



Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Solving the SEND crisis](#), HC 492

Tuesday 11 March 2025

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Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Amanda Martin; Darren Paffey; Manuela Perteghella; Mark Sowards; Patrick Spencer; Caroline Voaden.

Questions 82 - 109

Witnesses

I: Catherine McLeod MBE, CEO, Dingley's Promise; Annamarie Hassall MBE, CEO, nasen; Clare Howard OBE, CEO, Natspec; and Margaret Mulholland, SEND and Inclusion Specialist, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL).

II: Young people with experience of the SEND system: Katie Nellist; Lucy Bowerman; Joanna Hall; Sarah Cobb; and Madeline Thomas.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Catherine McLeod MBE, Annamarie Hassall MBE, Clare Howard OBE and Margaret Mulholland.

Chair: Welcome to this public oral evidence session with the Education Select Committee, which is part of our inquiry into solving the SEND crisis. I am going to ask our witnesses to introduce themselves briefly to the Committee, starting with Catherine.

Catherine McLeod: Hi. I am Catherine McLeod. I am the chief executive of Dingley's Promise. We support children with SEND in the early years.

Annamarie Hassall: Hello. I am Annamarie Hassall, and I am the chief executive at nasen, which is the National Association for Special Educational Needs. We are a membership organisation drawing membership from the education workforce.

Margaret Mulholland: Good morning. I am Margaret Mulholland, SEND and inclusion policy specialist from the Association of School and College Leaders.

Clare Howard: Good morning. I am Clare Howard. I am the chief executive of Natspec. We are the membership body for 137 specialist



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colleges. We also train the workforce across mainstream, general and further education and other FE providers.

Q82 **Chair:** Thank you. I will start with some questions on SEN support provision in mainstream schools. This question might be less relevant to you, Clare, because you are concerned with colleges rather than schools, but do come in if you would like to. Can I ask our other witnesses, what is your assessment of the current provision of SEN support in mainstream schools?

Margaret Mulholland: We are extremely worried about the current situation. School and college leaders tell us that it is not working in terms of the resource they are receiving to support the young people they serve.

There are so many issues that we could list with the current system, which I think we are all aware of, particularly around the lack of consistency; the unhelpful bureaucracy; the inconsistencies around magnet schools; provision in local areas being inconsistent, not just nationally but locally; the pressure on schools to reduce numbers on registers; and the lack of funding coming direct to the classroom.

Those are the things we are concerned about. However, we do think there is a lot of brilliant work being done in the system, and we are excited about the commitment to inclusion and the opportunity to build on the expertise that already exists. One of the messages I would like to share today is that we have some good practice out there, but we need further resources to embed and build on the shoulders of some of that expertise.

Annamarie Hassall: I would welcome an opportunity to add that, for the past three years plus, on behalf of the Department for Education, nasen has been involved in delivering a universal SEND services programme. That is intended to reach schools and colleges to build on and improve their confidence and SEN support. So we have a good picture of the overall SEN landscape.

I would say that the top points of concern are the inconsistencies around the country and the mixed portfolio of engagement with skills development training, which can mean a very mixed portfolio of support for children in schools. Every school is required to have a SENCO, and there is a prescribed form of training for that SENCO, but the SENCO is not enough on their own. Many years ago, when that role was first established, it was quite a different picture in schools. We now have a single person who is seeking to lead on SEND within their school and to influence all the practitioners and the practice, so that is the challenge. We have this leader with a very key role, and we have a bit of a mixed range of commitment from other teachers within schools. I am mainly referring to the mainstream.



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As a Committee, you will know about the changes that we have had across the education system with increased academisation. We have some multi-academy trusts that do some exceptional, stand-out work around inclusion. We have others that are focusing perhaps on their GCSE exam results in secondary, because they are taking on schools where there is a need for improvement, so they are not necessarily seeing SEND as core to school improvement. We would say that if you can get the provision right for learners with SEND needs, it does not leave anybody else out. In fact, if you set that as the gold standard, it can create a very inclusive opportunity right the way across the school.

I know we have a lot of questions, but perhaps I could just quickly say that, aside from what is happening in schools, there is dependency on other services outside of school. The speech and language therapists and health provision are crucial. Again, this is where we have a bit of a mixed arrangement across the country. Schools seek to compensate if that is not readily available in the area, so you may find that teaching assistants, for instance, will take on more health support before they can even begin to support learning, because there is not necessarily some school nursing or other, similar provision of occupational therapists and others.

That is just an example of how there is not one position for all. There is some standout practice and there are some real areas of challenge and concern. It is not all at the door of the schools and the colleges. It is very much down to other public services in the area, too.

Catherine McLeod: We will talk about early years later but, thinking about schools, what we have not done up until now—we are doing better—is understand the value and importance of the early years for children with SEND as they feed into schools. That relationship between schools and early years is not particularly strong in some areas, and the early years as a sector is fairly undervalued—it feels very much that it works really well with children with SEND. The early years is our best chance to have full inclusion, and that is what we should be driving for.

Where that is a possibility, it needs to be there for all the children and the families, so that the families have the confidence to say, “When we move into a school, we are confident to move into a mainstream school.” Sometimes when that is not valued, you end up with a situation where more families are looking to go into special education, simply because they do not trust the system.

In terms of schools valuing the early years, and local authorities valuing the numbers from the early years—the statistics on who is coming through—we need to start our pipeline earlier. That will then benefit our schools because we will know which children are coming through and we can support them effectively.

Clare Howard: Very briefly on FE, one of the main differences between colleges and schools is SEND support. There is no equivalent to the



notional £6,000 in colleges. I know that the Committee heard quite a lot about the high needs funding formula in your last evidence session. The other formula you need to be aware of is the 16 to 19 national funding formula. There is no reference to SEND within that, which makes it very difficult for colleges. Colleges are performing miracles despite that, given the large number of SEND learners in colleges—nearly 30% of 16 to 18-year-olds and 18% of adults. I think it is urgent that some SEND support funding does arrive in colleges.

Q83 Chair: That is very helpful. Thank you. Turning to what can be done, I have two more questions before I hand over to colleagues. The first is about what can be done immediately. Based on your experience of good practice—it is good to hear and to be reminded of all the expertise within the sector—what could the Government do immediately to help the situation in mainstream education settings as far as quality and consistency of support goes?

Margaret Mulholland: One of the things we are anxious about is the fact that, where there is good practice, it is in pockets across the country, and it is not rolled out. Yesterday I was in Liverpool. They were talking about the impact that ELSAs—emotional literacy support assistants—have made to school provision. There is no sustainable funding to take that forward. There are multiple examples like that of really effective practice. So sustaining good practice is one thing that we could be doing.

But, more fundamentally, we are hearing from teachers that rather than more training—training is really important—they need time. They need time to embed some of this training and engage with it effectively.

We are also fundamentally concerned that any short-term fixes—I could list 40 of them—are in the short term. What we need is a system redesign so that money has traction when it reaches the classroom. At the moment, schools are dependent on top-up funding rather than core funding for young people. We need to change that imbalance. We are using some of the top-up funding to maintain the staff needed to support young people's needs. How have we got to a situation like that where we have one in five children with special educational needs in school, but we do not have the provision and the funding to enable us to do that universal provision well? That is what is escalating the demand for EHCPs.

Annamarie Hassall: Margaret has referenced education, health and care plans. We would advocate for a shift in how funding is allocated, to make sure that support can be funded earlier. We are talking about the phase that we refer to as SEN support, or even earlier than that, and about the whole school environment being more inclusive from the outset, with an environment that is language-rich and appropriate for neurodiverse learners, with attention to acoustics, lighting and so on, so that we do as much as possible to prevent some of those barriers from arising.



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That is easier said than done, because it is the funding that often holds the key to being able to get in any additional support or have some additional staff time. In terms of tackling the funding, this is not necessarily about more funding; it is about freeing up the funding, and a presumption that it will be possible to buy into the resource and that, if the specialist resource is speech and language therapists, that will, where possible, come through the public sector, to maximise the use of funds, rather than it being an independent resource, which is often more costly.

Catherine McLeod: From an early years point of view, one of the key things we need to see is really strong inclusion training across our whole sector, making sure that it reaches all practitioners, not just SENCOs, so that everybody understands, which reassures families, as well as reassuring practitioners.

As I said, that is also our best chance for inclusion for everyone. It is about that strong, ordinarily available provision—knowing what every setting should be offering and making sure that every setting is using a graduated approach of assess, plan, do, review. If they are using those strategies, we would say that those earliest years should not be focused on getting an EHCP or those processes. What we have been looking at more recently is asking whether that could be shifted into reception, looking at properly funding the early years to say that any child in the early years will get what they need without needing to go for a diagnosis at that stage.

That is something that we think would really help with giving every child what they need early and, again, moving away from, “Oh, this child is a child with SEN, so they get this. This child is another child, and they get that.” We have the opportunity to say in the early years that every child is an individual and the support is there—it just needs to be funded properly.

Clare Howard: Two quick things from me on further education. First, we are delighted that you have another inquiry on FE and skills. That is the key one in terms of your question, because unless that inquiry and all FE and skills policy properly considers the full breadth of SEND learners, not just those who are moving on to employment or who are on higher-level academic courses, we will not get the inclusive approach and some of the approaches that you have been talking about.

I agree with what colleagues said about what is needed in terms of training and a graduated approach but, to do that, FE and skills policy has to properly consider SEND. It is a policy gap at the moment. It has fallen between FE and skills policy and the SEND policy. Nought to 25 tends to neglect 16 to 25. FE and skills tends to neglect the broad range of SEND.

Secondly, it has to be a system-wide vision of inclusion so that there is a clear role for specialist provision within that, in terms of supporting the mainstream and sufficiency planning across mainstream and special. We



are lucky in further education that 90% of EHCP holders are already in mainstream general further education or other mainstream providers, and only 10% are in special. That is right in terms of balance but, in order to make it real inclusion—breaking down that binary system and helping those colleges to work together—and provide better training, we need much greater recognition of an inclusive system with that mix and balance.

