



HOUSE OF LORDS

Autism Act 2009 Committee

Corrected oral evidence

Thursday 8 May 2025

10.20 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Rock (The Chair); Lord Addington; Baroness Browning; Lord Crisp; Baroness Goudie; Lord Hope of Craighead; Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick; Lord Wigley.

Evidence Session No. 11

Heard in Public

Questions 73 - 78

Witnesses

[I](#): Sarah Wild, Headteacher, Limpsfield Grange School; Dr Nicola Crossley, SEND (Special Educational Needs) Representative, Association of School and College Leaders; Dr Anne Heavey, Director of Insights, Ambition Institute, and Member of SEND inclusion in education expert group, Department for Education (DfE).



Examination of witnesses

Sarah Wild, Dr Nicola Crossley and Dr Anne Heavey.

Q73 The Chair: Good morning and welcome to the public meeting of the House of Lords Committee on the Autism Act 2009. We have two evidence sessions today. In this session we will hear about supporting autistic children and young people with access to education and transition to adulthood. I am delighted that we are joined by Sarah Wild, headteacher of the Limsfield Grange School, Dr Nic Crossley, SEND representative at the Association of School and College Leaders, and CEO of the Liberty Academy Trust, and Dr Anne Heavey, director of insights at the Ambition Institute, and a member of the Department for Education SEND inclusion in education expert group.

Our evidence sessions are on the record, which means that they are broadcast, and a written transcript is taken for subsequent publication. The list of members' declared interests has been published on the committee's website. Thank you. You are all very welcome here today. I will now ask the first question. When you answer, I would be very grateful if you could briefly introduce yourself.

The Autism Act does not cover children and young people, except the transition from children's services to adult services. What impact, if any, has the Government's autism strategy for 2021 to 2026 had on improving access to education for autistic children and young people? In your answer, could you also say why the strategy has been effective or not effective? Dr Heavey, I will start with you.

Dr Anne Heavey: Thank you. It is a complete pleasure to be here this morning on this important topic. I have a 10-year background in SEND policy, working at Ofsted, in one of the education unions, ATL, and for Nasen, before joining Ambition Institute, which is a teacher training provider. My doctorate is in inclusive curriculum implementation.

It is very difficult to pin down a precise impact for the strategy, but I want to pull out data around attendance, which I think is important to consider when we are thinking about access to education. As we know, nationally attendance took a dive around the pandemic and it is taking some time to recover. When we look particularly at pupils we know are autistic, there are some concerning trends. In the latest data that is available, one in 20 autistic pupils is absent for more than 50% of their time in school. There are clearly some interesting systemic barriers around literally accessing education. We also see that the absent rate is significantly higher for autistic pupils, at 11% versus around 7%. That rate is increasing. Whereas we are seeing the overall attendance rate starting to come down gradually, it appears over years to be steadily increasing for autistic pupils, which suggests that there are some entrenched systemic barriers around accessing education.



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The final two points I will make are that we know that around 50% of education, health and care plans are still not issued within the 20-week deadline and it takes far too long to create new specialist provision, particularly free schools. We are struggling to create the provision that is needed. I think that there are some systemic problems that probably transcend the strategy that are creating barriers around access.

The Chair: Thank you. Sarah, shall we come to you?

Sarah Wild: Yes. Good morning, everybody. I hope you are all okay. I feel like I am doing a massive assembly.

The Chair: We will try to behave well.

Sarah Wild: Excellent. No heckling, please. I am headteacher of Limpsfield Grange. It is the UK's only school specifically for autistic girls, so I will try to shoehorn autistic girls and women into all my responses if I can.

I went back and had a look at what the aims were for the strategy around awareness and acceptance for autism. I think that maybe there is slightly more good news. The rate of diagnosis for autistic women and girls is on the increase, finally, and that seems to have been speeding up quite significantly over the last couple of years. There are definitely more women and girls being identified—girls particularly in this context—as autistic and that is a good thing, although I know obviously at the moment we have some politicians, both here and in America, who think that is not the case. I disagree with them.

I think that there is better awareness around autism in the UK. However, I question whether or not the acceptance part has quite worked yet. Maybe that is time, because you do have to have some awareness before you can start to understand what acceptance is. At the moment we have got to the point where we think, "Yay, autism is a thing" and now we are like, "What are we going to do about it?" There definitely needs to be more work around that. Certainly, with the female lens, there definitely needs to be more work around female autism and acceptance.

One of the questions you also asked was why it has not been as effective, and we would have to talk about resourcing. I think that one of the problems with the strategy is that it is large, unwieldy and disparate. Nobody owns it. It is owned by many masters and maybe none. If you were looking to improve it in the future, you may wish to make this somebody's specific responsibility because at the moment it does not really feel like it has much focus. It is well intentioned, but unfortunately we all know which roads are paved with those.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Sarah. Dr Crossley.

Dr Nicola Crossley: Good morning, everybody. I am the SEN representative for ASCL, the Association of School and College Leaders. I am chief executive of Liberty Academy Trust, which is a specialist trust



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for autistic children, with schools in Cheshire, Reading and London. I also have lived experience of autism.

With my evidence today, I also want to reflect that, as an association, ASCL represents both mainstream and specialist providers, but there is a larger representation in mainstream so there might be a slant towards that. I want to flag the importance of us not forgetting those who have learning difficulties and learning disabilities as well when we are looking at the impact of the Autism Act as a whole.

