SEND and improve their educational outcomes?

Tania Tirraoro: At the moment, there still is very little in the initial teacher training about SEND training and we think that it should be a golden thread all the way through. It should not be just a separate module, because any child can be diagnosed as having SEND at any point in their school journey. You have teachers who are really poorly equipped to get into school and be confronted by a class where four, five or six may have some sort of special educational need. You are setting them up for a stressful, failing first few years, and the children are not getting the support they need.

Jo Harrison: I will echo what Tania has said, and say that 93% of our parent carers that we spoke to about today's session said that training needs to be highlighted within schools. SENCOs have issues that they are the one person there to support SEND and often have teaching responsibilities alongside their SENCO duties, which leaves them further stretched. As Amanda referenced, they are often not within the leadership team, which again provides further challenges.

I live in Essex, which is part of the balanced system, and we have seen some real changes there in using the specialist workforce to upskill teachers and teaching assistants to provide adjustments in their day-to-day teachings as well as support the low-level interventions that don't necessarily need higher-level clinical intervention. That really enables children and young people to thrive.

We have huge shortages of professionals, such as educational psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists. We don't allow teachers access to these professionals who can offer support strategies for them to do, not just with one child but with their whole class and children beyond. If we are not allowing them to have that touch base or touch point or access, when standard strategies fail from printed toolboxes that we have resourced on the internet, we are not giving them the tools to look at where else they can get that information to support the children and young people. That needs to be explored better to utilise our more experienced workforce to upskill them.

Hayley Harding: I agree with those points. There needs to be a change of perspective, in the sense that sometimes teachers will think it must be the parents' fault. That is their instant reaction, and it is behaviour. More training at the beginning when they are training to be teachers would really help, but also for the existing workforce. We need to reverse that trend, because unfortunately the more pressure there is on them, the easier it is to go to the instant easy response that there must be something going on at home, or something of that nature.

Agnes Agyepong: I agree; I echo all of that. I would add that there always needs to be a cultural lens in what we are talking about when we say training: when we are looking at SEND, it is not just one type. We had a case where we had a student from a white British background and he used the normal stimming ball just to self-soothe and that was fine. There was another boy who was beatboxing. The teacher just could not understand why this boy was beatboxing, very quickly going down the behavioural route. He was also autistic and the teacher did not understand that he was using music as his way to self-soothe and that was something that he developed.

There is a cultural lens to understanding how SEND manifests in different communities, different individuals, different people. Instead of going straight to the behavioural, punitive landscape, it is making sure that there is a needs analysis or needs assessment to understand how best we can support those children before we go straight to behaviour, punitive and then exclusions.

Jo Harrison: May I make one more point very quickly? We see that punitive behaviour approaches actually exacerbate dysregulation in children and young people and then further impact on attendance, exclusions and suspensions. Again, it is the wider impact and the reach and the outcomes for the children and young people.

Tania Tirraoro: There is in-school training funded by the Department for Education, run by Whole School SEND. It is called the Universal SEND Services. I sit on their advisory board. This has been going on for over three years now and it is free: it is available to every school; but we don't think the Department for Education is doing enough to push this training, which it pays for, out to schools and local authorities. It is fantastic training. It is there and it is available. We think that a much better job should be being done, and it needs to be done not just as part of the change programme, but long term.

Q24 **Jess Asato:** A number of you mentioned SENCOs. How do you think that there could be enhanced support for SENCOs to help them fulfil their roles?

Agnes Agyepong: At the moment, a lot of pressure is put on the SENCO. I forgot to add in my introduction that two out of my three children also have a SEND need, so I regularly interact with the SENCOs. We are going through a digital revolution. I am not sure if I am allowed to add that here. How are we now looking at some of the tools that can support SENCOs to help with the administrative aspect, so that they can show up more on the people-facing aspect of their roles?

In addition, there needs to just be more support. Our previous panellists said this. A lot of the time SENCOs are not given the level of prestige, I want to say, within the schools. That undermining already impedes their ability to really advocate for their parents. Sometimes you will find that SENCOs and the parents do have a really good relationship. However,

they are still not able to get the support they need from the school system.

Hayley Harding: Adding on to that, a lot of pressure is put on SENCOs, and they are very overworked. There tends to be in some schools the culture of "That is the SENCO's job". They dip in and out, so the child may have an hour's help but then that's it. As we have already spoken about, if we could get more of a whole-school approach so that all the teachers know the methodology and don't need to call the SENCO in to write the reports, for example, that would really help. It would also speed up the whole process.