Q84 Chair: Thank you. Just briefly—we have lots of questions to get through, so I encourage you to be as succinct as you can be in responding—the Government have placed a huge emphasis on inclusion in mainstream in everything that they have said about SEN so far. If we are to see genuine inclusion, and an improvement in SEN support and ordinarily available provision in mainstream settings, what is the shift in resource that is needed to achieve that meaningful improvement that we want to see?

Margaret Mulholland: We would like to see a writing off of local authority debts so that the money going into the system now—the huge amounts of money—is actually reaching the schools and the classrooms in the local area in a way that will make the significant difference that we need.

Again, if we want an inclusive model with the universal provision and the ordinarily available there as standard, we need to address the national funding formula; it must change. We estimate that, at 2024 prices, the commissioned place funding should be at around £13,500. What we know is if that core funding increases, we will have access to that ordinarily available provision more readily for all children. If we have one fifth of young people on the SEND register in school, it should be standard practice, shouldn't it? But we have a system that is still designed on an old model of minority grouping. One important point is that we need to fund implementation of change, and we have not done that very effectively in the past.

The other aspect of that is that I think the IFS report said that expanding core provision will need significant investment, not just funding; it actually talked about having double funding in the first instance to get the system mobilised and working. So we are talking about significant amounts of funding going into that whole-school approach, as well as about protecting that additional provision needed for young people with exceptional needs.

Annamarie Hassall: We need to address the curriculum and assessment primarily in mainstream schools. We know that significant numbers of learners disengage from education because the curriculum does not appear to match their skills and talents, and assessment is not really highlighting what they can do; it just highlights what they cannot do. We know that those who are counted as electively home educated—so 117,000 now—include a significant number with SEND needs.



The curriculum and assessment are already under review, so I would just say, "Be brave and make those changes. Do not dilute standards. It is important to have standards for all our learners and for the future of the country—for talent, employment and so on." We have to have a curriculum that is more flexible and broader, and that enables school leaders to make decisions about what works for their learner population, to bring in creativity and movement and, within that, opportunities for teachers to be able to reflect and talk with each other. We have examples of great peer-to-peer models where that has driven change and improvements and the embedding of small steps or big ideas that have made a difference for inclusion.

Catherine McLeod: From a financial point of view, we absolutely believe that there needs to be that value and recognition of the early years. Traditionally, as a country, we have invested much less in our early years statistically than our neighbours. What we know is that, by the end of the early years, you can fairly accurately predict what children are going to achieve at age 16, at their GCSEs.

What we need to do is to pool high needs block funding. In some of our local authorities, we hear that the leadership of the local authority is saying that the high needs block is not for early years. We really need to realise that that high needs block funding does need to be ringfenced for the early years, because that is not happening everywhere. That leads to a situation where we do not intervene early, children are seen later, and it costs more. We need to be brave and say, "Let's invest in the early years now to get that early intervention in, so that in later years we will start to save money." Please, please look at investing and ringfencing for the percentage of children in the early years who need that support, so that the money goes into the early years.

Clare Howard: Briefly, two things. On the proportionality of funding, 27% of the EHCP holders are aged between 16 and 25, and 10% of the high needs budget is attracted to those learners. Around 1% of the last high needs capital provision went to FE and early years combined. So we are not getting the proportionalities right there in terms of spread across nought to 25. Importantly for FE, the localised system makes it very difficult, so we need a greater sense of regional or national planning. High needs learners are the only learners in FE who are funded locally. Everything else is planned: policy, funding, nationally or through the combined authorities. I think that that collaboration and that planning are important as well.

Q85 **Manuela Perteghella:** We have heard calls for putting SEN support on a statutory footing. In your view, would this help improve provision in mainstream education settings, and what should this look like in practice?

Catherine McLeod: From an early years point of view, what I often see in local authorities is that it is the EHCP that is tracked because it is statutory. When you look at data and statistics in local authorities, you often do not have that for children on SEND support, so we are missing



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out on that huge number of children and that pipeline of need. I think that it is vital that we do look at SEND support in the same way that we look at EHCPs.

However, what we do not want to do is create a big system. In the early years, it is all about what the needs of all the children are and making sure we have the funding to be able to provide for those children, and not about labelling or a large EHCP-style system. It is more about making sure that these things exist for all children and that we can give them the support they need at the earliest time without having to jump through lots of hoops.

Most local authorities have their systems for SENIF already. What I would say is that SEN inclusion funding is one of those areas in the early years where we need more structure and support from central Government. A lot of local authorities have been talking about having more in the way of standard formats and standard ways of doing this for SENIF for ordinarily available provision, and for childcare sufficiency assessments.

Everyone is trying to do the same work at the moment, and they are calling out for more guidance from Government around what looks good, so that they can then manage it in the same way. Then, when we look across local authority areas, when children move, when staff move, if the systems are much more similar than they are now, that will also significantly help.

Annamarie Hassall: While there could be positives in defining SEN support as a statutory aspect of what happens in school life, it could bring an unintended consequence of driving a criteria for accessing that support. However, in an ideal world, we should be quite fluid with that support, viewing that all learners may need some support at some time and that it is fluid and not set, so that, once it is defined, it sticks.

There could be an unintended consequence there. Unless we have a means by which we can generate additional funding, resources and so on, if this is about doing more with the same, I think we might have to guard against what could result in a bit of a tick-box approach. I would rather we took a "right the way across the board approach" to the philosophy of inclusion and worked hard to define what that is.

Colleagues have referenced ordinarily available provision—so being clear about the expectations for all schools and all settings and about what should be there in every school, not as an added extra. I would prefer that the effort went in there, rather than defining SEN support as a statutory phase.

Margaret Mulholland: I endorse that from Annamarie completely, but I would also ask the question: how would it differ from what we have now? We have a statutory expectation to meet needs. We are struggling to achieve that, and we are struggling to see those outcomes.



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If, as we say, it is about being more intentional and more accountable for funding, and additional funding, that might bring some short-term benefits, because that funding might be ringfenced and more accountable. But if that is not there, what we want to be accountable for is the quality of provision, not whether we can provide it. I think we are literally at a point of assessing whether we can or cannot actually achieve that universal provision at the moment, so that has to shift.

Also, we are at risk of pathologising again in terms of making it statutory around SEN support. We are worried about SEN support. EHCP has a lens, a focus and a support system that is working to a degree, although we are still really worried about the lack of specialist support in relation to young people who have education and healthcare plans. But those on SEN support are not getting that broader universal provision. What we do not want to be doing is saying, "Right, we are going to ringfence funding, and we are going to pathologise that all over again. These children are different, and they need something different." As Annamarie said, we actually need schools that are fit for purpose, and these young people are a particularly important focus within our school core funding.

Clare Howard: I can understand the calls for putting SEN support on a statutory footing, because children and young people without EHCPs are not getting the support they require, and that feels like a natural suggestion. I agree with my colleagues, however, that it is not a magic bullet. Just creating a statutory framework does not mean that it will happen, as we have seen with the unlawful practice that is happening in other areas of the system.

As I have already mentioned, colleges do not get any funding for students without EHCPs. There is nothing in the formula for that so, as my colleagues have said, it is necessary to get the support in place, put the training in place and provide accountability measures that make sense, and then let's measure the right things in terms of outcomes.

Q86 **Jess Asato:** We know that waiting times for EHCPs are too long, with only 50% issued within the 20-week target. What additional support can education settings offer to parents, carers and young people while they are waiting for these plans to be processed and finalised?

Margaret Mulholland: As you know, schools are often waiting an awful long time, and they are doing their best to put provision in place without waiting for that EHCP. However, where additional intervention is required, while trying to use economies of scale, that is not always possible. There is not always access to those specialists that are needed. Schools are telling us that they are trying to meet need by pooling resource and looking at alternatives in terms of online provision for acute needs.

We are particularly worried about children with mental health conditions at the moment—young people are seven times more likely to have a mental health condition—and ensuring that they can be in school and



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engaging with learning is proving incredibly challenging. Access to an educational psychologist and to CAMHS is not available in that period.

So we are bringing families in, working with them closely, making sure that we are constantly in touch with them, encouraging the LA to do the same, and making sure there are helplines available.

A number of LAs are working with schools to make sure that they can release funding early, working through clusters. We have examples of Camden, Croydon and many others. I heard this week about Birmingham, where they have provision plans that are releasing funding early so that we are not waiting for the completion of the EHCP.

During that needs assessment period, it is important that families and professionals are getting what they need. We need a single point of contact at the local authority, and we need that team around the family still supported in the interim period.

There is lots of innovation in that space but, again, we need those timelines to be tighter. We need less bureaucracy. Schools are often making a needs assessment, and completing the needs assessment to the local authority, but then having it rejected and having to go back through that bureaucratic process all over again.

It often feels that that is because the escalation of demand for EHCPs is a huge pressure for those local authorities to bear, so that pressure comes back into schools—there is pushback. Then, instead of being able to use our capacity to focus on meeting the needs of the young people, we are meeting the needs of an administrative, bureaucratic threshold. We really want to see a rapid change to that.

Annamarie Hassall: We also need to tackle the bureaucratic process that is the education, health and care plan process. Unless we tackle that, we are invariably just going to go around the same track. I really favour looking at a digital approach to education, health and care plans that makes them visible and that raises the bar of accountability, but that would also significantly reduce the administrative burden and simplify things. I am absolutely sure that we will speed up the process.

We need to tackle that ultimately, because at the moment we have schools, we have local authorities and we have parents all seeking to fill the gap until resource is released. But these are children—these are learners—who have been part of the school system for a while. They do not go from nothing to an education, health and care plan, so there are strategies in place and there are approaches that schools are doing. At times, we are seeing schools—it is almost a point of last resort for a school—seeking something, a solution. We need to debureaucratise the education, health and care plan system.



