

Education Committee

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

Tuesday 1 July 2025

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Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Sir James Cleverly; Dr Caroline Johnson; Amanda Martin; Darren Paffey; Manuela Perteghella; Mark Sewards; Caroline Voaden.

Questions 230 - 294

Witnesses

I: Catherine McKinnell, Minister of State (Minister for School Standards), Department for Education; and Alison Ismail, Director for Special Educational Needs & Disabilities and Alternative Provision, Department for Education.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Catherine McKinnell and Alison Ismail.

Q230 Chair: We now begin the public proceedings of the Education Select Committee this morning. I welcome members and our witnesses to the meeting. It is, as you will be experiencing, extremely warm in this room. Please help yourselves to water, feel free to remove your jackets and make yourselves as comfortable as you can be.

This is the final oral evidence session in our Select Committee's inquiry on special educational needs and disabilities, entitled Solving the SEND Crisis. We are very pleased to welcome the Minister Catherine McKinnell and her official Alison Ismail to give evidence to us. I will start by inviting the Minister and her official to introduce themselves to us.

Catherine McKinnell: I am Catherine McKinnell. I am the Minister for School Standards.

Alison Ismail: Good morning. I am Alison Ismail. I am Director for SEND and Alternative Provision at the Department for Education.

Q231 Chair: Thank you very much. I will begin our questioning this morning. We understand that the Government's goal is to have a mainstream education system that is inclusive for children and young people with SEND. What is the Department's working definition of an inclusive mainstream setting?



Catherine McKinnell: I should have said thank you very much for having me here today. I know how hard you have all been working as a Committee on the challenges facing the SEND system and investigating that. I recognise that you are all here because you care profoundly about the children and young people with special educational needs and their families. We share that concern and priority. We recognise how difficult the system is currently for parents and carers and young people to navigate, but most of all we know that it is not delivering the outcomes that we want to see for children and young people.

Before I answer your question, which I will come to, Chair, I want to put on record my thanks to the teachers, the support staff and all those who work closely with families right across the country every day to make the best possible offer out of the current system. I want to reassure the Committee as well that improving the SEND system is very much a priority for the Government. We want all children to feel that they belong in a mainstream setting if that is the best place for their needs to be met, and that they receive the right support to succeed in their education and lead healthy, happy and productive adult lives as they move on as part of that transition.

I appreciate that some of the detail will have to be set out in our statement, the schools White Paper that we will set out in the autumn, but I want to be really clear from the outset that we will not be removing any existing effective support. We want to identify where there is good practice in the system, where we are seeing the delivery of consistent high-quality provision that is helping young people to thrive in a timely and effective way as they move into adult life. That is what we want to build on and expand across the system.

That in part, I hope, answers your question, but to the specifics of how we see inclusivity in mainstream schools, it is about building the expertise of the workforce in schools to break down the barriers to education, whatever the barriers are that children might be facing to access and unlock their education, particularly to ensure that special schools can cater to those with the most complex needs. We want to drive a consistent and inclusive approach to supporting children and young people with SEND so that every child can achieve and thrive in mainstream settings through early identification, effective support, high-quality teaching and the effective allocation of resources.

Q232 **Chair:** One of the problems that we have heard and received a great deal of evidence on is that the state of the current system has resulted in a real collapse in the trust and confidence of parents in the system. I think what parents want to know is that we will reform the system from the Government and there will be accountability so that if things are not going as they should, there is somewhere to go with those concerns. Will you be setting out a working definition of an inclusive mainstream so that if a school is deemed by the Government to be an inclusive school, parents can be confident that they know what the characteristics are of



that school, what expertise should be on-site, what the physical environment should be and what the makings are of a truly inclusive setting, so that schools can be held to account under a new system for whether or not they are modelling inclusive practice?

Catherine McKinnell: You touch on the really challenging point that we are at with confidence of parents in the system. We know that it is not where it should be. Many parents and families are having to fight really hard for their child's education and we want to change that completely. We want to build a system that restores confidence. We recognise where we have arrived at and the journey that we have been on to get here. The last Conservative Government acknowledged themselves that the system is lose-lose. We have reached this point now. As we reform it, we are absolutely conscious that we need to deliver better outcomes for children, but we need to bring children, families, parents and the whole sector with us so that we can not just deliver better outcomes but also restore trust and confidence in the system and, as you say, be very clear about what good inclusive mainstream education looks like and ensure that it is clear where specialist education is required for complex needs. Alison, do you want to come in on the system more broadly?

Alison Ismail: I echo everything the Minister said, but I will also say that there are a number of components to it and they will be set out in the White Paper. We frequently hear that parents and carers are looking for workforce confidence and capability. When they get the message from their child's school that they feel equipped and competent to meet the child's needs, that is a really important part of it. I think the capital point that you made is also important, and that is what we will invest in. Flexibility around adaptations for schools and a well-evidenced approach to the school environment is really important for parents. It is also that we are forward leaning and crisp and clear about what we expect our settings to offer for meeting all children's needs.

We know that all those things, as well as the point about early intervention and, wherever possible, support without a long bureaucratic process and without a diagnosis or a label, are important components for rebuilding confidence. As the Minister said, those are the things we will focus on in the White Paper.

Q233 **Sir James Cleverly:** Minister, you started off by saying that the current system is not working. You then also said that no one who is currently receiving provision would lose that provision. That suggests there will be a no-losers one-way valve for stuff going into the White Paper. What will change fundamentally? I think everyone can see that the current system is not working and is unsustainable. Are you envisaging significantly more money coming from Treasury to map against the recent increase in demand for SEND provision? Are you going to recruit more people in mainstream education? Are you going to expand physically the mainstream estate? I did not hear anything in your introduction that gave me the slightest clue as to how you will fundamentally address what we



all agree is currently an unsustainable situation.

Catherine McKinnell: That is a question that covers probably everything that we will discuss throughout this session, so I am conscious of that.

Sir James Cleverly: In broad terms.

Catherine McKinnell: Okay, in broad terms, the point that I hope should be reassuring for parents—and that is an important part of this conversation—is that good already exists, what works already exists and it is already evident in the system. Since coming into Government last July, the first thing we did was restructure the Department for Education to put SEND right at the heart of the system. That is a difference from the previous Government and from the previous situation.

We secured £1 billion to inject immediately into the high needs budget and into SEND services. We have invested £740 million already in capital to expand the estate. That has already been distributed to local authorities, which are working with their local schools to expand capacity in the system, whether in mainstream schools or the specialist sector. We have set up an expert-led neurodiversity task and finish group to improve inclusivity for children with SEND in mainstream settings. We are being led by experts on this. We have ended the use of safety valve agreements and we are working very hard with local authorities to support them through a challenging period.