On the question, it is fair to say it has been a mixed picture. I agree with Sarah that the intent in raising awareness and promoting more inclusive education is and has been welcomed. The advocacy of the National Autistic Society, alongside the offer of training in mainstream settings, in particular through the Autism Education Trust, has supported this. However, has the strategy improved access to education? I am not convinced. If I refer back to the aims of providing appropriate education, widespread teacher understanding, no bullying, less mental health issues and better access to higher education, as the examples in the strategy show, the available data does not really stack up. We are seeing issues in the SEND system as a whole and multiple reports of lack of specialist placements in settings. The SEN census shows numbers of autistic children and young people in school-age education has continued to rise and notably so if you compare 2020-24, so pre- and post-pandemic figures.

On the appropriateness of existing placements, NAS data suggests a high level of parental dissatisfaction, which is also confirmed by National Audit Office reports year on year. We are hearing from the sector that the co-occurrence of need for our autistic children and young people is increasing and that this Autism Plus, in our experience, is around social, emotional and mental health difficulties, with increased reports of high levels of anxiety in particular. As Anne has suggested, this is impacting attendance and engagement, which creates a vicious cycle for some of our children. The more education you miss, the more anxious you become.

One of the biggest concerns for me, which is substantiated by reports from our members, is the lack of support for academically able autistic individuals accessing and succeeding in higher education. One of the issues is the lack of nuanced data that is available because we do not actually know the true scale of the problem. We know that an education, health and care plan ceases to be maintained once a student goes to university. At perhaps one of the most important transitional periods of your life, the support your family has fought for and that you have relied upon is taken away. Clearly, individuals applying to university want to experience independence and academic rigour, but there are increasing reports from our members of concerns about emotional readiness for that progression.



Office for Students data highlights the higher drop-out rates and lower progression rates of those previously identified as SEN. The lack of refined data does not confirm whether autistic students are the most affected. However, given the evidence that you have already heard from previous sessions about employment rates being around 30% and ONS data confirming degree-qualified individuals at 20%, it is not a huge leap to make to suggest that we are losing highly qualified or potentially highly qualified autistic individuals.

Why has it not been as effective? I think that the scale of the challenge is bigger than education alone, as Anne has already said. If I reflect on the implementation plan that was provided as the annexe to the strategy, very few of the actions recommend cross-departmental working. That risks a lack of joined-up thinking to protect against future unintended consequences.

The Chair: Dr Crossley, thank you. I think that was very helpful indeed.

Q74 **Lord Addington:** Hello. The question we have down here is: what are the main barriers that schools and colleges face in providing access to education for our autistic children and young people, including the roles of inclusive practice and formal identification and support? What is the best way to overcome these barriers? The Government have suggested that they want mainstream schools to create more inclusion—for example, adapting classrooms and creating specialist facilities. In what context and how should the Government ensure that autistic children and young people access the support they need? I will add a little caveat into the back of that. What barriers are we seeing with the training facilities and things like that? I think that it would be very important if you could bring that out. We will start with Dr Crossley.

Dr Nicola Crossley: Thank you. If we go to the heart of the issue, inclusion as a concept is hugely contested and much debated. The fact that both Ofsted and the Government are spending time and money on trying to get to an agreed definition speaks to that complexity. At ASCL we have been debating this issue for years, and I do hope that I am representing council accurately. Where I think we have got to is that trying to create a tick-box for inclusion is an unhelpful route to take. Inclusive practice by its very nature depends on context. Inclusive leaders and inclusive schools are those that know who the kids are on the margins and how to get them out of the margins.

As for barriers that schools face in providing access to education, there is a lack of knowledge, understanding and confidence in teachers due in part to what you have also heard in previous witness statements about the spectrum of needs and the abilities that can reflect an autistic individual and therefore an autistic learner. In considering the educational offer for an autistic learner, even in my schools and in Sarah's school where all the students share the same label as a result of a medicalised model that dictates provision and funding, the needs, the strengths and the interests of each child differ.



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In my schools, while I prioritise an academic entitlement that is not at the detriment of a consideration of the whole child, I also push my schools to be aspirational and to compare our offer with that of our mainstream peers, but we are not beholden to things like Progress 8 or the baccalaureate. I can prioritise my improvements on flexible pathways and preparation for adulthood in a way that many mainstream schools cannot offer. I would argue that that does contribute to suspension rates that are higher and attendance rates that are lower for autistic children and young people, particularly in mainstream.

On early identification of need, I believe that special schools are being left out of vital conversations when we think about provision. If I can highlight to you the additional funding that was recently offered to primary schools to extend nursery provision because of the falling numbers and wanting to get that support in early, ASCL asked if this was extended to special schools. The department said no because special schools are already over capacity. I am sure that was said with the best of intentions, but it is a missed opportunity because the specialist sector has the expertise, just not the physical space, to be able to provide that support. We really need the space. Free up the empty buildings. Let us lead in partnerships and collaborations to build that strength and confidence in the system.

In the push for those integrated resources, adapting classrooms and specialist units, honestly, that will not be the answer if the culture and the skill set are not right. I know that this comes from a position of cost savings but it is a false economy if they are segregated, if the unit is managed by the cheapest staffing model, and if the provision is about containment rather than flourishing. Do not get me wrong: we have fabulous resource bases in the system, but they are successful because they are designed and run by specialists. For many autistic learners, the sensory overload of a mainstream environment can prevent learning. The specialists in the system can support with a wide range of needs and support that transition into mainstream. If we are going down that route of integrated resource bases, they can provide the expertise to make that successful.

Lord Addington: Let us go to Dr Heavey next, please.