Jo Harrison: SENCOs are often the key point of contact for a parent of a child or young person with SEND. If they have stretched capacity within the school, often we hear that you can put in a call to speak to a SENCO about a really simple concern that might have happened at school that day or a slight concern about the type of intervention, and there is not the capacity to have that conversation with the parent because they are stretched. There is only that one point of call and if you are speaking to the class teacher, generally they are also stretched and will say, "Oh, it is SEND—you need to speak to the SENCO."

Where there is not that relationship, that can foster anxiety in the parents, which doesn't help to resolve situations really quickly. That can exacerbate behaviour being demonstrated by the child in the classroom or, again, a child or young person not attending school because there is not the time to have that conversation with the parent to re-regulate the child to get them back into education. It has a wide-reaching approach when we are not giving them the opportunity to thrive in the role.

Tania Tirraoro: SENCOs have often said that they can be a class teacher, a head of year, head of PE as well as SENCO. They are only one person. Who can do all those roles sufficiently? Because SEND has expanded so much in recent years, they should just be being the SENCO—maybe a class tutor at the same time, but it is a job that is plenty big enough for them. They should also be trained in SEND law. IPSEA—the Independent Panel for Special Education Advice—does SEND law courses for SENCOs. They are available now, so we think that they should be taking those courses. They should certainly be having protected time at the moment so that they can get that work done.

Q25 **Mark Sewards:** What strategies or measures should schools or local authorities put in place to help SEND students make the transition from early years to primary school, or primary school to secondary school? Does the panel have any thoughts on that? Who would like to start?

Tania Tirraoro: They are supposed to do it now. Many schools do a really good job of this. The children have visits up to the primary school, from the nursery school to the school they are supposed to go to. Many schools do this really well, and the same into secondary school. Where it can fall apart is where the child has a SEND support plan, or an EHCP, to

make sure that that is fully transitioned and there is a meeting between the current school, the new school, the parent and the child so that they can discuss everything that this child needs, and how best to do that. That is quite difficult when you are moving into post-16 and is a massive transition. The same thing needs to happen there, but it happens less often. Those kinds of things can be written into an updated code of practice.

Jo Harrison: To build on what Tania has said—and I wholeheartedly agree there—we are finding that many children are moving, particularly from primary school to secondary school, where there is a real change in the environment from being in a small class in a more nurturing area to being a grown-up in school, and we are not giving them time to transition.

There is some excellent practice out there being done by some really good schools. Rather than having the day where you go in at year 6 for the day and you might have a lunch with everybody and do a couple of classes, we are seeing schools doing their transition period over a term, where a child will come in for an hour and then build up to two hours. By the end of that term, before they are ready to go, they are doing a couple of afternoons. They have met the teachers. That also allows the child to foster relationships with the school and, more importantly, to understand the environment so that it is not big and scary on their first day. It also enables them to foster connections with peers in that area and build up friendships.

Often children with SEND may take more time to develop friendships, will have difficulties sometimes with fostering those relationships and need support. It is being able to do that over a gradual period with a small group and then understanding the adults that will be supporting them in that environment, knowing where their safe spaces are, knowing where their nurturing spaces are. So, there are things that can be done and are being done by some really good schools that show that it is feasible, but it is about making that a priority and allowing schools to make that a priority.

There is also something around really engaging parents and carers. It is a huge deal. If you are picking up your child from nursery, you are having a lovely handover with your child, and you get a five or 10-minute chat, and you get a communication book. As you go through to primary school, often you are having that end-of-day handover—I know I did with my child when she was still in year 6. Then you go to secondary, and it is nothing; it is silence. That can raise anxieties, especially if you don’t know what the provision looks like for your child, what their interventions are or who their key person is. It is about strengthening the relationships and pre-empting those relationships—how are we going to communicate with you and what that might look like.

Agnes Agyepong: I come from an area that, on paper, they would say is a deprived area. My son went to an amazing local authority nursery, a nursery that is underfunded by the local authority. It meant that they had a SENCO and when my son was transitioning into school, he had so much support, first of all from the SENCO at the nursery, but also there was a relationship with the school that he was going to. Again, to echo that there is good practice in areas that people say "does not have funding"—relationships are built.

On the flipside of that, a lot of the early years provisions are privately run and don't have that support. They don't have the SENCO. I know there are so many parents who wanted their children to attend this nursery because they had the SENCO. We are talking about that transition in the early years. I am asking for SENCOs in the early year settings, within the nursery settings, because early intervention is key. You need to get in early enough to be able to prevent a lot of the challenges that we are seeing happening upstream.