Margaret Mulholland: Can I add to what Annamarie said? It is not just about making, digitising, standardising, because we know there is a challenge around the different systems—

Chair: I am really sorry. We have loads of topics and we want to get your evidence on the record. The question was about how we support families while they are waiting, so I am going to move on.

Margaret Mulholland: Of course, apologies.

Chair: Does anyone else want to come in on that topic of how we support families while they are waiting?

Catherine McLeod: Just very quickly, family support is so critical. I would especially flag those early years. In the early years settings, you have the most trusted professionals that work with families. If we can get it right there, it is all about that celebratory approach. It is about the fact that, when a child is needing that support, we are working with them to show that this could be the future, and to look at that positively. Certainly, in those early years, that is where you will set the path for how those parents think about what the future could be and what potential there is. I think that that moment is one that, sometimes, we miss. We do need to invest in making sure that those parents get that quality. A lot of local authorities have had portage cut. This is one of those things you really need to look at and ask, "How are we supporting those families early so they are moving into the educational system with hope that inclusion is possible and they have hope for the future?"

Q87 **Mark Swards:** This is a question for you all, but I might start with Catherine, if that is okay. Is the DFE's definition of an inclusive mainstream education clear across early years, across schools and across further education? If that is not clearly defined, how should it be defined?

Catherine McLeod: Definitions! I hear a lot of work going on in different places to define what inclusion is. I know that that is important. For me at the moment, and for the experiences that we have in the early years, what we really want to see is a situation where the local authority, the settings and the families have a shared understanding of what inclusive practice looks like. At the moment I would say we do not, and I think that comes from a lot of different levels. It comes from real co-production with families, with local authorities including families in those discussions, but it also comes from a respect for the early years settings, to listen to them when that is being discussed, and they are often missed out.

With Childcare Works we have just designed a new reflection tool to understand, "Is this inclusive? Is it not?" Settings can use that, and families will be able to access that as well. The DFE also launched the early years assessment guidance, which, again, is about trying to standardise what we would do in settings and what parents can expect.

Then, of course, the holy grail of all that is our ordinarily available provision. Again, we really want to encourage the DFE to consider having



an OAP guidance that is standardised. There may be tweaks for different local areas, but we need to have an agreed understanding of what provision looks like and what we want children to experience when they are in our settings.

It is not just that settings need that support to say, "This is exactly what we need to offer"; it is also that parents will then read that. The number of parents who have come to us and said, "My child is too difficult. I know they are not going to be able to succeed in early years, in a setting, so I have kept them at home"—of course, that is the difference between the early years and school: they do not have to go to an early years setting. However, once people see, for example, an ordinarily available provision—we share that, and everybody should be sharing that with families—they say, "Oh, actually, if my child had all that support, they would be fine." Without that knowledge—"This is what every setting should be providing, and this is how your child will be welcomed"—they might not put their children into early education.

So, I will not give you a definition, because it is so difficult, but those are all the things that need to be in place.

Mark Sowards: Brilliant, thank you very much.

Annamarie Hassall: I would just add that we have DFE in the hot seat, and ultimately they are leading education. Inclusion goes much broader than education; it goes beyond the school and college gates—it is a wider society definition. At nasen we would say that inclusion is also much broader than SEND. If we are really talking about an inclusive education, we do not start by identifying that as only for SEND, although we do say it is often the SEND learners who are not included. It is much broader. It takes account of wider vulnerabilities.

In this context here today, we are talking about inclusion and SEND. I think we retain that wider framework and we do not stop at a definition, because it is about the implementation. It is active, it is going to continue to evolve and it is going to look different according to the starting point. We have to make sure that everybody feels that they can play a part in inclusion, even if their starting point is not as developed and refined as another setting.

Q88 **Chair:** It is surely about the point that, in a system that has such little trust and confidence from parents, if what we are shifting towards cannot be properly defined, there cannot be proper accountability. It will be very difficult for that system to attract the confidence of parents in that context.

Annamarie Hassall: I think we can have very clear measures, and we can have measures that come from the voices of children and young people in the system, and their parents too, about their confidence and how they feel. Do they feel that they belong in a setting and that they are



included? Do they feel that there is a curriculum that is right for them and their needs and talents?

Margaret Mulholland: The point was made around the DFE's current framing. I think we get mixed messages that simply having high numbers of children with SEND in school and not in specialist settings is somehow indicative of inclusion. I know that the DFE are very keen to move forward with that definition.

We see inclusion as a process. It is not a static thing, as Annamarie said. It should be a verb, really. That process is what schools need help with, to consider what it is. What is the shared understanding that we have across schools, but also with families, about what that process of improvement looks like?

My clarity on that would be that the end state that you mentioned is belonging, thriving, achievement and attainment. But how you get there is inclusion. That is what we need to be clear about—that participation and engagement, how schools and local areas support that, and how we work collaboratively.

I think we get a little confused trying to define what a static state of inclusion looks like. It is constantly moving. In order to get to belonging, we need that inclusive, systematic process within our schools. We will mention the graduated approach later on, but it is a helpful tool for that systematic process.

Mark Sewards: Thank you. Are there any final thoughts?

Clare Howard: I agree that it is the right ambition to have the majority of children and young people in mainstream, but that is only one part of inclusion. The sense of belonging that Ministers often talk about is absolutely what we need. For further education, it is important to have inclusion as an end game in terms of their destination, their movement into adult life, and whether they are being included in society, in employment, and in social and community across all the preparing for adulthood outcomes.

Q89 **Caroline Voaden:** I have a question for Annamarie. What challenges do education settings face when adopting a whole-setting approach to inclusivity? What steps do you think could be taken in the setting and by the local authority, or the Government, to help overcome these challenges and improve inclusivity?

Annamarie Hassall: On the challenges, essentially it takes time. They need to work as is and to have a vision for where they want to be. It takes investment in staff at all levels. Whether it is the SENCO, the class teacher, the governors or the trustees, they all need to be on board with a whole-school, a whole-setting, approach.

Thinking hard about what the specific barriers are—obviously, I feel very strongly that that is the best and most strategic approach—I am aware



that the barrier is sustaining, time and juggling the competing pressures. Having a whole-school approach that is fully inclusive does mean working against the tide sometimes, with the current accountability measures that we have in place in the school system. It means being a brave leader and doing what is right for the school, rather than what might be seen as the approach that would be favoured if there was an inspection, for example.

There are some brilliant examples of schools at secondary that have transformed how they run their year 7. That is about thinking hard about how transition points can be quite challenging for some young people to manage and can amplify particular characteristics that are then interpreted as negative behaviour. Some school leaders have really transformed what they do at year 7. They have not diluted the curriculum; they just structure and timetable differently.

It is that attention to rethinking how one is leading a school that is the challenge. It can mean taking a tougher path and also being very brave in supporting staff when they may be questioned and when the vision is not always fully understood. That is essentially the biggest challenge. However, I am confident that some of those challenges will reduce if we get some real positive traction with the curriculum and assessment review.

Q90 **Darren Paffey:** I think it is very well acknowledged that the current Ofsted system does not value inclusion properly and that the unintended consequence is that you get schools adopting exclusionary practices because of what they are measured on. Maybe starting with Margaret Mulholland and then opening out, I would like to hear how you think the incentives in the system can be shifted so that we can properly promote and celebrate inclusive practices.

Margaret Mulholland: Any accountability system drives incentives, and we have many perverse incentives at the moment. The focus on attainment, performance and comparison across the system puts—as Annamarie said before—tremendous pressure on school leaders. I think the ambition of Ofsted to look at inclusion is welcomed, but we have concerns that, in wanting to celebrate inclusion we need to be careful about how the mechanics of that are unpicked, explained and shared. We would like to see the Department playing a role in that and Ofsted checking that, rather than leading on the articulation of that assessment framework.

At the moment, it looks like inclusion is going to be a judgment woven through the new proposals for the inspection framework, which we think could be positive, rather than that being a bolt-on and separate. However, we are very concerned about the continued perverse incentive from a five-grade inspection.

We are also concerned about admissions. Inclusion, as it is described in the new proposals, is not at odds with attainment. The way in which the proposals from Ofsted have been framed, it looks as though we will be



able to judge inclusion only within the school and not make judgments particularly around the representation of the local area and the SEND needs in the local area, because Ofsted does not look at admissions. We would like to think about the ways we might ensure that schools reflect the needs of their local area—the SEND needs, the inclusive needs of the local area.

Catherine McLeod: We are working with Ofsted on what that looks like in the early years. One thing I wanted to flag was around the Ofsted area inspections. Often, early years comes off very well in the inspections, but there is a need to shift that slightly to ask how many of the issues we are seeing in primary schools—that is what is then being fed back to the local authorities—could have been addressed in the early years? At the moment, that longer-term look at it is not really happening. What we need to be doing is saying, “If something is happening in primary, how much of that could have been addressed in early years, which would have then solved the problem earlier?” It is about seeing those area inspections take a longer-term view of where those issues are starting and then potentially what actions could be taken.

Clare Howard: Briefly, I think it is welcome that Ofsted is looking at inclusion, but we need to look at the right metrics. As I said before, with the breadth of learners with SEND, too often FE providers are judged on level 2 attainment, for example, instead of looking at different metrics, for independence, for self-regulation, for confidence, for sustained employment. We would like that breadth to be looked at.

Annamarie Hassall: We also need to look beyond Ofsted as a single lens. There are many other modes of improvement and support that happen within the world of schools and colleges. One example, from the programme that we are working on at nasen—Natspec is involved too—is peer-led SEND reviews of provision. We are organising those at school, at college, with some great results. We need to be more fluid in thinking about what inspection looks like in the future—so not solely through an Ofsted lens—and to be able to take a perspective of improvement from many different sources.

Clare Howard: Finally, very quickly, the worry for FE colleges—which, as I have said, are already quite inclusive—is that if the 16-to-19 funding system is not looked at, you will find potentially more colleges looking at their entry-level provision or their non-accredited provision and saying, “That is not cost-effective for us.” That is the concern—lack of SEND support, lack of programme weighting—to make sure that we can retain the inclusive system that we have already in many colleges.