Dr Anne Heavey: To echo some of Dr Crossley's points, I think that this focus on increasing the capacity of specialist provision within mainstream schools does need a careful hand, ensuring there is real intentionality. The true specialism that Dr Crossley was talking to is critical. We cannot end up with a space that is literally a containment facility for children we find tricky to serve. That is a true risk in the funding constraints that we face.

We do, however, have an exciting opportunity at the moment. We have some interesting set-piece reforms going on at the same time as this push around inclusion. If the Government are able to interlock the curriculum and assessment review and the inspection framework review



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with the mission around making our system more inclusive, there is potential here. The ultimate barrier for schools is that they have been asked to do so many things and to prioritise so many things that having a very clear priority and being able to stack your resources behind it has been very challenging around inclusion.

There are challenges with Progress 8 and serving youngsters who have complexity, including autistic youngsters, who literally need the time to work on the skills and the competencies that go into enabling them to take a great next step. You are also looking at your data, and it might be more data lucrative for you as a school to put a child on to a GCSE that may not serve them when there could be meaningful activities that they could be engaged in. If that review grasps the nettle around inclusion, that could be incredibly powerful. It is very hard—truly tricky—to atomise what the features are of true inclusion when, as was alluded to earlier, true inclusion is ephemeral. It is built into your DNA. It is very difficult to point and say, “That is inclusion”, which is what the inspection framework will need to be able to articulate. Those two interlock very powerfully.

I have two final thoughts. If we can provide the guidance and exemplification for schools on implementing reasonable adjustments with confidence, that will also go a long way to building more inclusive cultures. That is something that we hear time and time again. Leaders and teachers can struggle to understand how to do this and feel that it is legalistic, and it is not a language or a culture that is embedded within the school.

Finally, you asked us to call out training. We need to think hard about how we will mobilise the inclusion reforms when they come. We cannot have individual teachers doing bits and bobs of training all over the place. We need to think about how we rewire the school to be an inclusive culture and offer, and that requires something quite significant and intentional. It will require time and investment and high-quality design.

Lord Addington: Before we go on to Sarah Wild, you said something there about the progress reports and the school results. Would it be helpful if there was some recognition that getting a person with autism, or any other special educational need for that matter, through the system is slightly more important and should be a part of that, “Your school has done well here”, as opposed to simply, “Bang, you have passed your GCSE”? Would that be an actual structural help?

Dr Anne Heavey: That is a very interesting question. Looking at what the scorecards could look like and what other data points they could call out is interesting. There are huge risks around unintended consequences and unhelpful levers that might come out if we have just a kneejerk response. There is definitely a question about whether we think qualifications alone are enough to prepare you for adulthood. No. So what is that wider range of measures and how do we have a line of sight to those most vulnerable to not being served well and what they need?



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Sarah Wild: In addition to being headteacher at Limpsfield Grange, as a school we also run the outreach service for all the Surrey secondary schools. We have 52 secondary schools across Surrey. I am also a trustee of a mixed MAT. I asked other people what they think the barriers are, because obviously I am in a special school, and I will come to that in a minute. The first thing that came up was this tension between the accountability measures that mainstream schools have to adhere to and the fact that they are, by their very nature, exclusory. They exclude schools. They effectively encourage schools to not be very inclusive.

Anne has talked about the report cards and the reforms that are taking place at the moment. That is a good opportunity for us to look at what we want education to be. That is fundamentally the question, is it not? That might not look the same for all children, and for autistic children with the idea that you get through the system or you get to 18, you will not even necessarily reach the same milestones at the same time as everybody else. Why should you? We need to have more flexibility in the system and mainstream schools need to not be penalised for being good and inclusive.

There are big environmental factors that everybody I spoke to flagged up, especially at secondary level. Secondary schools are big and busy. From a sensory point of view, they are incredibly overloading. A number of head teachers pointed to the fact that with the fall in population there will be, we hope, more space in mainstream schools. If there was an allowance to hold on to that space and create more low-arousal spaces and more sensory-friendly spaces, more autistic young people might be able to get in and sustain their attendance in a secondary school. At the moment, unofficially, just from the data that we are collecting from working with the Surrey schools, we know that a lot of the young people who fall out of school from about year 8 onwards are unidentified autistic young people. They cannot manage it. You are asking them to do something they cannot do, and then they do not get an education. That is not fair.

We have the curriculum, we have the environment and we also have training. At the moment teacher training does not have a huge amount of emphasis on special needs, and on autism it is fleeting. It might be a morning. However, there are a huge number of autistic young people in the mainstream system, so we have to have better training right at the very beginning of your career so you do not think that this is something unusual or an add-on to what you are doing and you feel that this is an integral part of your practice.

Teaching assistants in mainstream schools are also incredibly important people. Often they are working with the most challenging young people. They are not very well paid and often they are not very well trained. If we want to be serious about this, we need to empower our TAs. We need to pay them better and train them better so that they can be more effective. We need to give them some career progression as well because



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they are exceptional people and we do not want to lose them. Often they are doing jobs that are hard with young people who are struggling, and we do not acknowledge that at all. Training is key and it needs to be ongoing. There needs to be commitment from all schools that they will continually invest in their staff group right across the school so that everybody understands what it is like to be a neurodiverse inclusive environment.

Lord Addington: Thank you very much. I have one final question on that. If you are in a mainstream school, would it help to have one person with at least a level 5 qualification in, say, autism who you could refer back to and who will give you guidance for your mainstream classroom, or are you talking about a general approach?