At secondary school, I feel that we are really missing the boat. In year 6, children have the SATs going on, they are about to leave school and it is a big transition. Personally, I thought it particularly hard for certain children, but even just in general—that cliff edge, when you are in school and then you are in secondary school, a big school with so many children, can be overwhelming. This transition needs to happen much earlier on—I would probably say year 5. It is not necessarily going into the school and then staying there maybe for a couple of days, but just getting familiar with different schools in that setting and having better pastoral support so it is a smoother transition from primary into secondary.

Hayley Harding: A lot of the problems that we find, particularly moving from primary to secondary, is because the child that should have an EHCP does not have one. The parents are in the tribunal process, or they have effectively had to wait to the end. SENCOs quite rightly often prioritise the children who are about to transition to make sure they are okay, but of course then you are going into that process of, as I said, the tribunal system and everything else that goes with it, which takes a long time. When they get to secondary, they completely fall apart because they don't have support. It is a very different environment to cope with and there is nothing there to help them through it.

Q26 **Caroline Voaden:** Children and young people with SEND experience disproportionately high rates of school exclusions. In your view, what are the key factors contributing to this issue and what measures do you think schools and teachers can implement to effectively reduce exclusion rates and better support children with SEND so that they do not end up excluded?

Agnes Agyepong: I am really passionate about this, and my first answer started off talking about punitive policies and behaviour. It is how behaviour is policed. That is the long and short of it. If children are

waiting years to get their EHCPs but then the behavioural policies are six months, you are not able to play catch-up. This is for parents who are even going down that pathway and attempting to get an EHCP. What about those parents who don't have the capacity to do that—to fight the system—because they are working and trying to put food on the table?

From the inception, when a child is displaying behaviour that the school have concerns around, we need to be embedding a SEND approach to look to see, before we go straight here, what is actually happening. We are all taught, from the moment you have a baby, that the child's behaviour is telling you something. Instead of going straight to, "Well, this is our behaviour policy: you shouldn't be doing this," let's understand what that behaviour is saying—have we done an assessment to find out if there is an additional need, and then start in that course, but at the moment we are not doing that.

Tania Tirraoro: You find far too many children are ending up in alternative provision without ever having any kind of assessment of need. AP is not SEND provision, so why is it that schools are not taking the time to assess the children? Agnes mentioned the differences in cultural behaviour as well. Instead of saying, "Is this a special educational need? Let's do an assessment," you are just out—you are out into alternative provision, whereupon children do get an assessment and they are found to have some sort of SEND, which could have happened within the mainstream, and they could have had the support. We really think that this should be banned. We don't think that a school should be allowed to exclude a child until an assessment of need has been carried out.

Jo Harrison: I would like to build on what Tania has said. There is something about having a multidisciplinary approach, particularly around exclusions, to really understand from all different areas across health, social care and education what the needs of that child are, and is it something more than "naughty" behaviour, as some schools would describe it? Because punitive measures and putting children out of education is not the way. We are not effectively safeguarding these children—the local authority. They are now out of placement, and it really impacts on the outcomes of children and young people, and in recent cases, not SEND-related but outcomes for children who have not been in school.

There is something around exclusions are frequently used to off-roll children. If they don't meet the school's criteria, if they are going to impact on the league tables, there are some schools that will not accept a child with SEND, or will off-roll that child with SEND. That also needs to have greater accountability.

Tania Tirraoro: A few years ago, the Government funded the Timpson exclusions review. They have still not carried out most of the recommendations that they said they would. If you haven't looked at the Timpson exclusion review yet, take a good look at it.

Hayley Harding: There are also some programmes out there that show that other methodology can work, and work really well. We have a very much one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to our education system, and often kids that have been excluded are—as you say, it is communication—that form of learning is not working.

A good example of this is that I have been recently doing some work with Dallaglio RugbyWorks. Its latest statistics are a 98% success rate in getting kids back from either excluded or on the ridge of being excluded to going into some sort of employment, further training or education. There are programmes out there that can be really successful, but we need to open up a little bit to what they are and not expect everybody to go through the same sort of methodology.

Q27 **Sarah Smith:** I am conscious of time, so maybe a couple of you want to take this, and then we will keep pushing forward. To speak now about the cliff edge that parents often talk to me about, which is that post-16 transition and the world feels quite scary at that point, particularly for parents and carers of children with SEND: how can the system take steps so that the teams and professionals and teachers around those children can continue to support them on their journey, and to improve that key transition?

Tania Tirraoro: When the Children and Families Act came in, it was brand-new for post-16 because there had not been statutory provision before. This was new then and I don't think that it has been properly embedded yet. It is too easy to say, if a child with SEND comes along to post-16, "How about travel and tourism for you? How about one of those lesser academic courses?" instead of really looking at what that child's interests are and how they can be supported.