Q91 **Darren Paffey:** In about no more than 10 seconds each, because we have to move on, if you could recommend one element to be added to the inclusion criteria that Ofsted is going to be doing, what would that be? We will start with Catherine and go along the line very quickly. I am sorry to put you on the spot.



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Catherine McLeod: I would be asking settings what percentage of children with SEND they expect and they are business-planning for.

Annamarie Hassall: I would be keen to hear the young people's voice and to make sure that that is firmly embedded in inclusion.

Margaret Mulholland: I think the progress in school improvement terms. We welcome the scorecard, but how does a school move toward inclusivity and how is it representative of its community?

Clare Howard: I would like all three of those, and I would also like FE settings to be judged on destinations—appropriate destinations—across a range of factors.

Darren Paffey: Thank you all so much.

Q92 **Amanda Martin:** Great question, Darren. My question is mainly to Margaret, but the rest of you should feel free to contribute. We have heard that all SENCOs should be part of the senior leadership team to strengthen the influence and support that is given across schools. First, do you agree? Secondly, are there other immediate changes that could be made to support SENCOs within the current funding? Thirdly, outside of the current funding, if there was more funding available, what would be an immediate solution for SENCOs to be supported?

Margaret Mulholland: Yes, we do think they should be on the senior leadership team—that SENCOs should be both senior and strategic, and enabled to represent SEND on that senior leadership team.

We also think that roles and responsibilities have to be much clearer and exemplified across the system, so that leaders and middle leaders know their role. What we see in really good practice is not SENCOs locked in their office being responsible for SEND pupils, but SENCOs working with class teachers; building confidence; developing their practice; making sure that middle leaders are driving inclusion; instigating a graduated approach, not to apply for an EHCP, but to do that assess, plan, do, review throughout the school, so that every player in that staff team understands their role and responsibility, has confidence, and notices and makes relational connections with those young people. So senior and strategic, but actually driving that whole-school approach.

In terms of what is needed and what we could do now, I think the pipeline is not good enough at the moment. We need more schools being able to train their SENCOs, and they need more beyond the NPQ. Within every NPQ, we need more of a SEND lens and more SEND training, but schools need sometimes to be training a SENCO and to have a SENCO in waiting. They need to be enabling core staff to have the skills to move whole-school approaches forward. That distributed leadership model is key to that.



If we had additional funding, what would we need for those SENCOs? For that additional capacity to be part of community clusters, so that we can upskill and up-level the expertise in the community.

Amanda Martin: Thank you. Does anyone else want to pitch in?

Clare Howard: In FE, there is no mandated requirement, and that is very logical because there are often teams of staff that need to fulfil those functions. The scale is much bigger across multi sites and across multi local authorities. What those staff need is a reduced level of bureaucracy. As I said before, the localised system is very difficult for colleges. They often work with five, 10, 15, 20 and sometimes 30 and above local authorities. The bureaucracy about EHCPs, the updating of EHCPs, late decisions about EHCPs and sometimes those local authorities sending colleges hundreds of consultations to reply to within 15 days—those are the pressures that colleges are facing, and the SENCO role is needing to be spread.

Annamarie Hassall: Briefly, SENCOs' roles have become much broader. They are often the key person for a whole range of pastoral responsibilities for the school, including pupil mental health and so on. That indicates that there is a need for more pastoral support within a school, whatever the title and however that is framed.

Q93 **Caroline Voaden:** This is a question for Annamarie and Margaret. The updated initial teacher training and early career framework includes new content on inclusive teaching. Could you tell us very briefly whether you think this is sufficient? What improvements could be made to teacher training to better equip educators in supporting children and young people with SEND?

Margaret Mulholland: Yes, it is an improvement but there is a long way still to go. We need more enhancement of each of the areas of the standards, both ITT and ECF. One of the particular positives is that in section 5 of the ITT framework we have, "What is vital for some is valuable for all." That shows a real culture shift in the way we are thinking about what is needed for all.

Also, the mention of support for young people from their start points, which is in both frameworks, has a huge implication for the way teaching and learning are developed. We need more inclusive pedagogy. What I mean by that is that we need to be enabling teachers to make good decisions about how they support young people. We need to be more into assessment sections of the standards, both at ITT and ECF, because that formative assessment is important for that inclusive teaching. At the moment we have a set of, "These are the 'to do's' you do as an effective teacher." What we need to be able to do for inclusion purposes is enable those teachers to make good decisions in relation to the child in front of them and ensure that that child can make progress. We need to build the confidence and competence of those teachers through those frameworks.



So I think the next steps are really exciting, but the frameworks need to be enhanced with more of a SEND lens in each of the areas of the standards, not just adaptive teaching.

Annamarie Hassall: Of course, fundamentally, it depends on the teaching practice and the experience and how those frameworks are led and supported. We have to influence those who are leading the teacher education to be inclusive in their language and how they deliver. So, it is about good intent and good work to the framework, but we absolutely have to do the follow-through so that we do not see inclusion as an add-on or an optional extra. We need a teaching workforce that comes out of their initial teacher education expecting to see an inclusive classroom and that that is part of their remit, rather than an added extra. That is really crucial.

I do not think we will ever be able to have somebody leaving their initial teacher education and their first couple of years of early teaching topped up with everything they need to know. The commitment to ongoing professional development is essential.

Q94 **Manuela Perteghella:** My question is for Annamarie and Margaret. What measures can the Department or individual education settings implement to upskill teaching assistants and other support staff to improve the support for children and young people with SEND?

Annamarie Hassall: On teaching assistants, I am delighted to say that teaching assistants have participated in the universal SEND services programme that we have been delivering. They are not excluded; they are included. Obviously, we have particular targets to achieve in reaching school leaders and class teachers, but teaching assistants have been engaging with those programmes. There are online units, which are self-led in one's own time; they are short and bite-sized. They have been very popular with teaching assistants, who have then been able to select the time when they can engage in those. As an example, over 23,000 participants have accessed those online units and that is across around 17,000 schools. That has included a significant number of teaching assistants, too. It is about understanding that they do not all bring the same underpinning knowledge that a teacher who is leading the learning will have. However, some of the training is entirely appropriate for them.

Separately to that, it is about ensuring that they do have career pathways that are taking them to whichever level they can progress to. We see good examples of that in a number of schools. In particular, in the multi-academy trusts, there is a lot of good school-led support for teaching assistants. The flipside is that they are often time-poor and do not have enough opportunity outside the classroom—it is in their own time quite often—to access the training opportunities that are there.

Margaret Mulholland: Perhaps I could add one point, which I think is an example of what Annamarie has been saying. The new apprenticeship model based on the levy for specialist teaching assistants is a great



opportunity for that career development. We need to be able to reward those teaching assistants. We cannot hold those teaching assistants in schools without those development opportunities. We want to enhance their practice, but we also want to reward them financially.

Chair: We are almost completely out of time. Our next panel of witnesses, who are young people with direct experience of the SEND system, has arrived in the room, and we really want to make time to hear from them. So I will bring in Sureena really quickly with a final question that is only for Catherine.

Q95 **Mrs Brackenridge:** Bearing in mind the unique challenges that are being faced in the early years SEND sector, could you briefly share some of the solution-focused changes that are needed at a settings level or at local authority or national Government level?

Catherine McLeod: I will be as quick as I can. The big difference between the early years and the rest of the system is that sufficiency is a big issue. At the moment, only 6% of our local authorities think they have enough places for children with SEND in the early years.

There are key challenges related to this. One is around workforce development and training. We currently have just over 20,000 learners on our inclusion training, and when they finish the training 97% of them say they can take more children with SEND. What that really shows is that this is about knowledge, but it is also about confidence, and we have to build that knowledge and confidence within our early years workforce.

Within settings, we need to make sure that there is not the over-reliance on one-to-ones. We know that one-to-ones do not lead to better life outcomes. We need to look at enhanced ratios and, again, at that strong, inclusive practice that makes settings believe they can take more children and support them effectively. That is really important.

We need to look at funding issues and the way funding comes in. Funding is often very slow to come in in the early years. Settings will often have a child come in, and then they will start to go through the process to get that funding. So they are funding that from their own money, and we know that our early years sector is not particularly well funded. That is becoming a barrier, and a lot of settings are starting to turn children away. We know that 35% of settings report having turned children with SEND away, and families are reporting that as well. We have to start to change that.

We also have a lack of accountability, which is again to do with the fact that the early years sector is a lot of businesses, so it is quite different to schools. Often local authorities will say, "We cannot hold them to account, because they are businesses. We do not have the same power we do with schools." But now, with the increased funding for early years entitlement, we need to switch that around as well. Our childcare sufficiency assessments, which every local authority has to create, do not



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have a good section on SEND. The SEND section simply says, “We have SENIF funding and DAF funding.” We need to get to a place where those CSAs show supply and demand specifically for children with SEND, because at the moment they do not. There are lots of ways to do that. We have created papers for that for Childcare Works.

The last thing I would say is, again, about that lack of value of the sector. We need to turn that around. We need to make sure that, when we make decisions in Government, we do not make a decision and then say, “Oh, hang on, how is that going to affect children with SEND?” It seems like, with a lot of changes in the early years, what happens for children with SEND has not been considered. It is only afterwards that we start to work it through. Often, for example, when we increase entitlements, provision for children with SEND goes down further. We really have to look at children with SEND centred on whatever we are going to change in our early years system.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Apologies that we are out of time. Thank you to all our witnesses for coming to give evidence this morning. If there are any points that you feel you did not have the time to get across today, please feel free to write to the Committee afterwards and let us know about them. We do want to hear all your evidence. I am sorry that we were a little bit pressured on time today. Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Katie Nellist, Lucy Bowerman, Joanna Hall, Sarah Cobb and Madeline Thomas.