Sarah Wild: It is probably both. There are a number of autistic young people in all schools, and secondary schools are huge. You need a belt and braces approach. We should also have a continuum of provision. I agree with Nic. At the moment, maybe special schools are slightly excluded from the conversation. I do not know whether it is because people think that the wrong students are in special schools—personally, I do not—or people think we are a bit precious. We are not. We would like to be party to this conversation because mainstream schools are okay for some autistic young people. Not everybody needs to be in a special school but some people do. All those options are equally valid. It would be great if we had a bit more voice so that we could help and be specialists and experts, which is what we are.

Lord Addington: Thank you. You are all nodding, so I will stop there.

Q75 **Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick:** You are very welcome. Local authorities have duties to prepare children and young people in the SEND system for adulthood, and this includes a duty to review a young person's EHC plan annually. From year 9 the review must consider preparation for adulthood, including further or higher education, independent living and participating in society. I think that all three of you have already alluded to these things. Therefore, what are the main challenges that autistic young people face in transition to adulthood and what role do schools and colleges play in supporting autistic young people with effective transition to adulthood for care and support, further and higher education, and employment? I will start with Dr Heavey, move to Sarah Wild and then to Dr Crossley.

Dr Anne Heavey: I will not repeat everything that Nic said earlier about higher education and the arbitrary standing down of EHCPs at that point, but I think that is a significant issue.

There is something in our system that could be rebalanced with the reforms that are going on at the moment around elevating transition to your next step, whether that is early years into key stage 1 or what comes next after school. Thinking about what you need to enter adulthood and flourish, there are some tricky things that I do not know if



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schools are particularly expert in: how many mainstream school leads understand access to work, how you negotiate reasonable adjustments in the workplace, how you decode the expectations and ways of being and doing of employers and manage the changing power dynamic of being pupil and adult in an environment of employee and employer, when you need to decode the social communication interaction expectations and make those explicit. If we can rebalance some of the priorities towards the end of school to help schools build capacity, bring in experts, work closer with employers and add time to dig into these issues, I think that could help.

I also flag, though, that things around supported internships and access to work face challenges. It is not as if there is a perfectly resourced, brilliant system that is flawless everywhere just for these children to step into if we open the door. We need to be looking at the receiving arms of society as well. If we can look at the inclusion reforms going on at the moment and the space that may be created to explicitly lean into the additional complexities round entering employment as an autistic employee—I am focusing particularly on employment—that could be very powerful.

Sarah Wild: In my view as a practitioner, there is quite a gap between finishing school, so the end of year 11, and going to college. That is something that I am quite exercised about. There is some provision for high-functioning autistic people—I will use that phrase because I think that is a category that is widely understood—up until the age of 16, but often there is no post-16 provision for them. Then their only option in many parts of the country is to go to college. I do not know why we would expect a young autistic person, who has struggled with a massive environment at school, to go to a college that is even bigger than their secondary school and be okay. That just seems a bit crackers to me.

What often happens is that school is okay. They get through it. They do not get a certificate for getting through it but I think that they probably should. They may not get the outcomes that you would anticipate or that they could get on paper because just getting through it has been a massive struggle and has taken a toll. Then they go to college and they do not really have great support. The college is too big and too overwhelming and they do not finish their qualification. They drop out. That happens a lot. Then, at 18, they do not have any high-level qualifications. They may be bright and capable, but their journey has finished and they do not have very much to show for it.

There is then no capacity for them to enter the workplace. There is no supported or extended work experience. With the women and girls I work with, there is a big question mark about whether you tell somebody you are autistic or not, because if you tell them, will they employ you? But if you do not tell them and you behave in an autistic way they will think you are weird. There are a number of different conversations.



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They are just not very well served, and that is before you get on to the question of higher education. We are doing them a disservice. They are short-changed and there does need to be better provision for those critical years of 16 to 19 so they can get something under their belts. In an ideal world, you would start having some internship as part of your post-16 provision at that point, somewhere where you maybe would get a job. For autistic people, building those relationships with the people you are going to work with is fundamental. You cannot succeed unless you do that. I do not know whether that is a solution, but to me that is definitely a big problem.

Dr Nicola Crossley: It is almost like we are having the same experiences. I have already flagged the concerns around the education, health and care plans ceasing to be maintained at HE. Alongside that, thinking about supporting transitions, universities and other organisations need support in their own understanding of what autism is and what it looks like, but also in supporting autistic and neurodivergent colleagues, particularly around reasonable adjustments in the workplace, as Anne has already flagged.

There is work being undertaken across the country. Birmingham Newman University, University of East London and University of Warwick are just a few examples where they are looking at how they support neurodiversity in HE. That is fantastic, but our autistic children and young people need to see positive neurodivergent role models, and our autistic colleagues also need to feel that they can be seen and accepted. I am not sure that there is consistency in that across educational institutions and partnering organisations. There needs to be a better offer in supporting transition to adulthood that reflects the diverse needs, interests and capabilities of autistic young people. Too often providers focus only on the current stage or phase. I think that accountability measures influence that.

I agree wholeheartedly with what Sarah said, because we often go down a route where we are focusing on course completion or a qualification gained to tick a box and it provides little benefit to the next steps for that individual, as Anne has referenced. What we need is a range of pathways that support future life goals and independence, but there needs to be more flexibility that extends to opportunities for further study, work experience or supported internships, whatever is needed for that individual to live a meaningful life as a valued citizen. We are not thinking about that all the time. We are thinking about the here and now and not thinking about what progression looks like and how these new learners will support us in our dotage. How are they given the skills to be looking after the rest of the country and progress?