My own son went from a specialist school back into mainstream sixth form. His support was not replicated there, not even close, and he ended up failing his ASs as a result, when he had got A*s in his specialist school. That situation has not changed. So, we need more help, more imagination to see what young people can do. Our co-director's daughter is a little bit older than post-16, but she is now doing a work fit with Down syndrome, a scheme where she has been working in H&M, doing fantastically well. It is just more creative thinking.

Agnes Agyepong: Our work, particularly with black and marginalised families and community groups across London, tells us that there is a significant concern, especially with post-16 transition, at a time when particularly our children are mostly at risk of criminalisation. It is really important that we get underneath the bonnet early on to reduce the likelihood of a failed or difficult transition into further education or employment. We believe that transition plans are just like what we said with the early years—they need to start early on. It happens so late. These big cliff edges keep happening. It means that children, especially children who have additional needs, are not able to adjust or transition

smoothly. The school system or the work system that they are going into is not able to have the time to prepare for that transition.

We believe that the Department for Education, local authorities and schools must ensure that the plans that are then put in place for these young people are regularly updated to reflect any changes in the student's life or needs, supporting them as they move into adulthood with the necessary skills and confidence to succeed in further education or employment.

Q28 **Chair:** I want to ask about funding. We heard from one of the witnesses on our previous panel that money that is in the SEND system at the moment is not always spent very well, and certainly we know that it is not achieving the outcomes or the levels of service that are needed. Do you have views about how the funding that is already within the SEND system should be allocated, how there can be more transparency for how it is spent and how it can be used to deliver better outcomes for children?

Agnes Agyepong: In short, it should be given to the families that are supporting or filling in the gap that the Government are not currently filling. So many groups are coming out—probably that is why a lot of us are here on the panel today—to fill in these services. We start off as parents advocating for our own children, another parent comes with their own concern, we start helping them, and then the next minute we as parents have a caseload. We don't know about funding applications or about the law at that time; we are just parents who are really concerned about the children in our community.

We believe that there needs to be better funding and better support for a lot of the community groups that have come in to fill in these statutory services, and money should be supported to go into them, so that they can scale up that work. There is peer support already happening. How can we scale that up, so that there is a safe and inclusive environment for parents?

Jo Harrison: We waste significant resources fighting for support that should be given without having a statutory plan. Within the system, and as we have heard from the previous panel, there is an over-reliance on EHCPs from parents because the system is not supporting them when it should do. If we were giving children and young people the support that they need earlier, we would not be seeing and moving into more independent provision, complex care, tier 4 provisions.

A child and young person I know was struggling with planning his homework in a grammar school and constantly getting detentions. His parents asked, "We don't understand all the apps. Please can someone just once a week sit down with him and help him plan his homework and look at the timescales of his homework so that he can manage it in accordance?" That never happened. He developed an eating disorder and was in the Priory for six months. What could have been a really cost-

effective intervention to support a child, did not happen. Anxiety came along and we are then spending a lot more money.

That is not an isolated case. The numbers of our children and young people who are in tier 4 provisions is increasing, and the number of children and young people getting EHCPs is increasing. We should be looking at better collaboration between health and social care and education to provide early support. It does not need to be one-to-one support with a child; what works for a child with SEND works for a whole class.

We need to be looking at how we can celebrate our children and young people to engage in the curriculum in different ways. If we keep forcing them down a curriculum pathway that is not allowing them to thrive, we are creating mental health difficulties. We need to be a lot more creative with the funding that we have in the system and how we use it.

Tania Tirraoro: No one, not even the Government, knows how much the SEND spend is in education, health and social care as a total. That is quite a shocking statistic. When you are talking about funding, it is best to preload the system with early intervention. It has been flagged since before the last reforms as being really important. For example, the National Audit Office Report said that it was critically important, but the DFE does not have a process or funding to facilitate early intervention.

In schools, the SEN support budget, the delegated budget that Imogen mentioned, has not been increased for about 15 years. It is worth half of what it was previously. When it goes there, it does not go to the SENCO. It is part of the general school budget and is not given to the SENCO or spent on SEND. It is spent in another area of the school, where it is just as equally needed, but it is actually supposed to be spent on SEND.

We believe it has to be ringfenced. It maybe should be renamed the SENCO budget. It has to be accountable. At the moment, it is completely murky: you don't know what a school spends its SENCO budget on. All those children who need EHCPs end up being out of school, and there are far too many of them. If they had had SEN support funded by an enhanced budget, how many of them would not have needed the plan to start off with?