Q96 **Chair:** We are now resuming our evidence session. This is a session of the Education Select Committee in our inquiry into solving the SEND crisis. I welcome to the Committee our witnesses, who are giving evidence in the second half of the session. They are young people with direct experience—either current or recent experience—of the SEND system. We are really grateful to you all for giving up your time to come and give us your evidence this morning.

The reason we have organised this session is that we want to hear from you directly. We know that no reform or changes to the SEND system will be any good at all if they do not directly improve the experience of children and young people with additional needs and disabilities. We want to put your voices at the centre of our inquiry, and we are very interested to hear the things you want to tell us this morning.

Please feel comfortable around the table today. Help yourself to water. If you need to step out for a moment to take a break, that is absolutely fine. If there are questions that we ask you that you do not want to answer, or you feel you do not have anything to say about that particular question, please feel free to say that; do not feel any pressure to answer any of those questions.



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Before we start, I should introduce myself. I am Helen. I met you all on the Zoom calls before we had this session. Members of the Committee will introduce themselves as they ask you questions. One or two of them may need to leave the room at different times. That is how it goes with Members of Parliament: they sometimes have other commitments, and the Chamber will be getting under way in a little while as well. Please do not think that that is anything to do with not being interested in what you have to say; it is just sometimes what needs to happen, and we will let you know if that does happen.

The final thing to say by way of introduction is that a bell will ring at half-past 11 and it will ring twice in quite a short space of time. That is just to mark the start of the House of Commons Chamber sitting at the beginning of the day. We do not need to do anything—we can just carry on—but I wanted to mention that just so that it does not startle us all when it happens. That will happen at half-past 11 on the dot.

I will start our questioning now with a nice open question for all our witnesses. We will go around, starting with Joanna. Can you introduce yourself and tell us a little about you and about the types of SEND support you have received through your education?

Joanna Hall: I am Joanna Hall. I am a 21-year-old autistic graduate from the north of Sheffield—I feel like that is quite important for when things come up later, like the economic disparity up there, which significantly impacts the SEND provision. I have come through the Ambitious Youth Network, but I am also coming through the lens of not just autism but physical health disabilities. I have a chronic migraine condition, as well as mental ill health, because I spent some time out of school in year 11 for a psychiatric ward stay.

I feel like I have quite a unique experience of education because of the comorbidities—not that it is unique to have comorbidities as an autistic person, but the education experience was perhaps a little bit out of the ordinary. That is particularly because I spent the majority of my time in education not knowing that I was disabled, so not being aware and not having any of the provisions put in place.

I had to experience school through a neurotypical framework due to a lack of diagnosis, which meant that I obviously was heavily misunderstood, and misunderstood myself. I did not receive a diagnosis of autism until 15, and I was not diagnosed with mental health conditions or physical health conditions until about the same time. For me, the majority of primary and secondary was in mainstream, and it was experienced as though I was not disabled. I did not really have much SEND provision.

A couple of things were picked—I can hand it to teachers. That is a good example of how you can meet needs without somebody being diagnosed with a disability, or diagnosed with anything. Everybody has sensory needs, and everybody has communication needs. For example, when I



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was in key stage 1, I got taken out of class to support my special interests and to help regulate my emotions.

Then, secondary school was hell really, particularly because of the fact that social rules become more complex, as opposed to when you are in primary school, when they are quite simple. Somebody might say, "Do you want to be friends?" and that is it, you are friends. Whereas secondary is a bit more of a minefield, particularly when female friendships can sometimes be a bit more complicated.

There is also the background of the fact that we were in quite a deprived area. The actual SEN provision was so depleted. It did get picked up at one point that I was struggling with my mental health, and in secondary school I did have some support to leave class, but it was essentially to go to an on-site unit, which was honestly almost like a ruin. It was really not well taken care of. The people in it were—it felt like nobody quite cared about you if you were in there. The staff there did the best they could with what they had, but they did not have much. I believe we only had one singular SEN-trained professional in the entire school, bearing in mind there were about 1,000 of us.

I had experience in specialist education. I ended up in a psychiatric unit, and there I had experience in the hospital school. That was wildly different—very small classes of two or three, only core subjects, much quieter, almost like a primary school outlook on things, which has its ups and downs. It was not super-academic, and I missed that, but it was also a lot simpler. You had very structured days.

After I was in that school, I went to another alternative provision, but that was in the community. That is still around now, but I think it has become an academy, actually. That was a similar experience. We did get through the GCSEs, and we had an individual learning mentor and everything.

Where SEN picked up for me, and where the provision got better, was the diagnosis. But there was also the fact that we had enough money to be able to manage comfortably, or at least not to struggle too much. With my mum becoming a carer, she was no longer providing, so my dad became the full bread winner. In the area I was from, for most people that is an impossibility, so I was really quite lucky. We are not massively well off, and I know for a fact that me being disabled has meant an extreme loss of income and a lot of stress on the family income.

I know I am talking a lot, but quickly, when it comes to college and university, I have to say that college was absolutely fantastic in their provision—really brilliant. I think that is because my hospital stay was so recent. University, again, was brilliant, but I do not know if the difference is because it is paid-for provision. I do not know why that difference is there. Sorry, I do not want to talk too much.

Q97 **Chair:** That is great. Thank you very much. Lucy, can you introduce



yourself, please?

Lucy Bowerman: Hello. My name is Lucy Bowerman. I am 22, and I have a variety of different SEND diagnoses, but the one that impacts me the most is autism, which I was diagnosed with age 12, but I do believe it could have been picked up quite a bit earlier than that. I am also the co-chair of My Life, My Choice, which is an Oxfordshire-based learning disability self-advocacy charity, and I have been there for a couple of years. I am also an Oliver McGowan autism co-trainer as well.

In terms of SEND support, I would say my journey was quite rocky. I started off in a mainstream primary school, which I would say I did pretty well in. I thrived with the routine—all that was quite good—but it all fell apart when I transitioned to secondary school. I was still not yet diagnosed at that point and ended up in autistic burnout, ended up sectioned. After that I had experience of education in a mental health unit, which was not wonderful. It got me an EHCP, though, which did help things.

After that I spent a period out of education, which happened quite a few times through my journey, unfortunately, as it was really tough on us all to find the right provision that met my needs. I did go to an autism specialist school, but there were difficulties with that because I was always considered very academic and quite a high achiever, and at that school there was not much of a focus on education, which I think was quite challenging for me because all I wanted to do was sit down and get on with it. There was a lot of disruption and stuff, so that did not work out. I then spent periods in and out of education. That sums it up for me.

Katie Nellist: I am Katie. I am 17. I have autism and PTSD from the education system. I guess it starts when I was five. My parents spoke to the GP, and the GP referred me to CAMHS. CAMHS said, “We are not going to see her” and just sent my parents to parenting classes. I carried on through primary school. I had bits of intermittent struggle, but was mostly coping all right until I got to year 6. The pressure of SATs was so overwhelming that I dropped out, had complete autistic burnout, and could not cope in school at all. That experience gave me PTSD, but I was not diagnosed until much later.

I got referred back to CAMHS then, but the waiting list meant that I started secondary school before I got my autism diagnosis, so there was no real support going into secondary school. Secondary school was overwhelming. I went to a busy mainstream school with so many pupils. It was so loud. I dropped out again, had complete autistic burnout, got diagnosed with an eating disorder. My mental health was really low.

I went on alternate provision for a while, tried to go back to mainstream school and could not. I tried two different schools. They were not SEND special schools, just private schools, but I could not cope in either of them, even though the environment was a lot better. I dropped out of



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school completely, got diagnosed with PTSD, and I am now on education other than at school.

Sarah Cobb: I am Sarah. I am 20, and I am a final year student at university. As for my SEND journey, I have multiple life-long conditions and stuff. I got an EHCP when I started primary school, and the support of my primary school was brilliant. Like a lot of other witnesses here, it was when I started secondary school that support all started to fall apart. Yes, I still had the EHCP, but there was not enough support for me. It turned out being things like the staff not giving me a TA in PE or my predicted grade happened to be lowered because I was not getting the right support. It was things like that.

Then, in sixth form, yes, the support was much better, but it then changed when I was in the end of year 12, when I lost a lot of eyesight. When I started sixth form, I did have a QTVI, but when I lost my sight, that that just went, in a way. Yes, I had had some mobility training and things, and within the sixth form itself the support was brilliant. I cannot fault it.

Now that I am at uni, the support is really good. I have disabled students allowance, and within that I have assistive technology software and non-medical help. Then, the uni themselves have also put additional adjustments in place—for example, all classrooms being on the ground floor, all materials being in large print, and all that sort of thing.

So, again, my SEND journey has been a bit rocky, but overall, taking the secondary school bit out of the equation, it has been a mostly positive experience.

Chair: Thank you very much. Can I say for the record as well that our colleague Darren Paffey has left just while you were speaking, Sarah.

Madeline Thomas: Good morning. I am Madeline. I am 19 and I am currently in my second year of university. I am here because of my provisions related to me being autistic and because I had ill mental health throughout the education system as well. I was diagnosed as autistic when I was about 17 years old, but I started off on that pathway from about the age of 13, through the help of CAMHS, which was brilliant.

I knew that there were particular elements that I struggled with when I was younger. At about the age of 10, I became quite vocal about it; I knew there was something that was not exactly the same as my peers, and it distressed me not knowing what that was. I did research into mental health conditions, and I was later diagnosed with depression and anxiety through my experiences within the education system.

I did not get particularly many provisions until I had left mainstream education. At 14, I had to leave my secondary school and go to an online schooling system called Interhigh. That was the best thing that happened for my education, because I was able to learn in my own environment



and it took me away from the busy and stressful and struggling education system that I was in at the time, that could not help me and that was not able to give the support, through different issues within their teams.