At a school and college level, it is about having a very robust careers offer, but this also needs support and partnerships with other providers and businesses who see the value in diversity. It is still too variable across the country. Knowledge and availability is where we have seen the difficulties. Our members at ASCL report difficulties in business



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engagement. It may well be that the Oliver McGowan training needs to be extended further, or certainly the principles of the training, which promotes tolerance, understanding and the importance of autistic agency in making reasonable adjustments.

Schools and colleges also need additional support with the Autism Plus profiles, particularly in mainstream, because it may well be beneficial for the stronger link with health to share resources, such as the Core Capabilities Framework, which is there; the Easy Read version is very accessible and makes very clear what we should be doing to support. As we have all said, we are not experts in everything. We know our education, we know what a good education looks like, but we cannot be the experts in everything and all of the issues that children face in society.

There is also value in exploring what personal or mentoring support could be available to allow for either stronger or elongated supported transitions that lead to success and greater independence that is sustainable. Sarah has talked about people dropping off a cliff and not making that progress. I think it is because, as she also said, some of our children are not quite ready to move on to the next stage. I have many examples from our members, who report that students are not quite ready—"We could do with having them another year"—particularly when you have providers that only go up to 16 and then, as Sarah says, they are launched into an FE college that is too big for them.

One flexible pathway offer could be about a bridging offer, like you get with adult education and access to HE, in the world of work and access to employment. Could it be they stay at school for an additional year but they are sharing the provision with the new provider? Is that remote sessions; is it day-release philosophy? What allows them to stay in the place that they know best for a little bit longer so that that transition is more successful?

The Chair: Thank you. Baroness Browning has a supplementary.

Baroness Browning: It is small. Excellent, thank you all so much. None of you has mentioned apprenticeships. If I could take you back—not to your own experience—years and years ago we had something called the Youth Training Scheme, where school leavers were in a supported situation. They were doing further learning and work experience at the same time, quite closely supervised. Do you think that something like that plays a role today?

Sarah Wild: It absolutely could, as long as that organisation understood what it was doing with the community it has. We would need to ensure there was a relationship grown from their school environment to that kind of training being provided. Yes, I think that would be great, because they just need a bit more time and support to go to college or to take qualifications or to go to work. It is things like knowing that you do not drink out of Barbara's mug or sit in Frank's chair, or you do not say to



somebody, “Oh, you are looking really red today, like a tomato” because they are very nervous and that is just what they have said. It is about trying to give them a bit more time so that they can be successful.

Dr Nicola Crossley: Apologies for not being explicit, because it is very much at the heart of what educators up and down the country are trying to tap into. The difficulty that people are experiencing is with business engagement and the confidence of businesses to offer something that is meaningful and trusting that the autistic individual will be able to succeed. I think that is where the strategy has not gone far enough. We are still learning and still getting to that acceptance level. That is very difficult because it comes with preconceived ideas of what an autistic person might do or look like and be in the workplace.

That is why we are trying to go down the supported internships route and look at a variety of pathways. Yes, we do want to focus on apprenticeships too but ensuring—as you say, Sarah—that the links with the businesses in the area will have the reciprocal arrangement and trust to allow that to continue and not be a flash in the pan, that only the odd child can do it. It needs to be something concrete and continuous that we can offer. Yes, they would love it. Sometimes that comes with prior expectations and academic requirements, which can sometimes exclude some of our children. It is about the flexibility to be able to tailor-make an offer that is appropriate for that individual.

Lord Addington: In talking about plans that are supposed to work until the age of 25 in colleges, you are implying that this is not happening or it is not happening effectively.

Dr Nicola Crossley: Obviously you have the code of practice and the principles of that go to 25, but with children who have had education, health and care plans while in education, once they get into employment or they get to higher education, they are “cured” so they do not need any support any more—but that is not the reality of it. There is a mismatch in the principles of the code of practice saying that there should be support to 25, but somehow within the enactment of the policy it turns out that when you have made a transition, that support is removed. That is where we are seeing people drop off again.

Lord Addington: In other words, it is the passport thing, where you do not take the information and the structure and things with you once you have left an environment at all. Okay, thank you.

Q76 **Lord Hope of Craighead:** My question is a rather particular one about the statutory guidance and the Government’s autism strategy. What we are looking for in this question—which I will read out in a moment—is your help as to what we should be recommending if there are shortcomings. I will read out the question and put the questions to you individually. How effective, if at all, have the Autism Act 2009, the statutory guidance and the Government’s autism strategy been in improving transitions to adulthood for autistic young people? Why have



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they been effective or not effective? I will start with Dr Heavey and then move across the table.

Dr Anne Heavey: The hard metrics by which you would measure that success are quite hard to come by. We have already heard some of the data points, which suggest that there are some real challenges, with around three in 10 autistic people being in employment, as opposed to eight in 10 non-disabled people, for example, and the Buckland review statistics are that autistic graduates are twice as likely to be unemployed 15 months out of university.

If I was thinking about how we can be constructive, in the spirit of the previous conversation, there is something very interesting about these moments of change in someone's life and thinking about how we have more fluid and overlapping transitions. That is what is not guaranteed. You have individual providers that are very driven and have created the capacity, and you have individual employers, colleges and so on that have the capacity and inclination. You can get some very interesting and effective practice, but it is not guaranteed. We need more examples that we can draw on to show that this is normal, that it is something that can enhance your setting, your employer and your business. Where this works, you do not hear someone saying, "Well, we are inclusive and it has hit our bottom line". You usually hear, "We are inclusive and it is very effective for our bottom line because we are drawing on all the talents". Really leaning into how you create an interlocking transition would be very powerful.