Funding is such a massive issue. We don't have time to talk about all the macro funding part of it. I am possibly not the right person to get into the weeds of that, but we will send that information to you as part of our submission.

Hayley Harding: The structure where schools have to find the £6,000 on top of the initial £4,000 that every child is theoretically supposed to get, needs to change. We have to be honest: schools are massively under pressure for all their children. They get this SEND budget, and I have spoken to headteachers who say, "Our SEND budget now is basically taken up by EHCPs, so we have no money left for anything else in the

school for the children that don't have the EHCPs." If you then turn around to the school and tell them to take on more children with EHCPs, we are going to get to a point where they say no. We do have that already: some schools do say no, and legally they should not but that is what is happening.

We need to change the system so that there is not this disincentive financially to take these kids, because they give so much back to obviously a mainstream class. If the money is not there to give them the support they need, we are pushing them into a situation where it is not good for anybody.

Tania Tirraoro: The direction of travel now is to create more resource provision, more units within schools, so where is the money coming for that? The potential issue is that children will be moved into resource spaces instead of being in the school with the rest of the children, and you need to make sure that if you are going to be an inclusive school, that resource provision does not become segregated.

Q29 **Chair:** Sticking with that theme really briefly, what do you think the Government should be doing to increase the capacity of the SEND system overall over the longer term? At the moment, there is a focus on delivering more resource bases in schools, but we have heard some other ideas as well. There are thoughts about how to create an accountable, inclusive mainstream. Briefly, if you can.

Agnes Agyepong: First of all, there need to be more staff and more support. I get shocked when I go into certain schools and I see there is a teacher in each class and one TA going in between. If we are talking about having more inclusive schools, and saying we will do all this new training but then we are not giving schools the capacity to be able to implement that training, it is just lip service. If inclusive schools is the talk that we are using, let's match that with money to make sure that the resources are in place for teachers to be able to truly deliver inclusive schools.

Jo Harrison: I would argue as well that we are not sufficiently planning for our population. When children and young people are born, often with medical and complex needs, we know that in five years they will be in school. We know that in 10 years they will be looking at secondary school, yet we don't incorporate that data. There is not a sufficient dataset and councils are not using that information to better plan their provision. As a result, they are relying on the independent market to come in to fill those positions, but often at a cost and a profit to them.

We need to be better at understanding what high-cost provision will look like, how it needs to be delivered. We need to be better at working in collaboration across local areas, across ICBs, to manage and collaborate those budgets to better manage those high-cost opportunities.

Tania Tirraoro: Even the Government's recent Delivering Better Values case review report has clearly identified the lack of early intervention as a major driver of problems. We know this, so why are we not putting that money into early intervention, which we have known since well before the previous reforms?

Jo Harrison: And not building new schools with the same provision, or spaces for new provision?

Hayley Harding: Can I quickly get on bases quickly? Bases can work really well, and they are very economical. I have a local school to me. They have expanded from, I think, initially two SEND bases classes and moved up to nine. They do really well at integrating children to the level that they are comfortable with, so it keeps them as part of the community but at the same time doesn't scare them going into school every day effectively. On finances, I think on average for a child there the spend is about between £20,000 and £22,000. If you send them to an independent school, you could be looking at as much as £60,000. So, it makes sense if it can be done well. It probably needs to be a statutory setting to make sure that it does not end up being effectively just childcare, and we have had cases of that in some schools, but when it is done well it is really good.

Tania Tirraoro: We need an evidence base to base this on, which I know the DFE is gathering at the moment, but while it is busy gathering it, local authorities are busy creating more resource provision without any guidance or anything like that.

Chair: I will go to Caroline now.

Caroline Voaden: No, we are short of time, it is fine. We will move on.

Chair: Are you sure? It is probably quite important. I will come back to that question if we have time at the end.

Q30 **Joe Robertson:** Evidence suggests the need for greater accountability for local authorities across education, health and social care in meeting obligations for SEND provision. What measures and consequences should be put in place to improve accountability, particularly when there are statutory failures in effectively delivering SEND services? We are looking at improving accountability and measures for consequences for failure.

Jo Harrison: Imogen, Amanda and Katie covered it earlier somewhat in the fact that a lot of the accountability sits within the local authority yet the responsibility to deliver the provision sits within the school—sits not even within the ICBs but the providers that they then commission to deliver health support, and within social care. There is very little accountability for the local authority to hold that to account.