All the way through my primary and secondary experience, up until I was able to go to an online school, I had a particularly difficult experience. I had really struggled with my mental health throughout, and I had to then leave because I was not able to get into school. I was having panic attacks and sensory overload consistently, and I would spend most of my day sat outside the classroom, while teachers passed me in the corridors, thinking that I had done something wrong and that I was sent out for being a troubled child, when it was just that I could not cope in that environment. That judgment, I think, affected me even more.

However, I went to a mainstream sixth form to do my A-levels. It was, I think, the best schooling experience that I had ever had. It really gave me the confidence to be able to go on and go off to university to live by myself. It was the support that I found from teachers who either knew first hand or were particularly empathetic and person-centred with their teaching, or the friends that I had gained through that experience who supported me, that gave me that confidence. I went from barely passing my GCSEs to excelling at A-levels.

Now I am at university and I have had difficulty, but I have definitely had more support after gaining an EHCP when I was 14, which my mother applied for. She was told that it would not be a likelihood—that if you were a parent applying for it, it would be a massive struggle to get me that support, but it managed to get passed through because she was able to detail exactly what issues I had had throughout mainstream education and what I needed. That support going on with the EHCP, and then further on with a DSA when I got to university, has definitely been a massive help.

Q98 **Amanda Martin:** Thank you, everyone. My name is Amanda Martin, and I am an MP down in Portsmouth. I want to say thank you for sharing your experiences. I want to ask you a couple of questions and ask if you can elaborate further. The first one—and I think some of you have touched on this already—is whether the SEND support you received was right for you. If not, what more could have been done to get it right?

The second part—you might want to talk about this as well—is, if there were delays in getting that support, whether it was right or wrong, what impact did that have on you while you waited? So the questions are, was it the right support, and if it was not, what could have been done better? And, if it was delayed, how did that impact on you? Shall we start with you this time, Madeline?

Madeline Thomas: As I have briefly explained, I really did not have much support until I was outside mainstream education, and my parents and I had to fight quite drastically to get me that help and for me to be able to pass my exams.



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I do believe that, especially from how vocal I was about my experiences and how much I was struggling when I was younger, the issues that I was having could have been noticed earlier. If they had been, I possibly would have got much more support, and I may have been able to stay in mainstream education. However, I do not regret the choices that I made leaving, because that was right for the time, and I do not think that I would be in this room today if it was not for that experience.

I wish, with those circumstances in mind, that the teachers that I had who were able to support me within smaller classroom settings, like primary school environments, where we had about 10 kids in a class, had had the resources within the school environment to be able to listen to me when I was struggling. I wish that, when my mum brought up the fact that I was struggling to make it into school—complaining of being sick, not wanting to go into school and wanting to be home-schooled from about the age of six or seven years old—that they had been able to listen, empathise and recognise that it was not a child messing around; it was someone who was really struggling. If I had had a different experience in a primary school environment, my entire life would have been different.

Sarah Cobb: Would you mind repeating the question?

Q99 **Amanda Martin:** Do you think you received the right support? What could have been done to make it right, if not? And if that support was delayed, what was the impact on you?

Sarah Cobb: For me, all my teachers throughout my whole education experience have been brilliant and always understanding—I was in and out of hospital all throughout my childhood. The support at my primary school, I would say, was really good, and they all understood. Secondary school, not so much, because I was not getting the right support that I needed. I had to rely on my friends a lot to help me, and I felt quite—I do not want to say embarrassed by having to ask my friends to help me, but I wanted to be able to spend time with them as friends and not as my TAs or support workers. Again, in sixth form, the support was really good and everyone understood, TAs and teachers alike. It was the same at university: my support workers have been really good, as have my lecturers.

Yes, there have been a few support issues that I have had, including my sight guide and note taker leaving a few times, and there have sometimes been delays in managing to find someone. For example, last term there was a period of three weeks, I think it was, where I was without anyone, and my friends all had to come to my lectures and help me to take notes and things like that. I just feel so self-conscious about asking people to help me, because I want to try to be as independent as I can, but I know that, sometimes, it is going to be a difficult struggle.

Throughout primary school, secondary school and even uni now, I would say, I felt a bit—I do not want to say self-conscious, but a bit



embarrassed. In my sixth form, I had two friends who were also visually impaired, and the three of us all had long canes and stuff like that. In primary school, secondary school and uni, I have not seen many, if any, students with a visual impairment. In secondary school especially, I was quite—I do not want to say reluctant to use my cane and stuff, but I felt that I was the only one. I do not want to say I felt left out, but that was sometimes what it felt like.

I lost my eyesight when I was in the middle of sixth form, so people there knew me with sight and without it. I have had a long cane for, I think, four years—I might be wrong about that—and I do not feel as self-conscious using it at uni as I have done elsewhere. Everyone at uni has known me without eyesight—okay, not totally without it. Basically, sometimes my friends have had to act as my TAs or support workers, and that does not feel right to me, because I just want to be able to spend time with them as friends and not as support workers.

At secondary school, a lot of the time my teachers had to double up as the teaching assistant if there was not the support when I was in class, or if there was, for example, one TA to five students. It was things like that, really. Sometimes the support was good, and it was there, and other times, it was not so good. Does that make sense?

Q100 **Amanda Martin:** Yes, it does. Thank you very much, Sarah. Katie?

Katie Nellist: Overall, my SEND support is all right now, but it was not for quite a while. When I started struggling in year 6 of primary school, I was not diagnosed with anything. My parents did manage to agree some accommodations with the headteacher, but those were then ignored by my classroom teacher—she just decided not to listen. Then I kept on struggling and dropped out a lot.

My mental health was really bad moving into secondary school, but there was not any transition support, because I still was not diagnosed with autism by then. My parents got one extra meeting with the secondary school people, but that was it. I was thrown in the deep end, so to speak. Then when I started struggling at secondary school, I did get my autism diagnosis and an EHCP. The support got a bit better, but I was still unable to cope. My support right now is education other than at school, and that has worked really well for me because I just cannot handle being at school at all.

In terms of delays in support, the main delays are waiting for diagnosis times. I have had many changes to my EHCP and many different EHCPs because I was moving provision a lot because no one could work out why I could not go to school. Every time you need to get a change with your local authority to the EHCP, you are stuck waiting for such a long time because there is always this back and forth and they do not listen to you. There are always communication delays, and it takes such a long time. Even if you are in crisis right now, there is nothing you can do; you are



stuck waiting, and that takes such a big toll on families because you are having to advocate for yourself constantly.

Q101 **Amanda Martin:** Thank you, that is really helpful, Katie. Lucy?

Lucy Bowerman: While there were a few things across the journey that I think people did get right, I think myself and my family would agree that I was completely failed by the system. There are so many simple things that could have been done that just were not. It is all right to offer somebody support, but if you are not offering them the right support, what is the point in doing it? You can actually cause further trauma and further damage to people.

In terms of the delays and the impact that that had on me, the biggest impact was spending prolonged periods out of education. I have learned that, in the SEND system, there is a lot of waiting around; there are a lot of periods where nothing happens. There was a period where I changed local authorities at one point, and my mum called up the EHCP people maybe a year after I had moved back, to see what was going on with my EHCP. We were informed by our local authority that my EHCP was actually still registered in the county that I moved from perhaps 18 months earlier. That was in 2022, we are now in 2025, and we still do not know what is happening with it. Obviously, an EHCP does run up to the age of 25, so I should have three years left on it, but we have no idea where that has gone to, and chasing the council does not seem to work for that, unfortunately. That is the impact.

It has also significantly affected my mental health, and it did at various points, because being left with periods without education and with nothing to do—you are just sat at home—made my anxiety so much worse. There were points when I was in the specialist school when I was starting to go out on my own and things, but as soon as I came out of that setting, I withdrew again and I had to learn to do all those things over and over again. It did have quite a significant impact.

Joanna Hall: Would you say the question again?

Q102 **Amanda Martin:** Was the SEND support that you received right for you? What could have been done to get it right? If there were delays in getting it right, how did that impact on you?

Joanna Hall: Okay. I feel like during my time at secondary school I did not particularly know that mental health and my migraine condition would have been classed under SEN anyway. That was not something that we would have pursued, because there were so many other things going on in the family that pursuing that would have been an added burden, and there did not seem much point anyway. I do not think it was quite clear until I became malnourished that there was such a significant problem happening, so when I did finally get support it happened quite quickly. I received the majority of my diagnoses in hospital within about three months, which is very quick for an autism diagnosis.



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Once I got that, mainstream school was not comfortable with being able to support me. I do not think they particularly knew quite how to support a recovering anorexic patient. They did not feel like they had the facilities to do that, which is probably quite correct. I think they should have had the facilities to be able to do that, hopefully, but they obviously just did not. The support afterwards was mostly quite positive. I am very glad I managed to get it in time for my exams.

My OCD is a lot better now, but at the time I was on my GCSEs, one of the things that made things quite difficult was making sure I counted every letter of each word and then every word in a line to make sure it was a certain number so that something horrific did not happen. That was really distressing; it took a lot longer. I did get extra time on my exams, which made a massive difference. Seeing physical time and numbers was also upsetting, and I had a teacher who was quite happy to turn them the other way.

It was just a case of there often being either the same number of staff to pupils, or potentially even more, but that was simply because it was a specialised school. My experience of specialised schools is fine; it is about mainstream not being able to cope, and that is probably because they cannot cope with everybody else, let alone the added disabilities.

Q103 Mark Swards: My name is Mark Swards. I am an MP from Morley, which is in Leeds. I have several parts to this question, but you have already answered the first part very well, so feel free to focus on the second part. I will mix it up a bit with who we go to first. What were your experiences in mainstream and specialist education settings, and how could this have been improved? Secondly, how could schools make sure they meet the needs of all their students, regardless of ability, background or need? On this one, I am happy to start with Katie.

Katie Nellist: I have a lot of thoughts about the inclusion one, about how schools could meet the needs of all their students, regardless of abilities and backgrounds and needs, because I just do not think it is possible. With mainstream schools in their current state, I do not think it is possible for them to meet the needs of every single student correctly. There are too many people with too many different needs. If you are in a classroom with one teacher to 30 people, it is not possible for that one teacher to be adequately looking after the needs and meeting the needs of all 30 students.