Something that we do not often talk about in education is that schools and colleges are also employers and they are able to model effective inclusive employment. They potentially have the bonus of a SENCO on site and some additional specialists that could offer additional support around the edges. There are some very nice examples. I had one ready for the previous follow-up, where schools have leant into apprenticeships, provided them as employers and interlocked that with their existing SEN provision to make sure that those youngsters have a little bit of additional support. Thinking creatively about how you create the capacity to have a more flexible, fluid transition that keeps one foot in your safe space as you are taking flight into your new destination would be very powerful.

Possibly let us think very carefully about the metrics we want to see improve and have some accountabilities lined up to individuals or departments so that we have good tracing of those.

Lord Hope of Craighead: Do you rely on these documents in the course of your work?

Dr Anne Heavey: No.

Lord Hope of Craighead: You do not actually read them, do you?

Dr Anne Heavey: Would I feel like I have to read them in my role? No.



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Lord Hope of Craighead: Is that because you are so skilled you do not need that sort of guidance; you have worked in the system long enough to not need it?

Dr Anne Heavey: I think that you look to your practice, you look to the practice of effective colleagues and settings and then you refer to them, but is it the first document that you reach for? No.

Sarah Wild: If we are going to point to a success, it is awareness and attitudes. When we think back to 2009, which feels like a very long time ago, understanding and thinking around autism was quite different. It felt very much siloed and on the periphery. I do not know whether you would agree, but I think there is more social awareness and social acceptance around autism. Doing the job that I do, when I first started at Limpsfield Grange I was told categorically by somebody from Surrey County Council that women and girls were not autistic and I was just making it up. Now, every time I get into a taxi and I say what I do, somebody has an autistic niece, nephew, daughter or granddaughter, like there are three autistic people in their family. That is a big journey for us to go on as a society. It was very important that we said, "This is important and we need to think about what we will do". That is the success of that piece of legislation.

The implementation has been a bit messy. It is fragmented, partly because it sits across so many different spheres and sectors and departments of government, but I also think an autistic life, like any life, is not lived in silos. You do not think, "Oh, I am going through my health phase now". I just do not think there is enough connectivity between the different aspects of this and maybe it was a bit too ambitious. Maybe that is because back then we did not know how many autistic people there were and what slice of the community we were talking about. That is the failing, that maybe it was like an intent rather than a pathway.

Lord Hope of Craighead: Is this strategy addressing the right people?

Sarah Wild: My personal view is that if you were to relaunch this in the future, it would need to be about neurodiversity, because very few people are just autistic: they are autistic and they have ADHD or they are dyspraxic or they have dyslexia. There are a lot of things that live together. If you are just looking at slices of that community at a time and you are allocating resources to small communities at a time, it means that you do not get enough of anything. Potentially what you would want is a piece of legislation around neurodiversity and inclusion because then you would cover all the shades of neurodiversity and capture the autistic community and other neurodivergent people. That would be very powerful and probably a better use of resources. The communication between different government departments would need to be better. There would need to be an overarching strategy, a proper one.

Dr Nicola Crossley: I will not repeat what Sarah and Anne have said. I will focus very much on the technicality of the strategy itself and the appendix. How effective has it been? With only 30% in work, 20% with a



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degree and 76% still living with parents, according to ONS data, the answer is not effective enough. The implementation plan recognises the need to strengthen and promote pathways to employment and an increased focus on workforce training in schools and colleges, but I cannot see any reports on data triangulation and evidence of impact that have been produced.

The completion rates for the majority of things within the annexe was March 2022. How was it monitored? Were the measures of success the right measures? Were the timescales even realistic, as Sarah also said? If I draw your attention to page 7 of the appendix, it talks about improving access to education and supporting positive transitions into adulthood by strengthening participation and involving SEND individuals with the design of policies and services. The measure of success is, "Plans and approaches developed that will be transferable to the wider Jobcentre network". What does that even mean? I do not know what I can hang on it, as to what is the tangible evidence of that; how can we prove whether that has been successful?

The other point is around considering "transitions for training to be integrated into the workforce programme of training in schools and colleges" and the measure of successes: "increased take-up by autistic people". By how much? What is the baseline? What sort of increase is a success? If I get three more autistic people, is that a success? As Sarah said, the strategy and certainly the implementation plan was perhaps too far-reaching, trying to address too many things, and it might have been better to focus on just a few core things that we could do very successfully.

I want to flag this, because this is very pertinent for my setting: 4(b) of the implementation plan identifies the need for an extension to the special free schools programme, with 24 out of 37 earmarked for autistic children and young people. The need has not gone away. Indeed, you have data from DfE, as reported in the *Independent* in March this year, citing that two in three special schools are at or over capacity. You have NHS and NAS modelling, as seen in the commissioning framework, with diagnoses of autistic individuals expected to continue to increase year on year to 2035. The decision to pause this free school programme at the moment is quite difficult for me to understand, and to think about how we will solve that problem when the numbers are not reducing.

Lord Hope of Craighead: Thank you very much indeed.

The Chair: Thank you. We will move now to Baroness Goudie, who is online.

Q77 **Baroness Goudie:** Good morning. Sorry to be online, but I am pleased to be with you this morning. Thank you very much for coming. The question is why have there been effective—or not effective—barriers? What are the main barriers that schools and colleges face in supporting autistic young people with transitions to adulthood? What would be the



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best ways forward with these barriers? I think especially of apprenticeships or getting placements in establishments that would keep them long term or for two or three years. Can we start off with Sarah, perhaps.

Sarah Wild: I think we have covered some of this already this morning.

Baroness Goudie: That is right. You have, yes, but there are a couple of things that just come in with this.