We are seeing a rising number of complaints being made to the LGA, for instance, who will offer financial penalties to the schools and

compensation to parents and carers. Parents and carers don't want compensation; they want education for their children and young people. There is nothing around non-compliance. There is no accountability. If a local authority has a high number of complaints regarding SEND support, where is the accountability, where are those conversations and how is that being addressed in a wider footprint? We cannot be holding the local authorities to account for not delivering speech and language therapy when a health provider has been commissioned at times—sometimes it is commissioned by the local authority—to deliver that provision. We need shared accountability.

We need better collaboration across our systems—not just the system leaders but also our providers. We need to be better engaging and working more collectively. We need to strengthen the system by putting some guidance and some legislation in there to support that, because we don't have the multi-agency working that we should have, based on current legislation.

Q31 **Joe Robertson:** Is there a problem that there are not any consequences and a system of fines is unhelpful and you lack the hard accountability if there are no consequences?

Jo Harrison: You have local area SEND inspections and the consequence for that is you will have some increased monitoring. If you have an LGA complaint, you might get a £2,000 or £3,000 or £5,000 fine and, let's be honest, some local authorities say that is cheaper than providing the provision. If you have a child who is not in education for a year and might be needing an independent provision, having a fine for £5,000 is much cheaper than providing that education for a year.

Hayley Harding: This goes all the way to the top, unfortunately. We need to get back to a place where the laws actually matter. Right now it feels, certainly for parents and for kids, that the laws regarding SEND don't matter. The tribunal statistics back that up. We have pleaded with the Department for Education, as local groups, as national groups, time and time again, to say, "Please come and help us." You can see the system breaking. This is prior to covid. This is not post-covid. Nothing has been done.

Obviously, as we saw in the Public Accounts Committee report a couple of weeks ago, they still don't know what is causing it. What does inclusion look like? Why has not this already been worked out? This is ridiculous. We cannot be back in this situation where, 10 years on, they still cannot tell you what inclusion should be. Yes, absolutely, we need better mechanisms for accountability.

We need parents to be given costs at the tribunal. They spend so much money fighting decisions that should have been made correctly in the first place and yet do not, through what sometimes feels like a bit of a loss-leader of process, and yet nothing happens.

I know from the campaigning we did locally that we basically threw everything at our council and nothing happened because they were not being told above to sort things out. Nationally, nothing has changed, either. We need to get back to a position where we are all on the same page because right now, we don't know what pages we are on, quite frankly. Most parents don't even know what the local authority's criteria are. An amnesty of some kind would be really helpful so that we know what the criteria are in every local authority. Then we can build on trying to make the accountability, because until we know what the rules are, what do we do?

Tania Tirraoro: The difficulties that we are now facing, though, is that we have the accountability, the tribunal and the ombudsman, but local government are doing their best to try to destroy the accountability that there is, by calling for the tribunal to be junked in a recent report that they funded. As another example, one of their ideas is to stop parents being able to appeal refusals for an assessment. We are noticing more and more that there are little snippets appearing in the press trying to further their point of view, to try to cut the amount. Claims that the tribunal is adversarial were in the press last week. The tribunal is not adversarial. The tribunal upholds the law. That is its job. That is what it does. The fact that local authorities only win 1.3% of the time really speaks to the fact that their decision making is faulty. In fact, that was underlined by a report by the Administrative Justice Council last year or the year before, which called on local authorities to improve their decision making.

We really don't want any situation where children's rights are diluted, which is what local authorities are wanting because they cannot meet the rules because of the funding. Their answer is to then just get rid of the rules. In whatever other industry would that be allowed?

Jo Harrison: If we dilute the rules, we are not going to dilute the needs. The needs will still exist.

Agnes Agyepong: The SEND system is broken. It is broken for everyone up and down the UK, but particularly when we are talking about black parents and the lens into which they interact. Oftentimes we are not even getting to tribunals, we are not even getting to that stage, because of how our behaviour is policed. We go in trying to support our children and our children's mental health, and the next minute it is our mental health that is being questioned in that process. There is an intersectional layer of race, of poverty and how that intersects in this system. This has to be an issue that we address as a fundamental injustice.

Black women and leaders are doing often unpaid work to fill in these gaps. I cannot tell you the number of women and families that we have to support that are stressed out with the system, not just because they are fighting for their children, but because of how their behaviour is policed as just being a black woman fighting and navigating that system.