There is another thing that bothers me about the way the term inclusive is being used now. Something that is inclusive to one person may not be inclusive to another, and using it as a blanket term removes the nuances and the fact that people are individuals with needs that may conflict with each other. You need to acknowledge the individual in the inclusivity. General inclusivity is not going to work overall. You need to teach people how to work with the people who are right in front of them. Training teachers broadly is okay for some things, but to some extent you also need the teachers to sit down and have a long chat with each pupil and



understand what is going on with them. Mainstream schools do not have the resources to do it at all. Sorry, what was the other question?

Q104 **Mark Swards:** Is there anything you think schools could do to improve? So let us say, as you articulated very well, that you do not think inclusivity works. What would you suggest?

Katie Nellist: Being inclusive is a good thing, but the latest terminology for it all just makes it into more of a blanket term, rather than more individual. To improve support, teachers need to really be on top of what is going on with each young person or student in their class and really understand their needs, but with the current class sizes, I just do not think they can. Smaller class sizes would help some people, and smaller schools overall. School is overwhelming; it is sensory overload constantly. Often people are too busy to look after you; that is the other thing. It is like, "I need help, but they are too busy right now." There is no one right there for you.

Q105 **Mark Swards:** Brilliant. Thank you so much. If you have further input, I am very happy to take that later on as well. Can we go to you next, Sarah?

Sarah Cobb: Sorry, could you repeat the question?

Mark Swards: Of course. It is quite a long question. I am happy to repeat it as many times as you like. What were your experiences in mainstream and specialist education settings, and how could this have been improved? The second part is, how can schools make sure they meet the needs of all their students regardless of ability, background or need?

Sarah Cobb: The whole support system for me has been really anxiety-inducing. I already suffer from anxiety, so the uncertainty of whether I will get the support or not has been really anxiety-inducing and has really taken a toll on my mental health.

As for meeting the needs of everyone, one thing that I think is important is language choices. What is acceptable for one student is different for another. For example, because of my visual impairment, I am not a huge fan of sight-related language. Okay, I know this is not the context we are talking about, but, for example, someone might say, "Do you see what I am saying?" I know, in that context, that "see" is not what it normally means, but it is things like that. Off the top of my head, that is one of many examples I could give. It is about things like that—making sure your language is accessible to everyone.

Again, it is about making sure you know your students as well. Say you have a main teacher, and then a trainee teacher comes and teaches a class. Make sure the needs of every student are passed on to that teacher, if that makes sense.

Mark Swards: It does.



Sarah Cobb: For me, the main thing over a lot of my education journey has been the language accessibility and the uncertainty of everything—knowing what language the teacher is going to use and whether I will get the support and stuff like that. It has been really anxiety-inducing and has had a massive toll on my mental health.

That is the case not just for me, but for my family as well, because they are having to sit there and watch me have the uncertainty of not knowing. I know that it is me receiving the support, but it is as uncertain for them as it is for me, if that makes sense as well. I already suffer from anxiety, and—I know I have said this about 50 times—it has been anxiety-inducing and has had a massive toll on my mental health.

Lucy Bowerman: I will touch more on my experiences in the specialist provision, as we have spoken about the mainstream. One thing we need, for a start, is more provision for people who do not fit in either of the boxes of mainstream or specialist education. For me, mainstream did not work. I struggled too much. The secondary I went to was, I think, 1,600 students, so it was absolutely massive, chaotic and very busy. I lasted less than a year.

I waited a couple of years for a specialist autism school. Again, I lasted a year and a half in that maybe. I found that, for somebody who is very academic and wants to put their head down and work hard, there was a lot of disruption and a lot of people who would rather mess around than engage in education. I would say that there was also a significant lack of focus on actually learning things. A lot of it was that there would be a lot of disruption in the classroom, so they would give me my book and send me out of the classroom—me who just wanted to sit there and get on with everything. I would be sent out of the classroom to wander around the building, go and sit in an attic room, or sit and read my book. In the end, that, unfortunately, did not work out for me. What was the second question, sorry?

Q106 **Mark Swards:** You have answered the first part brilliantly. The second part of the question is, how could schools make sure they meet the needs of all their students, regardless of their ability, background or need?

Lucy Bowerman: My first point on that would be that flexibility is the most important thing. For me, in my life in general, I need a lot of flexibility, and I need to be quite flexible as well. Around the curriculum and things, some subjects might not work for some students. Rather than continually drumming into them, “You need to do this as part of the national curriculum. You have to learn this. You need this for life skills,” maybe schools should think about whether, actually, if students are finding a subject that difficult, they are gaining anything from being forced to sit in that lesson? Is there something else? Is there some sort of vocational course that might work a lot better for them and that might not only give them life skills but significantly improve their wellbeing? Surely, having good mental and physical health and having life skills is



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far more important than some random maths skill that you might never use again. Considering things like that is important.

If people do need support, it is about listening to them, listening to their families and listening to relevant professionals involved as well. Somebody might appear—and this is how I appear—to be thriving at school, but, you never know, when they go home, they and their family might be having to deal with the consequences of them masking their poor mental health all day, and they might be absolutely melting down when they get home. It is about considering things like that and actually listening to the person and their family, because you do not know what goes on outside the school setting. Someone is not at school 24 hours a day. There might be other things happening for them.

It is also about remembering that every person is their own unique individual, with individual needs, individual likes and dislikes. It is about tailoring things to that, rather than insisting that people conform to social norms and fit into silly little boxes.

Joanna Hall: I relate with what Lucy said about the lack of academia in specialist education. It is missing, and I understand why. because I do not think people know how to manage the behaviour, potentially, of people with special educational needs. It is assumed that you are uninterested in academia, that you are not smart enough or that you are from a troubled background, a troubled neighbourhood or whatever, so there is no interest for you. The school I had when I was in the psychiatric unit was very insistent on a lack of academics, and I can totally understand why, but again, you need to be considerate of what works for that particular person.

There is a lot of assumption that the reason people are unwell is exam stress. Young people have significantly more things going on in their lives than that; the majority of people have a lot more going on in their lives. For some people, that might be the case, and that is okay, but do not make an assumption about what is going on there. For me, the only thing I have enjoyed about school is the academics. Socially, I struggled; communication, the sensory element of it—it was hell. So taking the academics out of school was like, “Well, you have taken everything good out of it. Why would you do that?”

In terms of making things better, I think it is about having more options for people and considering what that particular person wants, but also not having to be diagnosed with something to have your needs met. Every child has different communication needs, and every other person does, too. I have a couple of good examples where I have had people consider my needs without it being, “That is your need because you have autism”, or, “That is your need because you have OCD”; it was just, “That is how you learn better.”

I do understand what Katie said about mainstream schools not being equipped to deal with SEN effectively, but they could be. It is a lack of



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funding, but another thing is how the focus on league tables is a massive issue, because all the teachers are so stressed by it, which then bleeds into the children. You have so many tiny things that are penalised, like uniform, lateness—very small things. It was so frustrating. I do not know if anybody is familiar with the poem, “Cause I Ain’t Got a Pencil”—

Mark Sowards: Yes.

Joanna Hall: You would get to school and, genuinely, if you did not have a pen, that was detention. It was like, “I have done this, this and this all morning. I have tried my absolute hardest to get in, and I have not got a pen.” Schools need to be a bit aware of the environment that they are in—what context they are in. What kind of people go to your school? What are they generally dealing with? Our school was about 60% free school meals, for example. They know that as a statistic; they therefore should know that finances are a problem. If schools take into account the context they exist within, and we move away from the academic focus on the league tables, that would be beneficial.

Madeline Thomas: I would like to start off by hammering home everything that everyone has said for that question and to re-emphasise the importance of flexibility, empathy and the aspects around a school uniform, like Joanna was saying.

I had a particularly difficult time with a new school uniform that came in. We went from comfortable jumpers and clothing that was particularly easy for sensory issues, to within a couple of weeks having a whole new school uniform, which required ties, blazers, jumpers and all sorts. It was really distressing having that change. Then there was having an entirely new regulation around what you are wearing, and having to get used to that within a couple of weeks. There was learning to do a tie for the first time when I was 13 or 14, and that being really stressful. Other kids would mess around with their school uniforms; I remember seeing kids pulling on each other’s ties—“Oh, it’s a new thing. It’ll be fun”—and the amount of stress that that caused.

I felt like the new school uniform was choking. It became really difficult for me to engage in that environment, with all the noise and all the busyness, and then, on top of that, the fact that we would have school uniform checks going through the door to every class. You had to have the top button done up and the tie done up all the way, and it would be overwhelming for me. Despite the fact that my parents had said that I was struggling in that environment and needed a little bit of flexibility and leeway, that was consistently met with, “But she has to behave like all the other students. We cannot accommodate that.” That was for something as simple as not doing the tie the whole way up, which you would not think, for a 13-year-old, should be a problem, particularly—it is not the biggest aspect of education.

It ended up with being met almost every day by teachers who were saying, “Well, you need to accommodate to what we have been told, and



to what the foundation and the federation have told us has to be regulated across the board, because if you do not, then we will get in trouble.” I am empathetic to that, but that control and pressure to conform—from league tables to uniform—does really impact students negatively in terms of that conformity, especially when it involves something they do not find easy and they have other needs that are not being taken into account because the teacher is overwhelmed and worried about their position. That is the heart of it: empathy and being able to recognise that, despite those rules and regulations, each child is a separate individual. Each child needs to be taken into account as a whole person, rather than a statistic who needs to conform in exactly the same way that every other student does.