We have launched the music opportunities pilot so that children with SEND have access to music education. We have created Inclusion 2028 to improve access to PE and sport for pupils with SEND. We have increased earlier targeted support to overcome speech and language challenges. That is set to reach an extra 20,000 pupils with the funding that we have allocated this year. We are rolling out the partnership for neurodiversity in schools programme to another 1,200 schools. That is better teacher training to identify need and support children with their needs.

I appreciate that the need for change and reform is urgent and we are not wasting any time in getting on with that. We are already delivering on it and then we will set out the much broader picture of how we see the whole system delivering these aims as part of the White Paper in the autumn.

Q234 **Chair:** Can I bring you back to some of the challenges in the current system? We have heard a lot from parents and from schools that ordinarily available provision in schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities is very broken in lots of places, and largely non-existent in some schools. That will be key to getting a more inclusive set of mainstream schools across the board. What plans do the Government have to improve ordinarily available provision in schools? What are the components of that improvement process? How will you clarify expectations for schools and local authorities on what should be available in a mainstream school?



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Catherine McKinnell: As I said, some of this is already there but it needs to become much more consistent in the way that it is delivered across the country. We are looking at a whole range of areas to support schools to provide a much stronger offer and to meet the needs of the children within cohorts. I have mentioned a few.

Since taking on this role, one of the great joys—which you will know because, as a Committee, I am sure you do this as a significant amount of your work—is visiting schools and seeing the fantastic practice that is happening in schools around the country. I had a brilliant visit on Friday to a primary school in Eltham, which was showcasing the fantastic interaction that it has as a school. It has a significant amount of SEND provision as part of its mainstream offer. The visit was particularly to look at the assistive tech that they use to support the children in the school. We have launched a £1.7 million pilot into assistive tech, which is through a lending library, to ensure that schools can make the best use of the technology that is now available to support children with a whole variety of learning needs but to make sure that they are not making that investment without knowing that it meets the needs of the children in their cohort. We are setting up these lending libraries so that schools can try before they buy.

I could see the transformational impact that this tech was having in this school for the children who require an iPad to verbalise and to communicate; for the children who were being assisted with their reading with a reading pen that will check for them to give them the confidence that they are reading things correctly; and for the teaching staff themselves, all talking into microphones and projecting their words on to a board to enable a visual as well as audio learning experience for children. The school clearly has brilliant outcomes and is providing a brilliant, inclusive mainstream education for the children there.

That is just one of a whole range of visits that I have had since becoming the Minister for Schools and there are great practices there. I could talk about some of the inspections under the new inspection regime that have had good outcomes from a local authority perspective.

Q235 **Chair:** We will come on to questions about accountability and the inspection framework. As a Committee, we have also seen very good examples of good practice. I think we would not be calling it a crisis if that good practice was happening everywhere. The question for Government is what levers are you going to use to drive that good practice across the whole of the country. Do you perceive, as you are thinking about reform of the system, any conflicts between a system that at the moment is focused on meeting the rights and needs of individual children, albeit that it does not do that very well in lots of cases, and the shift to an inclusive mainstream education? Are you concerned that that policy shift of the Government may result in some children not having their individual needs met because the system may become too broad in its focus as a consequence of that? Is there any conflict between the



current rights-based approach and shifting to a more broad spectrum approach?

Catherine McKinnell: No, I think it is the opposite. We desperately need to move away from this adversarial system where parents feel they need to fight for every bit of their child's education and for their child to get the education they deserve. We feel that the system, as it should for any child—our focus is on all children getting an excellent education and putting in place all the means necessary in our school system to deliver that. That means all children, so that includes children with special educational needs and disabilities, and making sure that that can be provided in the most effective and consistent way possible right across our school system.

That is why we are looking at the curriculum, Ofsted reform, accountability and the new inspection system, which I know you will get on to, for local authority accountability. We are working with colleagues in the Department of Health on how we work collaboratively to deliver across a whole range of needs. We are very focused on an evidence-led approach as to what works in school to deliver and unlock learning for every child. We are not prepared to accept anything less than every child getting the education they deserve, and that is what we are focused on delivering.

Q236 Mark Sowards: Thank you, Minister. We know about three quarters of students with SEND receive some provision, but it is inconsistent and the quality is all over the place. Much of the written evidence we have received as part of this inquiry states that there is a desperate scramble for EHCPs precisely because parents know that if they do not get one, the provision will be pretty dismal in some places. What are you going to do to address this?

Catherine McKinnell: We know that local authorities have seen a significant increase in the number of assessment requests for education, health and care plans. This is contributing to the difficulty of ensuring that children and young people receive the support that they need quickly, because we need to make sure that the services are delivered in a timely way in every locality. We need to see much better communication with schools and families so that confidence can be built that their education will be delivered.

The Department for Education commissioned independent insights, and they were very clear that if the SEND system was extensively improved—that is what we are determined to do, including much better early intervention and more resources for mainstream schools—tens of thousands more children and young people with SEND could have their needs met without EHCP and could be educated in mainstream settings, along with their peers; and, most importantly, their outcomes would be improved. That is what we are very focused on—not just how we change the system, but how we improve outcomes for children. That is our No. 1 priority.



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Q237 Mark Swards: Would you consider changing the SEND code of practice to enforce this?

Catherine McKinnell: Do you want to come in here, Alison?

Alison Ismail: May I comment on that, and then I will respond on the code of practice? I want to pick up on what the Minister said. On the point about variation, one of the interesting things about the SEND system is that there is no single definition or threshold to be designated as SEND. In fact, the Education Policy Institute found that the single biggest determinant in whether you will be designated as SEND is your school. There is a huge variation. What we see from the visits we do and talking to schools is that provision for children with additional needs in one school might be done through their core offer, perhaps even without giving the label of SEND support, and in another school it might be considered to require an EHCP application. There is that interesting disconnect in the consistency of practice and consistency of expectations, which we know is really important to parents and carers.

We do have a SEND code of practice, which is available. From what we hear and from the evidence that you have taken as a Committee, that needs to be perhaps clearer, updated and more accessible as something that we can clearly point to for the expectation on the core offer. It speaks very clearly about a graduated approach when there is a child with additional needs—the “plan, do, review” cycle, which I think many schools do to a high quality already. That cycle should be fully explored before the need for what it calls the statutory system, but we know that is not happening consistently. I expect that as part of looking at the overall system, we would definitely review whether there is more we can do to improve the code of practice.

Q238 Mark Swards: You mentioned statutory support. The Committee has heard lots of evidence that suggests we should put SEN support on a statutory footing. What do you both think about that?

Catherine McKinnell: We have not made any decisions yet about future changes on education, health and care plans. The settlement from the spending review means that we can make a significant investment in the provision available for SEND pupils in mainstream schools, as well as protecting the provision that is currently in place. To clarify, following the question earlier, we have been clear that we will avoid removing effective provision that is evidence-based and is working and delivering for children and young people. We want to expand the capacity where it is working well to deliver high-quality provision. We will set out more details about the intended approach in the White Paper in the autumn.