For us, we want parent forums that are particularly led by black and diverse communities to basically be supported, for that lens to be understood. Also, Ofsted and local authorities must formalise partnerships with these leaders, and pay them for their expertise. I cannot express the number of times where it is this issue of, "We want to be more inclusive, we want to be diverse. We know there are these issues. Can you come and give all of your resources, all of your knowledge? On top of having full-time jobs, on top of looking after children who have additional needs, come and give this free labour," but there are no resources or support to be able to do that. We need to ensure that these voices are embedded within the system so that when the SEND system is being rebuilt, it is in an inclusive way so that all people's voices, all people's experiences, are included in that system.

Q32 **Jess Asato:** We have covered some of this already, but what improvements and safeguards can be implemented to ensure that accountability pressures on schools and local authorities do not lead to exclusionary practices, but instead promote inclusive approaches that support the needs of children with SEND?

Tania Tirraoro: Ofsted is looking at this at the moment to see how it can inspect inclusive schools. There are all sorts of things that it can do. One of them is about looking at data to see how many children have been off-rolled. It can look at where the SEND budget has been spent. It can speak to parents, most importantly, because the parents will tell you whether they have been pressured to move their child to another school, or whether a zero-tolerance behaviour policy has disadvantaged their child with SEND, has discriminated against them. Those things can be done. Behaviour policies need to adhere to the Equalities Act as well, which many of them do not do.

Q33 **Jess Asato:** My next question is about some Ofsted reforms so it might be worth merging the two, and obviously they are looking at new inclusion criteria. Quite a number of people, and evidence that we have seen, suggest that a narrowing of the curriculum, at the same time as very strict behaviour policies, has led to a natural exclusion of children with SEND. Do you feel that that was the case?

Jo Harrison: There definitely needs to be a flex on the curriculum. We are pushing children and young people with SEND who are not highly academic—and also those who are academic, we need to make that really clear—because we are putting them in environments where they cannot thrive. Many children and people would be able to thrive in mainstream environments if we adapted the environment and the pressure—if we allowed regular breaks, for example. If you are in a secondary school, you are supposed to take nine GCSEs. For some children and young people, it would be far better to do five core GCSEs and do really well at those, rather than be pushed to do all of them and not do any of them well. We are not offering the flexibility. Sometimes a child or young person is struggling with English language, yet we are forcing them to do

German at school. I understand the culture and the insight, but there has to be that flexibility.

We should not need children and young people to have an EHCP to have those recommendations, and that is where inclusion really comes in. We think if a child is at school that they must be included, but what we hear from our parents is, "My child is in school, my child is in the class, but they are not able to engage," and that is not inclusion.

I think you talked earlier about sports. If a child and young person cannot engage with sports but are having to sit on the sidelines, that is not inclusion. We want children to have a sense of belonging, to feel empowered to go to school, to be able to socialise. A great view of inclusion is, how are children and young people integrating with their peers with SEND in the school? What is that culture? How are we fostering that and what is the school doing to support that?

Hayley Harding: To add on to that—I am echoing what Tania said—they need to listen to parents a lot more. I heard Tania say at a previous meeting that for parents the in-person meetings are not always taking place now, compared with what used to happen. But also, if a parent has a view, do not descale it. I think the problem at the moment is that parents feel like their view is probably fifth down the line.

An example I can give of this is of one local authority that passed. When the pressure group then turned around to FIY the result of that, they said 371 parents wrote to Ofsted on their online forms. All their responses did not echo what the council were telling them, yet that was dismissed and the council was still given a pass rating.

Parents are living it; that is what is forgotten about. We live it, we breathe it, we reap the consequences when things go wrong. It is very easy to believe people because they are the ones sat around a table with them and they are running the systems, and they can tell them everything is great. The reality is we actually know the results, so we really need Ofsted to listen to us and rate that as high, if not higher than any other factors in their decision making.

Agnes Agyepong: A practical improvement would be for Ofsted to penalise schools for high exclusion rates and reward those with robust inclusion practices. It is getting under the bonnet to find out what is going on there and having detailed knowledge about how many students are being off-rolled and then look at that particularly through an intersectional lens. I personally feel Ofsted has a big role to play because we know schools listen to Ofsted and look to Ofsted, and there needs to be that joined-up approach.

Tania Tirraoro: Ofsted monitoring visits for area SEND inspections have been paused at the moment because it wanted to pause them to see the direction of travel of the new Government, but I don't think that is particularly helpful for those local authorities who have had—it is not

graded, but it is the lowest level, so they are not getting monitoring visits to see how their improvement plans are going, for example.

Hayley mentioned that previously parents could go along to an open meeting and give their views of the area SEND inspections, but that was halted because Ofsted, as I recall, said it had enough from the online surveys and some of the parents were too loud compared to the other parents and it was very emotional. That was a meeting management problem, not a parent problem. Let's put the blame for that where it needs to be and let's hear parents.