I also had difficulty getting into the classrooms. I was told that I could be on a limited timetable for certain amounts of subjects I could not get in for. However, tutor I had to be in for—it was desperately important to my education. I missed geography, but I had to be in for tutor. That ended up being the final straw for my family and the reason for taking me out of that education system: for the one unstructured part of the day, when our teachers sometimes struggled to control the classroom, I still had to be present, in an environment that did not work for me, where I had no friends, no support system and no escape. It is about taking that into account, and the fact that every child is different and has different needs, and taking each situation as individually as you possibly can.

Chair: I will get to Caroline in a minute. We are at 12 o'clock. I will let this session run on for another 15 minutes, until about 12.15 pm—I think we brief all the witnesses that that is what might happen. You have been giving really full answers to our questions so far, so if you feel you have already answered a question, please do not feel that you have to answer it again. We have captured what you have said already. That will help us to get through all our questions by 12.15 pm. I will go to Caroline now, who has a question on a completely different topic now.

Q107 **Caroline Voaden:** Hello. My name is Caroline. I am an MP from south Devon, right down in the west country. I would like to ask you about the school curriculum. How do you think the curriculum could be changed to be more inclusive? If you think that there are any changes to the curriculum that would not make any difference, please say so. We will start with Joanna.

Joanna Hall: This is one I actually really struggled with when I had a little look at it. There are a lot of things I could think of in regard to changing the curriculum, but not necessarily in regard to SEN. A couple of things I did think of off the top of my head were sex education being disabled-friendly. For example, when you are disabled, you are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and to being groomed, but that is not really mentioned. We could also have more in-depth understandings of how relationships work; as an autistic person, that is a difficult thing to



understand. It would be good to really break those things down and have that in-depth teaching throughout being a young person.

Another thing would be some actual education on disability, to teach other students. There was a child in our class in primary school who everybody knew. Children know when a child has additional needs sometimes, but do not necessarily know what it is. They are like, “I know that person needs extra help. We will look after him”—that is when you are little, not when you are a teenager; that does not happen. There was one time when the teacher sat down and explained that he had a different brain to us. I now know that he was autistic. They explained it in a way that was quite friendly for us to help us understand that. I think that that would be really helpful to do throughout secondary school. It is a difficult one because how do you actually change the culture of secondary school children? I do not know.

Caroline Voaden: That is a whole other question.

Joanna Hall: Yes, that is a whole other question, and I do not know if the curriculum is something that can do that.

One last thing that we did that I think was really cool and that could potentially be a good thing is that they gave us an opportunity to do a little project. We got separate credits for, but it was totally outside the curriculum, on whatever we wanted—absolutely anything. We could just go ham on a special interest, and that was really good. You did not have to do it, but that is an example of something you could really get your teeth into. You could do whatever you want—it could be about anything.

Caroline Voaden: What did you choose?

Joanna Hall: Hieronymus Bosch’s painting “The Garden of Earthly Delights”.

Madeline Thomas: When I was first looking at this question, I started thinking about it more from the perspective of what people have to learn around disability. It made me think more towards the actual teacher training than anything else. Going back to how you change the school culture, that starts with the people in positions of authority—with the teachers themselves—and their approach to things. I do not think that we have enough teacher training, or effective teacher training, looking at disabilities and SEN and how that then affects the students.

That can then trickle down through things like PSHE and working on the fact that people are going to be different. I know that I had a massive lack of PSHE when I was going through the education system. It was not something that was particularly included; it was neglected. It would be interesting to see it from that perspective, working with kids, speaking about differences and acknowledging those, and teaching kids how to have empathetic conversations.



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Alongside that, we could look more at the way that children learn, in terms of what could be effective within the curriculum for disabled children and young people, with the possibility of having more flexibility in how they tackle classroom activities or homework. Instead of saying that something has to be done within a very specific standard—an essay—it would be interesting, especially in the younger years, to see the change that could come from having children go off and find their own ways of displaying that information for themselves and having more flexibility and freedom. If the overarching theme is sea life, for instance, how does the child want to then display that information? How can we make the projects more accessible if they are struggling with communication difficulties, or if they are particularly passionate about one specific medium? It is about having them figure out what they want to do and then be able to understand their own creative identity through that.

We also have workplace environments in corporations where we are seeing a lot more around flexibility and creativity and how that could then stem into young people going into the workforce and having more freedom to figure out how they want to display information and how they can have fun with the work that they are doing, rather than it having to be within a strict guideline.

Sarah Cobb: Would you be able to repeat the question again?

Q108 **Caroline Voaden:** Yes. How do you think the school curriculum could be changed to make it more inclusive? More of anything, less of something?

Sarah Cobb: For me it has mostly been accessible, but there are a couple of things that have been particularly difficult to access for me. One of those was some of my GCSE physics lessons. For me, in one of our units—I cannot remember what the official title was, but it was something to do with magnets—every time the teacher did a practical, I had to go outside the classroom because of my medical conditions. It felt like I was missing out on not only the social aspect of it, but also the learning. I was in the covid year, meaning that all my GCSEs were based on predicted grades, but if I had actually sat my GCSEs, that could have been some vital information that I had missed. That was the main one for me.

It is also things like online learning. Because of my vision difficulties, anything online-based is difficult full stop. It is about things like teachers, lecturers and all the academic staff making sure their modules or topics, or whatever they are called, are accessible to everyone. I know I keep coming back to the example of my vision, but a lot of my modules have been really visual. I know that everyone has tried to reduce that—not reduce it, but make it as accessible as they can—but I have still really struggled with that sort of thing.

It is about trying to make the language not only accessible, but also a bit more descriptive, in terms of trying to describe what the topic is and



trying to make everything accessible in terms of the module you are teaching. Part of that, again, is the whole having to stand outside the classroom thing with my GCSEs, even in PE lessons—again, because of my medical conditions, PE definitely is not the safest of subjects, so I had to spend a lot of it outside the sports hall, not participating. It felt so isolating as well. Again, that took a real toll on my mental health.

Katie Nellist: What really needs to change is that there should be less exam focus and particularly exam drilling, and also less attendance focus, and then seeing those things reflected in the way Ofsted looks at schools. For my primary school in year 6, the reason they were putting so much pressure on SATs was that they needed to get the results up to show to Ofsted. Clearly, that came above the mental health and wellbeing of the students who were actually in the school. That has now resulted in me barely having any secondary school education as a long-term effect.

That makes me much more focused on the fact that a school's job is to set up this young person for life. It is not to get good exam results, not to force them in every single day. This is a young person who is going to go out into the world some day, so how are you giving them the best chance of doing that, whatever that means to them?

Probably, it is about changing the curriculum to be more focused on what these students want to do, as other people said. If they are not enjoying a subject, there is no point forcing it; it is not going to happen. People should also be free to learn in whatever way suits them, and how they will learn best. Just forcing the same method is not going to work. You are just ending up with more problems by forcing it.

Lucy Bowerman: I think I have covered most of this already, to be fair, so a couple of short points. We need less of the one-size-fits-all, "You have to follow the national curriculum. This is what you can do. This is what you can't do." We need to get rid of that. It does not work, and that is not just for SEND students; it does not work for a lot of people. Moving away from that strict approach would be helpful.

We should also have individualised curriculum plans for anyone who is struggling, whether you have a diagnosis or not. That can include things like reduced or adapted timetables. Something that we did do at my specialist school that did help was having sensory and movement breaks. We had a 10-minute period between each lesson where we could wander around and have sensory breaks; things like that were really helpful. Also, we need designated SEND staff to help deliver these things in a smaller classroom setting—something like that.

Chair: I will go to Sureena now to ask our last question. We have answered the other ones as we have gone along.

Q109 **Mrs Brackenridge:** Wonderful, thank you. As we come to the end of today's session—it has been so beneficial and helpful for us all to hear your experiences and insights—this is an opportunity for you to think of



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something that you may not have mentioned. If there is one more thing that we can go away and tell this Government that will help other children and young people with SEND, what would that one thing be? I will start off with Lucy.

Lucy Bowerman: I will keep it short and sweet: listen to people like us, and listen to their families. When you do that, you will start getting all the information you need, and then you can go from there.

Madeline Thomas: I would say, like you are all doing today, to keep young people within these conversations, to keep listening to our voices and to have us within those decisions.

Sarah Cobb: I agree: get to know them and see what they want. The discussion should not be about them, or talking to someone or about them if they are in the room; the conversation should be with them. As Lucy and Madeline have said, make sure you listen to the young people and include them in the conversation. Within that, do not just talk at the young person or about them as if they are not there, but make sure you listen to them and talk to them as well, and make sure you get their opinion. It is about what support the individual wants, so listen to the individual and make sure you include them in the conversation.

Katie Nellist: Same as everyone else: have the youth voice at the heart of all SEND services, functions and everything including that young person. Also, local authorities need to stop fighting families and start working with families and young people. Stop constantly saying no, pushing back and trying to make it difficult. We all need to work together on it, because fighting is not going to help.

Joanna Hall: Do not leave the working-class kids out of it. I think a lot of people here will probably say, "My mum has been able to fight for me," or, "My dad has been there." There are a lot of people in my area whose parents are illiterate because of the poverty, so they would not be able to advocate for themselves.

Mrs Brackenridge: Yes, they do not have the same support networks. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you again to you all for coming this morning. You have been incredibly clear and articulate about your experiences and about what needs to change in the SEND system of support, as well as about some of the things that have worked well and been helpful to you.

We were keen to do this session in public, so the session has been broadcast. The session will be on the public record as part of our formal evidence for this inquiry, so your voices really are at the heart of everything that we are trying to do with this inquiry. It is really important that you have that status within it.

Your evidence today is incredibly helpful to us, and it will directly inform the recommendations that we make to the Government when we get to



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the end of this inquiry, so thank you very much. I realise it is a big deal to come up to Parliament, and there has been a lot of preparation that has gone into today. I am sure it has not always been a very easy thing to think about doing and to anticipate. So thank you so much again for coming today. It has been important that you did. Thank you.

Amanda Martin: Thanks to the families that have enabled this as well behind the scenes.

Chair: Absolutely, and to the organisations that have provided support as well. Thank you so much.