Mark Swards: There are no decisions yet. Thank you.

Q239 Sir James Cleverly: Can I just clarify? You are saying that there is not a guarantee of continuity of provision. You are saying that where it is good quality, it will continue, but you are not giving a 100% guarantee of



continuity of provision.

Catherine McKinnell: We have been very clear that we are not going to remove effective current provision that is working for children and young people.

Q240 **Sir James Cleverly:** Yes, but you are saying there is not a 100% guarantee of continuity of provision?

Catherine McKinnell: We are not looking to change the existing provision that is working for children, but obviously the system—

Sir James Cleverly: That is not a 100% guarantee of continuity of provision. I think it is a yes or no answer.

Catherine McKinnell: We are very keen to change the system so that it works for children and young people.

Sir James Cleverly: You are saying that where it is good, it will continue, but you are saying that that is not a 100% guarantee.

Chair: Minister, I will give you one last chance to respond, but we cannot have this back and forth. The Minister has said what she is going to say, and you are going to have to take that and interpret it as you want to.

Catherine McKinnell: We are very clear that we will protect existing provision that is working for children and young people, but we want to change the system to make it work for all children and young people. That is what we are very focused on delivering.

Q241 **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge:** Minister, access to statutory support at this time depends on medical assessment and diagnosis when it should not, but in practice—in reality—there are far too many young people who are having to wait for assessment and diagnosis rather than having the support that they need early on. Why has this happened and what actions will you take to prevent this?

Catherine McKinnell: Sorry, do you mind just asking the question again?

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge: Statutory support should not depend on medical assessment and diagnosis, but the reality is that for a number of reasons, children are not getting the support that they need and are having to wait for that assessment and diagnosis. Can you talk me through the actions that you will be taking to prevent this?

Catherine McKinnell: We know that effective early identification and intervention is critical to improving the outcomes for children, and that is what we are focused on delivering, moving away from a system that is reliant on labels, plans and diagnoses before the support that is clearly needed materialises. That means a system that can accurately assess what a child or young person's learning and development needs are, and to then have a system that effectively supports meeting those needs. We



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know that many settings already have the mechanism to make those assessments. That is the best practice we want to build on that is evidence-led, evidence-based, with the training for the workforce to identify and meet those needs.

ELSEC, early language support for every child, is in pilot phase at the moment, but this is the intervention we see being transformational for children and for schools in meeting needs. I saw it in practice and I could see the impact on the children; that was quite clear. What came out from the visit was the impact on the teaching workforce in the school, the teaching assistants as well, and the confidence that they had gained and built through working with trained professionals—speech and language therapists and educational psychologists—to change their practice and find new ways of unlocking the learning and the speech and language development of the children.

There was one child who was really expressive and they said to me that even just a few months ago, that child never spoke. You could see they had unlocked the learning of the children and that is through a very evidence-based, targeted approach to supporting the teaching workforce to meet the needs of the children. This is the good practice that we want to see rolled out more extensively, and that gives me real confidence that we can deliver real change.

Alison Ismail: I agree with everything the Minister said. The Minister mentioned ELSEC, but PINS, which is another programme we run, is a good example of schools involving parents in early support for children explicitly without the need for a diagnosis. The code of practice is very clear that support should be needs-based and not dependent on a diagnosis. There is interesting evidence from the Children's Commissioner's research that young people themselves don't want to have a label or a diagnosis to get support. They want it to be easily available as far as possible.

As you say, there is still often a strong perception that something like a clinical diagnosis for autism or ADHD is necessary to access support. We work very closely with our colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England on that, particularly in the real growth areas of children and young people who have SEND. For example, in 2022-23 there were 116,000 children with autism as the primary need on their education, health and care plan, and last year that had gone up to nearly 150,000.

I agree with you that we need to find ways to get support without the diagnostic pathway being an essential part of it. It may be very important for a child or young person and their family for other reasons, but support within the education system should not be dependent on it.

Q242 **Jess Asato:** We have heard that there is significant concern from parents and charities and stakeholders about the future of SEND reform already. Some of this has included suggestions of removing EHCPs from pupils in



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mainstream settings, or a raised eligibility threshold or even scrapping the tribunal system. Many desperate parents have said that waiting for an EHCP or taking the council to tribunal has been the only lever they had to ensure their child can access the support that they deserved and that is their educational right. Can you provide clear assurance that any reforms will not reduce access to statutory support for children and young people with SEND?

Catherine McKinnell: Yes, we want to change that. We do not want it to be the case that parents are left fighting for their child's education or that children are left without the education support that they should have within a system. It should not be that that must be fought for. It should be available as part of the system.

If you look at the system as a whole, there are a huge number of children with special educational needs who would benefit from the best practice that we have seen being rolled out more universally. That is what we are focused on in terms of outcomes for children and making sure that they improve. Most education, health and care needs assessments and plans are concluded without a tribunal hearing, so the percentage that require that is relatively small, but I recognise for the parents that have had to go through that process, it is incredibly time consuming and incredibly stressful, and we want that to change. We want that to end. We want to create a much less adversarial and more sustainable redress system where families and local authorities work together to resolve disputes much earlier.

What I think is often lost in this conversation is the amount of time that is lost while this adversarial process is gone through. We want it to be much more collaborative, much more solutions focused, ensuring that every child and young person accesses support as quickly as possible. We will set out the details in the White Paper, but that is our aim and intention and that is what we want to achieve for children and young people and their families.

Q243 Dr Caroline Johnson: Good morning, Minister. In your opening statement you said that you wanted to be really clear that you will not be removing existing effective support. Who will be determining whether the support is effective? Will that be the Department, the parents or the school?

Catherine McKinnell: There are inspection systems in place. I understand we are coming to accountability, but there are processes in place for holding schools to account through the Ofsted inspection system. There are processes for holding local authorities to account through the CQC Ofsted inspections as to how the support for children with special educational needs is being provided within the system. As we have also said, we are consulting widely. We are talking to children, to families, to parents, but also to experts on what good provision looks like. We will be setting out more detail in the White Paper as to what that vision is. As I said in my answer to the previous question, what we want



is to move away from the adversarial system where families have to fight for what should be their child's right, which is their education, and move to a system that provides that and has a consistent framework to it and a consistent implementation approach so that we know that all children will receive that education.

Q244 Dr Caroline Johnson: Some children out there today at school will receive a level of support that their parents feel is effective. The school may feel it is effective, but the Department may think differently. The parents will now be concerned that you are going to remove their support. If a parent believes that the provision they are getting is effective, can you guarantee to them that if they believe it is effective, it will not be removed?