Agnes Agyepong: We are talking about tribunals and EHCPs and so forth. I have an EHCP for my son. I see that as a privilege in some way, and we will talk about how that is embedded, but so many families are not getting to that stage. They are not getting to that stage because they are turning up at the school, being told that their child is misbehaving, their child may be excluded, their child may be going to the PRU, they are going to be on a temporary timetable. That means that the parent now has to leave work, be pushed further into poverty if they are already facing financial challenges, to be able to fight for their system.

There are parents, such as myself, who know how to navigate the system to some degree, and we are still struggling with that, but then there is a whole other side of parents who literally are taken aback, they are trusting their schools and the local authority to have the best need for their children. They don't know about SEND. They are just finding out about dyslexia, autism, as their child is presenting. They don't have any understanding and their children are being failed.

There also needs to be a lens, and we are talking about Ofsted, about how Ofsted is involved in looking at children, not those who are necessarily textbook—"Okay, this child has an EHCP, or this child is going down this route"—but looking at children as a whole, and seeing how those behavioural policies are being implemented in the first place.

Tania Tirraoro: May I suggest something that is really important, that could help so many more parents? We used to have an independent supporter process when we were doing the transition from statements to EHCPs. These people holistically supported parents all the way through the system, and it was ended when the transition finished. We need to reintroduce that because it could smooth everything out, it could help prevent parents from not knowing what is happening, and I believe it could cut trips to the tribunal as well.

Q34 **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge:** What changes should be made to ensure that parents' voices are heard, that their voices are considered, and to strengthen parental engagement during area SEND and Ofsted inspections?

Tania Tirraoro: We covered some of that before, about having that meeting back. If parents are upset in the meetings, they are upset for a

reason. It is because their children have been devastated by not getting the support that they need. That loud parent is probably speaking on behalf of a whole load of other parents who don't have the confidence to speak up, and they are probably quite grateful that that parent has spoken.

Jo Harrison: Many parents and carers feel unheard, often blamed, quite often shamed, when they are advocating their child's and young person's needs. It is great filling out a form, because we have all—if you have a child with disabilities, you have to qualify very quickly for a degree in form-filling. It is lovely to get a form and send it in, but what we don't hear from the local area inspections is the themes of what parents are telling us.

What then becomes the challenge for the parent carer forums, for the charities and the voluntary groups that are also inputting into those area inspections, is we then get a lovely report that does not really reflect what the parents were telling them, what those who are supporting the parents were saying. If you have it all over here and you have a thousand responses from parents who are saying it is not working well, how are we reflecting? What are the themes that are coming out? There is nothing in there that talks about that, and that really needs to change.

Agnes Agyepong: I feel that parents need to feel safe: we need to be able to feel safe to be able to participate in this process, and oftentimes parents don't. When children's behaviour is already being seen in a certain way, then definitely the parenting of that child is also being viewed in a certain way. Oftentimes, you get parents who have concerns around their children or are navigating and thinking, "Does my child have autism or don't they?" but because their behaviour is in such a way, to be frank, they are feeling that social services will be at their door and maybe their child or children could be taken away. They are feeling judged and they are not feeling safe. Until we create a safe environment for parents to feel like they can raise concerns and not be judged, we are not going to get there. They want to understand the system better and work together without fear of redress.

Equally, there are parents that we supported who are here legally but are going through the immigration process. We are told that when they try to engage within the system, the first thing that is happening is they are being questioned. They then have to retract from even engaging, because when their visa comes up for review in maybe the next two years, if they have one query or question that they have been referred to social services or mental health, they may not be able to stay in the country. Oftentimes, they come to me, and they say, "Look, Agnes, I know we talk at the school gate, but we are not like you. You can say these things; we cannot, because our visa may not be renewed if we raise our head above the parapet and we advocate for our children." Those children are then being failed.

We need a safe system. We are talking about parental engagement. We are talking about equity. We are talking about inclusivity. It needs to be safe for parents to be able to engage in this process without feeling that they will be judged or receive punitive measures themselves.

Tania Tirraoro: Or be investigated by social services, which happens, and have children taken away.

Chair: On that note—an important note—I will draw this sitting to a close. I thank all of our witnesses for coming today. We deliberately designed the programme so that we heard first from parents and organisations that represent parents and organisations that provide services in support of parents, and that will set a context for the questioning that we undertake in our further evidence sessions, when we will be hearing from young people themselves, but also from professionals who support them across a range of different professions as well, and from Government Ministers. Thank you very much for coming today.