Sarah Wild: No, that is absolutely fine.

Baroness Goudie: It is the way the questions are.

Sarah Wild: We have already talked about the fact that obviously there are fracture points and cliff edges for young people in transitioning from one setting to another setting, the break in education between school, statutory education up until the end of year 11 and then further education and higher education. All of those transition points are quite high risk for an autistic young person because they are times at which they can drop out and the level of support that they receive can diminish or change or not be upheld.

Another problem, for example in a mainstream secondary school with a sixth form for preparation, is sometimes around identification and understanding. Getting an autism diagnosis at the moment is taking a very, very long time. If you are a woman or a girl, obviously you are joining the queue at an older age, and then once you are identified getting an EHCP can take a very long time as well. Schools can be held in a position where they are not entirely sure what they are meant to be doing or what needs somebody might have. That can hit you as you are going through some of the transitions from year 11 to year 12, so understanding what the young person needs can sometimes be a barrier in itself.

I think that local authorities are trying to do their best with issuing EHCPs. I know Anne has talked about that already, but they are just taking too long. They are often very poorly written, the provision in them is often incredibly generic and schools do not get any money or resourcing to deliver any of the plan. In some instances, they just feel a bit meaningless and they do not add any value for the young person. That is one of the issues.

There are the things that we have talked about this morning around employability and apprenticeships, that kind of work partnership so that you are supporting somebody to get into work and stay in work. These are not impossible things to do. We just need to think differently about what it is and why it is important.

Dr Nicola Crossley: I think that the barriers for schools and colleges are around the availability of flexible pathways, as we have already referenced. The accountability landscape does hinder the ability. Schools



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and colleges feel that the accountability landscape restricts the opportunities that they might have for creating an individualised approach. Within the sector, vocational pathways are not always given the same value, or it feels like that. When we are talking and giving evidence in lots of things—consultations—it sometimes feels like we are the ones that are not pushing an academic curriculum offer, that we always look for what is perhaps considered to be the easy option, vocational or whatever.

The specialist sector is very focused on creating something that is stretching and challenging and provides the broad and balanced academic curriculum that the children need, but the chronological expectations that we have created are not always appropriate for some of our children. Sometimes it is a “stage not age” approach. As we see, we all mature and develop in different ways at different rates and sometimes our children are not quite ready to transition at 16 or 18. That is very tricky. That is almost a philosophical question that we have to explore and I doubt we will ever get to the answer for the sector because we are all so different.

Schools and colleges are struggling, as Sarah said, with being given the freedom to be inclusive and to provide the personalised pathways in a way that is cost efficient and supports the transitions for the young people alongside this accountability landscape, which is quite tricky to manage.

Dr Anne Heavey: I will add only two small things to everything that has been said. The capacity that is available within education providers is a very key barrier. When you already have constraints from the accountability system that you are working within, if you then have constraints around your capacity and your access to embodied expertise, that in itself creates a barrier. Looking at the flexibilities that could be freed up in accountability and then, frankly, the resourcing that needs to be available to bring these flexibilities in is key.

Baroness Goudie: Thank you very much, all three of you. Very kind.

Q78 **Lord Crisp:** I have the final question. You have been extremely clear in your answers, but this gives you the chance to both sum up and to look forward. If we could go from right to left, so Dr Crossley first of all, with this question: following the end of the autism strategy for 2021 to 2026, what should the Government prioritise to improve access to education and transitions to adulthood for autistic children and young people?

Dr Nicola Crossley: I will pick out three things for each. On improving access to education, I think that the Government should continue and extend the rollout of autism training to all education settings. As Sarah has talked about, there should be a focus on SEN and neurodiversity as a whole. In the same way that safeguarding training is mandated for schools, SEN training should be mandated annually, because the percentage prevalence of not just autistic individuals but SEN and



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neurodiversity across the school population is increasing. You will never go into a classroom where there is nobody who has an additional need, so it makes no sense to not make sure that that is mandated training annually.

The second thing is to remove the pause on the special free school programme and continue the commitment to 24 schools with autism designation.

The third would be to include specialist providers in discussions—planning and delivery of resource bases and associated adaptations—so that the expertise can not only be shared but disseminated across hubs across the country.

In improving transitions to adulthood, the first thing should be, as Anne has already talked about, to seize the opportunity with the curriculum review, to recognise the need and agree to the inclusion of a range of suitable learning pathways, and an assessment that is fair and meets future as well as present need.

The second thing is to improve data collection so that the scale of the problem is known and able to be addressed for access, progress and completion rates.

The final thing is to provide options for transition support that join together perhaps the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education, for example, with access to work-type support, mentoring, supporting access to HE, and having that joined-up approach so that there are no unintended consequences in the future.

Sarah Wild: If you could do that by lunchtime, that would be great.

Lord Crisp: I thought that was probably the task, yes.

Sarah Wild: I agree with what Nic has just said. On access to education, there are some quite practical things that the Government can look at: the tension that we have all talked about between accountability measures and the curriculum. The curriculum is just wrong, and I think if we change that, more neurodiverse people would be successful in mainstream schools and some of the problems might dissipate a little. Changes to school environments: as the falling roll comes through, we can hang on to that space and use it to become a better sensory environment for neurodiverse learners. That would be very helpful. Ensuring that teacher training and training for the wider staff group is mandated and funded is absolutely key. I love the idea of it being annual as well, because you are right: you will never teach a class without someone who is special needs in it ever.