Catherine McKinnell: Yes. We are not interested in—I have said it very clearly; I do not know how much more clearly I can say it—removing any support that is currently available for children that they are getting and that is helping them with their education. What we are looking to do is to expand the system so that that best practice can be delivered much more consistently across the system, so that all children can benefit and no family is left fighting for support or for their education.

I have gone into some detail already about the evidence base that we are using for that and the consultation processes that we are undertaking, although I can go into more detail on that. We are determined that all children get the best education and that they should get that as their right. Where things are working, we are looking to build on that and improve the system and expand that more widely.

Q245 Dr Caroline Johnson: When talking to parents and staff in schools, one of the groups of children that they find most difficult to manage in mainstream settings are children who display very challenging behaviours, where they need quite a lot of support and quite a lot of staff to manage that. How do you envisage that the system will be improved so that the children with those challenging behaviours can thrive and—you talked about all children—the other children in the classroom are not disrupted significantly by that?

Alison Ismail: I will start by saying something very briefly to build on your previous answer and then come to the point about behaviour, if I may.

As the Minister says about effective support, where that is well established and in place, we have been very clear that that will continue. On your point about what we are hearing, for example, from children's charities, a week or two ago our Secretary of State hosted a group of representatives of children's charities who are part of the Disabled Children's Partnership umbrella body, who came in to see us. We heard that the families they work with do very much value and want to preserve that certainty and stability of provision, but they are also looking for a system where it can be more easily accessible, more



transparently and consistently accessible, and where, exactly as the Minister says, there should not have been that fight to put it in place. We are very much taking representations and listening as hard as we can to what it is about the current system that is not working and what, on the other hand, is highly valued and we would look to continue in the best way possible.

On the point you make about an inclusive system, which includes that full spectrum of core provision in local mainstream schools and then also local specialist schools, for example, I would say that in lots of areas they work incredibly well together already and we are keen to promote that. However, where we were seeing a shift that we wanted to support more children, for example, with social, emotional and mental health challenges—I referred to autism as one of the areas where we have seen a huge amount of growth, but SEMH in the jargon is another one—we would be looking to support more children in their local school wherever possible.

I go back to the early answers we gave to the Chair about what the key components will be of the new system. There is an important thing there about making sure the workforce is well supported to work with those children and meet their needs. That includes school leaders and teaching assistants, for example, as well as teachers. I would also just mention the point about the school estate and capital. Some of the schools that already do this effectively have been able to make adaptations to the way that they are set up to make it easier for children who might have sensory difficulties; for example, provision of small group space and that sort of thing. Those are examples of the sorts of things that need to be in place alongside, as we were saying, an effective code of practice to help to guide schools that will be necessary to support the changes you mention.

Q246 Chair: Can you elaborate on the point about engagement? We have heard a lot of concern from parents about a lack of engagement from the Government, and the consultation that you have done in the public domain so far has been specifically for professionals. In a system where there is often very little trust between parents and professionals, that does not appear to have struck the right balance and given you a comprehensive enough range of views. What have you planned in terms of public engagement, and how can parents and organisations that represent them feed into the process ahead of the White Paper?

Catherine McKinnell: Clearly, engagement is important for us, not only because we want to hear about current experiences, but because we want to make sure that any changes that we make build that confidence of parents, of families, of stakeholders. That is a real priority for us.

I must be clear that since I took on this role I have spent a huge amount of my time engaging, whether that is with national stakeholders or young people themselves. We have the FLARE group that represents young people. I meet with them, with directors of Children's Services, parent



carer forums and with the national network of parent carer forums. I joined the Secretary of State just a couple of weeks ago and we met with 80 members of the parent carer forum nationally and had quite extensive engagement on detailed aspects of the challenges that we know many families face. It was good to hear it first hand from parents in that forum, and to be clear that we are listening and taking on board the feedback and the input that we are getting. It is very much shaping what we are then looking to do to change the situation, which we are determined to do.

In Parliament I would say this issue is one of the biggest issues that I have in terms of parliamentary time. I have met with a lot of MPs who are raising specific issues on behalf of their constituents. I have signed hundreds of letters, which often come from constituents, about particular issues. I have led 12 debates in Parliament on the issue and I think there is another one coming next week, so the amount of input that we have in terms of concerns around the current situation—but I also recognise you are asking about how we are going to consult on proposed changes as well.

Q247 Chair: I wonder, given all that engagement, why you have not launched a national engagement strategy so that that is transparent in the public domain, so that it is clear exactly which organisations you are engaging with and so that everybody, whether they are part of an organisation or they are just an individual parent, has the opportunity to feed in their view in a systematic way that can take account of all those views.

Catherine McKinnell: That is a good point, and when we produce the White Paper there will be a period of consultation that will follow that. At the moment, we are engaging extensively to produce that but clearly, as you rightly identify, consultation is key to not only getting it right, which is our No. 1 priority, but also to rebuilding that trust and confidence. Like no other issue, we recognise that that is a big challenge.

Alison Ismail: I agree there is always more we can do, and we are always keen to find new ways to do that. I would also strenuously agree with you that that should include, wherever possible, children and young people themselves as well as their parents and carers.

Q248 Jess Asato: We have heard from SENCOs that they are overworked, undervalued and isolated, as well as evidence highlighting incidents of head teachers and school leadership teams receiving training on SEND to ensure that fostering and inclusive culture is not the sole responsibility of SENCOs. What steps are you going to take to change the situation?

Catherine McKinnell: From my perspective, they are not undervalued. I pay tribute to the work that SENCOs do, and indeed all school staff do, but I totally recognise the challenge. That is something that we would like to see addressed. In September last year we introduced a new mandatory leadership level National Professional Qualification, NPQ, for SENCOs. That is a three-year training programme for SENCOs to be



skilled up and during that time supported in the challenging work that they do, because we want to make sure that they do have high-quality and evidence-based training so that they know what works and they are supported with knowledge and skills to be able to work with all leaders in their school to create that inclusive environment. We also fund a point of need training programme. It is the universal services programme, which helps schools and further education workforces identify the needs of children and supports them to find the tools to meet those needs most effectively.

More broadly, we have updated the initial teacher training and the early career framework, which is the initial years of a teacher's training, to include a greater proportion of SEND-related input so that they can be better trained in adaptive teaching and to make sure that we have a whole school workforce that understands, can recognise and has the tools to meet the needs of the children within their cohorts, which will hopefully as well go some way towards supporting the work that SENCOs do in trying to co-ordinate that education for the children within the school.

Alison Ismail: I agree with all that, and the other important point is that I agree that SENCOs do a fantastic job but often they may feel isolated. They may also feel that they spend more time on paperwork, assessments and those sorts of things—for example, advising about going for an EHCP—when they would like to spend more time working with their colleagues to embed that inclusive approach in the whole school. Any shift that we can effect that means they can spend more time in that respect and less on what they might perceive as bureaucracy would be helpful.