On the transition to work and to adulthood, the things that we have talked about this morning in supporting experience for work and training and apprenticeships are absolutely key. That is missing from the conversation at the moment. I know that the Department for Work and



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Pensions had a look at that last year, but nothing seemed to come out of it.

We have not really talked about inclusion in your wider community and society. I think a lot of autistic young people are very lonely and isolated. There needs to be some resourcing put to providing broader social networks for autistic young people as they are hitting the workplace. They are missing and losing all of the structure, routine and comfort of their education provider and are just thrown into something. If you do not get a job, you can end up at home with nothing, you get very depressed and that can lead to wider problems. We need to consider that. That is not just a “nice to have”, that is fundamental for quality of life as a human being.

On the idea that there needs to be better connectivity between government departments so that we are not just doing random things and not connecting them, it would help if there was somebody—I am not suggesting a neurodiversity tsar but somebody like that—who had oversight of all of the things that were going on so that there was a face to this work that was happening and that they had influence over multiple government departments and could co-ordinate some of this work. It would also raise the profile of this. Broadening it out from autism to neurodiversity is very important, because we are only looking at one part of a picture here. There is a large neurodiverse community within our community and at the moment we are not looking at all of them.

Lord Crisp: Can I ask you to unpack your very first point there about the accountability and the curriculum? “Just wrong” I think was the language you used. Could you unpack that a bit?

Sarah Wild: I am old enough to remember the Tomlinson report back in the old days. Oh my goodness, that was amazing. What an incredible time. That would have been brilliant, would it not?

We have designed a curriculum offer that is basically for the top third of students in the school, and even neurotypical students who are just not that way inclined find it very heavy going. It is very old-fashioned, it is very boring and I do not know what it is preparing kids for, if I am being very honest. It is this idea that vocational learning is, “Oh, must not talk about that” or, “Only do it in a shed around the back”. Why are we not creating plumbers and builders and electricians? Why are we not creating hairdressers? Why are we so embarrassed about all of this? That is great. If it means that you can get a job at the end of it, even better. The curriculum is just the wrong curriculum. I think it works for the top third in any school and for everybody else it is just a bit arbitrary.

Lord Crisp: It is written down: “just wrong”.

Sarah Wild: There you go—close the meeting.

Lord Crisp: Dr Heavey, the last word to you, please.



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Dr Anne Heavey: Thank you. I do not entirely agree on the curriculum but we might take that outside.

Lord Crisp: Very good.

Dr Anne Heavey: We have to remember that you cannot prioritise lots of things, so my big push is that we embrace inclusion as an organising principle and the test for any of the set-piece reforms or tweaks that we are making. If the curriculum review does not answer the question of, "Will this help more young people be prepared to take flight and flourish in their next steps?", it needs to go back and be redrafted and done again. Are the accountability measures incentivising, recognising and rewarding inclusive behaviours in schools, rather than feeling like they are in tension with making the decisions that you need to make?

I would also call out reasonable adjustments. Particularly in a secondary school mainstream context, it can feel very difficult to understand how to offer enough flexibility, particularly around pastoral support. If you think about a youngster who is perhaps incredibly anxious about attending school, and you are working with them to break an entrenched pattern of poor attendance, having an attendance policy that has detentions that ~~are automatic if you are late and texts home if you miss sessions will not~~

¹ Note from Dr Nicola Crossley: "From my perspective and largely influenced by the medical model of SEND we have adopted; teachers are fearful of what *reasonable adjustments* means and looks like in practice.

"I think the term itself has created confusion because what does 'reasonable' mean and what is an 'adjustment'—and that is where I think teachers get themselves in a tangle. To be clear 'reasonable' means that you don't have to completely change the lesson for one child, and 'adjustment' is that—it's a tweak or a consideration.

"Across the specialist sector we tend to spend much of our time demystifying this concept because practitioners imagine it needs something distinct and obvious—and of course, there are children who need something very specific and bespoke, and many of these children will be in a PMLD or SLD school.

"For children with SEND who are cognitively able, and those who may be a little behind their peers, reasonable adjustments are often about common sense. It is a question of 'How do I ensure this child can access the learning?'

"This might be as simple as seating someone with a VI at the front of the class, not assessing a dyslexic individual's progress solely on the daily spelling test, or making sure instructions are given clearly and once at a time, for many neurodivergent individuals, including those who are autistic.

"But to get reasonable adjustments right, it requires knowledge and understanding of the individual child—the label we apply may give us some generalised principles but knowing the child, their strengths and their needs, will ensure any adjustments to classroom practice are effective."



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help you. If you have the confidence to say, “We will stand down these elements of our attendance policy for you because we can see that the fact that you have come through the door today is a huge achievement”, that is not lowering expectations, that is being realistic about what it takes. That will go a long way to improve the experience of autistic pupils and help them know they are cherished and belong in their schools.

We cannot have lots of priorities, so let us make inclusion the priority and the test for the pieces of work that we are doing and let us do a real drive on reasonable adjustments in our schools.

Lord Wigley: On that very point, I noted in an earlier answer to question 3 that teachers do not understand the concept of reasonable adjustments. If there is anything additional on that you feel you could bring to our attention, I am sure we would welcome a further note on it. It is a question that goes beyond the concept of our report here, of course.¹

The Chair: Any further questions for our witnesses? Thank you. What an incredibly informative session that was. You have given us a lot of amazing stuff to focus on and to start to think about as we are building our recommendations going forward. I am incredibly grateful to the three of you. Thank you very much indeed. We will send you a transcript of the session if you want to check it for accuracy. With that, we will continue in a moment with our second evidence session, but this first evidence session has concluded and the meeting is briefly suspended.