Q249 Jess Asato: Teaching assistants and support staff are also essential, as we know, in the delivery of SEN support, but often they may be the least qualified staff working with the highest needs students. What specific measures will the Department implement to improve their recruitment, training and retention?

Catherine McKinnell: We recognise that support staff play such a crucial role in schools, and teaching assistants in particular often work very closely with children with special educational needs and disabilities. It is very important that the balance is right in that respect, that we get the balance right between the time children may spend with different workforces—sorry, they are all part of the school workforce, but teaching assistant time and teacher time. That is something that we will be looking at in more detail.

Supporting teaching assistants to develop their skills is very important. I went on a fantastic visit to see a school that is making brilliant use of the new level 5 specialist teaching assistant apprenticeship, which enables teaching assistants to upskill in the particular areas of SEND, of social and emotional wellbeing or curriculum provision, so that they can specialise in an area that they feel they can really contribute to. That is



giving them the valuable skills to engage children with special educational needs and disabilities. It is giving a school that incredible resource and it is giving the teaching assistants that important development opportunity for them as well.

We are keen to see a much greater use of apprenticeships within the education system to provide those opportunities both for teaching assistants, but also for what may then become teachers as well. Finding those different routes into teaching and that development as teaching assistants is very important.

Q250 Mrs Sureena Brackenridge: I think I heard that you recognise the importance of prioritising SEND, and better SEND training, at all levels within schools. I heard about initial teacher training, early careers teachers, more established, experienced teachers, as well as teaching assistants, so all school staff. I am going to move on to an important point that I have heard time and again, which is about ensuring that the staff have the time to have adequate training, that there is a strategy and therefore consistency and that they are able to embed the important practice.

Catherine McKinnell: You raise an important point and I am very conscious that schools, teachers, teaching assistants and support staff do an incredibly important job. You are right that they should have the time to do that. That is something I am working on, on a much broader level, in terms of teacher retention and making sure that we hold on to our great teachers and school workforce.

We are looking at a range of measures to reduce what might be seen as less effective and productive use of their time and the ability to spend time with children and young people and to invest in them. One of those is the assistive technology. While we recognise that there is no replacement for a teacher and there is no replacement for a teaching assistant in the classroom, some of the developments that we have seen in technology can certainly give teachers some of that time back to spend with the children and young people in their care.

We are also looking at the curriculum. As I am sure your Committee is well aware, we have the curriculum and assessment review ongoing. I think it is important that we produce a very high-quality curriculum, a high-quality and trusted assessment system, but also where we can make sure that it is getting that balance right between the time to embed learning, to stretch learning, while also having a rich curriculum content in and of itself.

Chair: You have strayed a little way from teacher training at this point.

Catherine McKinnell: No, but it is part of the jigsaw that we are putting together on creating an inclusive mainstream school life that both the children and young people and the teachers feel they belong to, want to belong to and can get good outcomes from.



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Q251 Manuela Perteghella: What evidence is there that the universal SEND service programme is driving long-term change in inclusive practice and, given its funding ends in 2026, will additional investment follow?

Alison Ismail: The universal services programme is long running, and it has been an important part for some time of our work to drive that whole school approach to SEND and make sure that the whole school workforce feels equipped to support children. A rigorous evaluation approach is part of that. I do not have more chapter and verse I can offer you now, but I am happy to follow up if that is useful.

In terms of next steps for that programme, as you would expect, that is part of the overall landscape we are considering. We very much want to turbocharge the approach that underpins the universal services programme, which is about putting excellent SEND provision at the heart of the core business of all schools. Again as you would expect, that will be part of the overall programme we set out in the White Paper.

Q252 Darren Paffey: Minister, in your opening statement you talked about achieving inclusivity by building expertise, as you put it. Of course, we know that continuous professional development on SEND is still optional. There is lots of evidence out there to show that training is crucial for effective support to help children, so do you agree that rather than this being an entitlement or a right for teachers to access it, which is of course good, it should be an obligation if we are going to achieve good outcomes for children on SEND? Therefore, will you consider making that CPD mandatory for all staff?

Catherine McKinnell: It is now part of the initial teacher training and early career framework that I have mentioned. All new teachers coming into the system will have SEND training as part of their journey, part of their rite of passage through to teaching. It is mandatory for SENCOs. We are also very keen that school leaders take up the opportunity of national professional qualifications up to the highest level as leaders. Whether it should be mandatory I think is something certainly to consider, but the point I would make is that as well as reviewing many aspects of our education system, the other one that is currently under review, as you will know, is the Ofsted inspection system. Ofsted, while it is still to report on the final framework—

Chair: I am really sorry, Minister, but we have a huge number of topics to get to and one of them will include Ofsted. The question was specifically about mandatory training and CPD for existing teachers.

Catherine McKinnell: What I was going to say was that a core part of its inspection framework will be inclusivity and the provision of inclusive mainstream education within the school system. Therefore, schools will want to make sure that they have the best training and the best support available for their workforce to deliver on that, to deliver on the outcomes for the children that we all want to see and that will be inspected as part of the Ofsted process.



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Q253 Darren Paffey: The responsibility should not just lie with SENCOs. This is about building a culture of inclusion in all schools. Will you at least commit to considering making that mandatory and ensure that schools carry out regular audits, as has been suggested by a leading head teacher, on this issue to make sure that we are moving towards that continuous improvement and accountability towards the goal that we all want?

Catherine McKinnell: I am more than happy to take that away.

Q254 Dr Caroline Johnson: Inclusive culture requires good leadership. There are at present several level 7 apprenticeships available in educational leadership and, in particular, ones that relate to leadership in relation to SEND and SENCOs. Do you regret that the Government are restricting access and essentially abolishing level 7 apprenticeships in most cases?

Alison Ismail: The status of level 7 apprenticeships—this is the announcement that we had back in May?

Dr Caroline Johnson: Yes, from your Department saying that level 7 apprenticeships will be essentially abolished in most cases. At the moment, they are offering training in leadership for those leading our inclusive services and now you are getting rid of them. Do you regret that?

Catherine McKinnell: I am not entirely sure what the relationship is to the current discussion.

Dr Caroline Johnson: It is the training.

Catherine McKinnell: However, we have been very clear, in terms of the way that we fund apprenticeships, that we target the funding where it can make the most impact, and particularly on the lower levels of apprenticeships and particularly ensuring that we bring young people into the market and support them throughout their apprenticeship journey. The schools have their budgets and can choose how to spend them. Some of that clearly will go on training and support for training. There are a range of apprenticeships available at various levels of the school system, which I know many schools are taking advantage of. That is what we want to see in terms of targeting the support where otherwise it may not have reached. Clearly, we have a finite budget due to the situation we were left in by the previous Government, which you will be aware of.

Q255 Dr Caroline Johnson: Would you be able to write to the Committee and talk to us about the effect of the level 7 apprenticeship changes on special educational needs leadership apprenticeships?

Catherine McKinnell: I will certainly look at that.

Q256 Mrs Sureena Brackenridge: I would like to consider funding and finance now. The notional £6,000 threshold for SEN support has not been



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lifted for over 10 years since its introduction, yet we have seen significant increases in demand and rising costs for support services. Do you believe that the level of funding remains sufficient and is it sustainable?

Catherine McKinnell: In terms of the level of funding, sorry, I did not catch the beginning.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge: The notional £6,000 threshold for SEN support.

Catherine McKinnell: This is all part of the broader picture of the system that we want to create and we will set it out in the White Paper. I appreciate the challenge in that under the current system many schools are facing significant challenges in meeting the needs of children and clearly local authorities are, too. That is why we recognise that the system needs reform and needs to change. We do have the overall funding of the spending review settlement that we are going to put to work throughout our mainstream school system to drive all the good practice and the evidence-based practice that we have outlined, but how any specific funding will be allocated we will set out in the White Paper.

Q257 **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge:** We have also heard, as a Committee, a suggestion to ringfence SEN funding so that it can only be spent on SEN funding. Has the Department looked into this to ensure that schools are accountable for how this funding is used?

Catherine McKinnell: I recognise the premise of the question, but I see it as an opportunity that we have to improve outcomes and drive outcomes for children. Bringing that within the schools group, within the Department and within all the work that we are doing as a Department recognises that it is a whole school system challenge that we have. That, I think, is where the solutions lie to meet the needs of all children within a school. I will certainly take on board the suggestion as part of the work we are doing that we will set out in the White Paper, but I see this as equipping schools with the best practice, the best evidence of what works, the best support with training of their workforce and the funding on a per pupil basis, which by 2028 is set to increase to make sure that schools can decide with all that best evidence how they best meet the needs of those children and have the ability to do that. Obviously, local authorities and their role and how they work with schools within a local area to make sure all the needs of children are met will also come into the local government finance consultation that is ongoing as well.

Alison Ismail: The reason it is a great question to ask is because something that seems distinctive about the SEN system is that it is not just about resource. It is about how you best use the resource and how it can be accessed and deployed effectively and as quickly as possible. The Minister mentioned the high needs budget, and that has seen very high levels of investment—I think about an 87% investment in the last six years. We have seen a lot of new funding going in there but unfortunately no real improvement in outcomes, which suggests that we should look



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very carefully at making resource available at an earlier stage through schools, colleges, nurseries and so on.

The point about ringfencing and how we hold schools to account is a good one, but I would echo the Minister that that needs to be thought about in the round, particularly as we have noted that designation of SEND is so variable between schools. A child who might in principle attract that funding in one school because they are officially on SEND support might be having their needs met as effectively or better in another school without that label. I think it is about how you keep all those things in balance.

Q258 Caroline Voaden: The national funding formula has been criticised for failing to adequately reflect the needs of pupils with SEND, and it contributes to significant funding disparities between areas. In Devon a child who receives a high needs funding block will get £1,245. In Camden that same child would get £3,565. Effectively, that child is worth three times less in Devon than in Camden. I spoke to a head of a federation in Devon who had moved from London to Devon and was horrified at the level of support she could provide to the children with SEND in her classes in Devon. Speech and language therapies, an educational psychologist—she said that in Camden she could just bring it all in, because she had the money, and she does not have it in Devon. It is completely unfair. What assessment has your Department made of the impact of this funding formula on SEND provision and what steps are you taking to address these inequalities by reforming the NFF?

Catherine McKinnell: I recognise what you set out and the challenge. To be clear, and I know I have probably responded to this both at in-person meetings and in the Chamber, we did keep the national funding formula as it is 2025-26 because changing the national funding formula needs to be done very carefully and needs a significant amount of work and input. The way the timeframes work for getting schools their funding allocations and knowing what they have to spend means that we must take a slightly longer timeframe over any changes that we want to make. We also do want to ensure that any changes that we make to the national funding formula do work with the vision that we have set out for SEND within the White Paper. That work is ongoing and we will look at how we create a fair funding system to both meet general education needs and ensure that every child gets the best education, but also with the particular challenge of special educational needs and disabilities and supporting schools to provide for that.

One of the issues you raise is related to previous changes to the national funding formula that then resulted in—there is always a period of transition. When you change the national funding formula, there is a period by which you cannot just switch it overnight. There must be a gradual change, and some of the disparities that you highlight are, in my understanding, because of previous changes to the national funding formula that are still working their way through the system.



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Alison Ismail: I think that is right. I think we are alive to some of the disparities in the system, but I would agree with the Minister that it is how we approach it in the round to try to address some of those without creating instability.

Q259 **Caroline Voaden:** To be a bit more specific, do you accept that it is unfair that a child in Devon on a high needs block gets three times less money than a child in Camden? Do you accept that there is an unfairness in that allocation of resources?

Catherine McKinnell: That would depend on how you look at what would be fair if we were then to change the system, and how soon those changes can work their way through the system. The issue for schools is you cannot just make a big change in their funding allocation from one year to the next. It needs to be done gradually, and I think some of the challenges you outline in the system are where the formula has been changed in the past but the changes are still working their way through. That is being done annually and has to be done quite carefully in among a landscape where we also have changing demographics within school cohorts and other challenges within the system.

I can reassure you that there is no intention whatsoever from the Department for Education to allocate funding in a way that is unfair and does not meet the needs of children in a local area, but it is a complex funding system. We need to look at what the different factors are and proxies that are used as part of the way that funding is calculated and ensure that we do it in a way that is fair but also that does maintain that stability in the system.

One of the things I want to be clear on across the board in all this questioning is that our priorities are to improve outcomes for children and to improve the situation for families that are currently fighting for their education, but we also want to reassure parents and bring them with us. We want to maintain stability for schools and ensure that there are no shocks to the system. These are the priorities that we are working to. We do want to see a different world but we have to get there in a way that maintains the stability of things that are working well.

Q260 **Caroline Voaden:** Can I ask for a quick yes or no on this one? Are you looking at making the national funding formula fairer across the country?

Catherine McKinnell: Yes, we are looking at the national funding formula.

Q261 **Caroline Voaden:** Okay. I will move on. Given the importance of early intervention for children with SEND, what assessment has the Department made of the merits of prioritising a greater proportion of high needs block towards funding early years provision?

Catherine McKinnell: Yes, a great question and really important and one that we are clearly very focused on.



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As you rightly identify in the premise of your question, the more that we can target resource at the earliest years, early identification and earlier support being put in place, the more we can then see a change throughout the system where needs are better identified and better met, and we move away from the current situation. You will see the Government have prioritised making sure that we have high-quality early years settings. We have the roll-out of nurseries. We also have new training in place for the early years workforce to make sure that they are all trained in special educational needs and identifying where there might be a need within the early years.

Clearly, the early years is a big priority for us, as a Government, and we will set out more details in the schools White Paper, which is why we are setting this within the context of the whole system. We recognise it is a journey for every child and we need to change it wherever each child is on their journey, but the more we can invest in early years, the bigger the impact we can make for the future as well.

Q262 Caroline Voaden: I have a supplementary, if I may. Shifting focus slightly, we know that the Government are extending a profit cap to private provision in the children's social care sector. I would like to know, given all the funding challenges you are facing, whether you are going to extend the profit cap to cover the private provision of special education. We know that, in many cases, this private provision is overseen by the same private equity firms as those that are being tackled in the children's social care sector.

Catherine McKinnell: First, I want to say we recognise the important role that independent special schools can play. We want to see that collaboration between mainstream schools and special schools, independent special schools and maintained special schools. We want to see a healthy ecosystem of school provision for children particularly in meeting low incidence needs but also supporting with all that expertise that exists within the specialist sector to support mainstream schools with the inclusion that we want to see. There are great examples of this already happening so I want to make it clear that we absolutely recognise that.

Our priority is to ensure that placements are used appropriately and that local authorities will need to work with the sector as a whole to ensure that where specialist provision is used, that is used, and that those places are available for those children that need them. That is clearly a big priority. We will ensure through our reforms, and we will set out more detail in the White Paper, that the expectations that we set are comparable to state-funded providers so we have much more clarity and consistency right across the system, which is what we want to see, and transparency about the costs as well.

We recognise the challenge that you outline. One of the big challenges is the instability that could potentially be created by not having a consistent system across the board. It is about having that consistency for children.



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We know how difficult transition can be. We know how unsettling and worrying that can be for a parent as well, so anything that we do wants to drive that much greater consistency and transparency across the system while maintaining that stability for children who are currently in placements and need that specialist support and are receiving it. We are considering how best to achieve this as part of our SEND reforms and take on board very much the concern that you outline.

Q263 Darren Paffey: As someone who used to be the budget holder on council for SEND, I know that the extension of the statutory override will be welcomed by councils across the country. However, is this just kicking the can down the road or is there a set of concrete actions that the Government are going to be working with councils on to ensure that by the time this extension expires in two years, councils can reduce those deficits and they will not be in the same situation in two years?

Catherine McKinnell: You raise a really important point and challenge. We recognise that local authorities will need support during this transition to a reformed SEND system. We will be beginning a phased transition process and that does include working with local authorities closely to manage their SEND system, including deficits. That is why we are extending the statutory override to 2027-28. The existing deficits are an issue for local government finances more generally, not just in relation to SEND. That is part of the wider local government funding settlement process. Some of this will relate to MHCLG announcements or work that MHCLG is doing with local authorities. Unlike the previous Government, we are determined to grasp this; we are determined to change the situation. We recognise it is challenging for families, challenging for children and challenging for local authorities. We want to work with all the partners to deliver a different system and different outcomes.

Q264 Darren Paffey: In that case, what would be in your discussions with MHCLG, especially as it has announced a consultation at the same time as the override has been renewed?

Catherine McKinnell: The conversations are constantly ongoing with local authorities. I was looking at the list of local authorities and their most recent inspection outcomes under the new framework to see whether there is a pattern to which local authority is managing to deliver good outcomes within their budget. If I am really honest, there is not. You have local authorities that are performing really well under the new inspection framework, from Hartlepool to Rutland, and then you have ones that are underperforming. I would not want to name one without double checking so I do not set any hares racing, but I think the Department has been working for some time with local authorities on how to drive already the change to the system.

I guess that is one point that I want to drive home in response to all these questions. It is not as if we are waiting for this work to begin when we launch the White Paper. The White Paper will be a marker on a journey that we are already well and truly on, working with schools,



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working with stakeholders, working with parents and working with local authorities to drive much better outcomes. Some are already seeing big improvement but others are much further behind on that journey. We will continue to work with them to support them to work within their budgets, but most of all to deliver better outcomes. That is always our No. 1 priority in the approach that we are taking.

Q265 Darren Paffey: On that point, then, can you offer reassurance to this Committee that the conversations are happening between the DFE, the Treasury and MHCLG on a long-term sustainable funding solution for SEND? Is that work happening yet?

Catherine McKinnell: The basis of all the work that we are doing to reform the system is founded on improving outcomes for children, but it must be done within the settlement that we have from the Treasury and it must be delivered by local authorities within the means that they have. That is clear. We must work cross-departmentally on any challenges that may present themselves in achieving that aim.

Q266 Darren Paffey: Forgive me, just to press you on that, does that mean that essentially Treasury has spoken and you and MHCLG simply must solve this with what you have, or are there specific conversations going on that recognise that this is a crisis and that it is going to take cross-governmental and departmental strategy and rolling up of sleeves to get the finance in place to deliver the better outcomes that you have rightly talked about and that we agree with? Are those specific conversations taking place to reflect that this is such a crisis?

Catherine McKinnell: The spending review process is a cross-government endeavour by its very nature, and we must work cross-departmentally on local government with the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions where that comes to transition. I think the point that Alison Ismail made earlier is an important one—that there is a significant amount of investment going into special educational needs and disabilities but it is not improving the outcomes. What we need to do is take all that best practice, take all the best evidence, take what is working and make sure we have a more consistent offer around the country so that we deliver those outcomes within the means that we have through schools and local authorities, but also that we deliver those much better outcomes as a result. As you will see, the current system has achieved neither, so that is why we want to see it changed.

Alison Ismail: I echo that. I think that joined-up way of working was already very much how we approached things but the opportunity mission has given that a whole new focus. Those conversations with Treasury, DHSC and specifically MHCLG are very live and very frequent.

I would mention perhaps home to school transport, which is something that I think you have heard about as a Committee. It so happens that that is not funded through high needs. It is funded, as you know, through



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local governments' core budget, but it is so much part of the same picture that we make sure we are taking a joined-up approach to thinking about it there. Equally, we talk frequently to the Local Government Association, for example, and the Association of Directors of Children's Services.

The other thing I would mention, to pick up on the Minister's point about where local authorities are making progress in some respects and in some areas, is our change programme, which has been under way for a couple of years now. It is represented in every English region, with 32 local authorities in total working together to test what works in improving outcomes for children—that is a top priority—but also getting that partnership working with that focus on stability, which is so important.

Q267 Chair: The statutory override is a very big and specific problem, and it is not dealt with by the comprehensive spending review. The solution to it is batted back by two years, and that is a welcome relief for local authorities that they are not going to face a cliff edge. However, Darren's questions were really about whether the Government have a pathway to a permanent solution to the statutory override before the next deadline approaches in two years. We would like to know whether there is a process for that or not, because we cannot see it at the moment. Could you be super brief in answering that but to the specifics of: is there a pathway that gets local authorities—between now and the deadline in two years' time that the Government have set by way of the extension—to an end to the statutory override and stability for the SEND system for local authorities?

Catherine McKinnell: The quick answer to that is that we will provide more detail by the end of the year on a plan for supporting local authorities with historic and accruing deficits, because we recognise it is an ongoing challenge.

Q268 Manuela Perteghella: Given the scale of unmet need, does the Department agree that the £740 million high needs capital for 2025-26 is only a starting point? What immediate plans exist for a long-term capital strategy to ensure inclusive and sustainable SEND provision across the country? I have children in my constituency who are waiting months if not years for placements, and often these are out of county.

Catherine McKinnell: You identify what is a fundamental challenge in the system, which is whether we have the balance right currently between mainstream inclusion that will meet the needs of the vast majority of children and should meet the needs of the vast majority of children, and the rising need for more specialist settings because the mainstream system is not providing for the needs of children. I would not characterise the £740 million of capital funding in quite the same way as you have. I think it is welcomed by local authorities, which are then working with local schools to increase and improve provision, expand provision and adapt their premises if needed. That could be making their entranceway accessible for a child with mobility issues to access a school.



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It could be, as we mentioned earlier, creating additional space within a school if children need a separate room or if teachers and teaching assistants need some additional space to provide more one-to-one support.

Schools should work with their local authorities. It is very important that we get the word out to schools and local authorities to make sure that they know that funding is there. We do need to maximise the impact that making the changes within the mainstream system can make to relieve that pressure, as you identify, of children being sent long distances and the impact on local authority budgets of transporting children, to go back to the previous question. If the good practice—good provision—was being provided, so many more children could access their local school and would not need to spend hours being transported elsewhere.

On the longer-term vision, yes, we want to invest in capital. We recognise it is an infrastructure challenge across the board in our school system. There is a big backlog of capital infrastructure investment that is required, and we are working very hard on that strategically. SEND is a key part of that vision.

Q269 Manuela Perteghella: Do the Government accept that capacity within specialist provision will need to be increased as part of the SEND reforms? Some children will need that kind of highly specialist provision.

Catherine McKinnell: Some children will always need that more specialist provision, and it is important that those places are available for those children who need it and their families. I visited a specialist school on Friday and saw amazing work going on with children with very complex needs, but working really hard with them towards transition. We are getting towards the end of term and they are working very hard on their independence, life skills and aspirations, and it was lovely to see what they want to do and want to achieve. Clearly, those children need to be in that very specialist setting and we need to ensure that those places are available for the children who need them.

Q270 Manuela Perteghella: How many additional specialist places will the capital budget deliver each year during the three years of the comprehensive spending review period?

Catherine McKinnell: In our longer-term strategy, we clearly see a much greater role for inclusive mainstream. We want to see schools in every local community being able to offer that specialist support where needed; being able to offer that accessible support for children; making sure that every child, where it is the right place for them, feels they belong within their local mainstream school alongside their peers; and making sure that those specialist places are available for those children who really need them. In terms of whether that is additional capacity to what we currently have, I cannot say, exactly, because we want to increase that capacity within the mainstream sector. That is our priority at the moment: we are working to support schools to be more inclusive



and to build their capacity. That is what the capital investment is for as well, whatever barrier there is to a school giving support and a place within their school to a child with additional needs or with special educational needs, to make sure the school can do that.

As part of our White Paper we will set out more details. I recognise the challenge of what that means in terms of numbers, but fundamentally it is about educating as many children as possible within their local school. That will meet some of the current transport challenges across local authorities that we know they are grappling with and it will also make sure that those specialist places are available for those children who need them. I could not make it clearer that we do not want to unsettle the system; we do not want anybody to feel that if they currently have that specialist provision, it will not continue. We want to see a different system come through with that high level of support—that well evidence-based support—and a trained workforce there to support every child within their mainstream school as far as possible.

Q271 Manuela Perteghella: This is the last question from me. If we go back to specialist state schools, what role will they play in the future SEND system, particularly in addressing regional shortfalls—I have one in my constituency—but also addressing cost pressures related to placing pupils in independent specialist provisions?

Catherine McKinnell: Sorry, what is the question?

Manuela Perteghella: What role will the specialist state schools play?

Catherine McKinnell: We know that many children and their families currently struggle to find a suitable school placement that is close to home and meets their needs. We want to make sure that we have the right places in the right time, but that is a big strategic challenge, and one that I think we will need to work on closely with local authorities and schools as we drive forward the reforms that envisage a much greater inclusive mainstream offer—much greater than has been the case. We want to make sure that where we do need additional specialist provision, we put that in the right place as well. We recognise that local authorities will have a big role to play as we work with them to reform their local system as part of our wider national vision. That is work that we will have to do together.

Q272 Chair: Minister, to get a little bit more clarity on that, you have a capital budget that has been allocated following the comprehensive spending review. You have a desire to increase the number of places in mainstream schools and you recognise that there is a shortfall of specialist places in some areas. When will we be able to see the detail of how that funding is being allocated across the country so that we can see what the balance is for different regions but also between the expansion of places in mainstream settings? We have heard from plenty of local authorities that they have not been able to build new special schools for a long time. Government only started measuring the number of special



school places two years ago. They are desperate in some areas to plug that gap for specialist provision alongside recognising, and I think sharing, the Government's aspiration for more inclusive mainstream.

The question is about when we will have the profiling of that funding so we can see how it is being allocated and how many places are going to be delivered within this spending review period.

Catherine McKinnell: It is difficult to give you a specific response on that because our aim is for a fully-inclusive school system where most needs are met and addressed early within mainstream schools. We know that there will still need to be high-quality alternative provision for those who cannot—

Chair: I am sorry to interrupt. We do not need to rehearse the strategy again. The question is: you have a specific pot of money; when will the Government set out how it is going to be spent?

Catherine McKinnell: We are working through the pipeline of projects at the moment. We are prioritising those that are due to open in the shorter term, and we are still working through that process. That is because of the wider strategy, you will understand. It is part of a wider strategy, which is why we appreciate there is a real balance to strike in all this between the urgency and the need for long-term sustainability, to make sure that where that specialist provision or alternative provision is provided, it is genuinely needed and could not have been provided within an inclusive mainstream system, which is what we want to increase within the system as a priority.

Q273 **Mark Swards:** I will continue on that line of questioning. There have been calls on the Government to publish the data on both SEND provision and then the data they have about areas of high needs to see whether they match up. Of course, we know that they do not. Are you going to publish this data?

Catherine McKinnell: Do you want to come in on the data side?

Alison Ismail: I do not have a clear, crisp yes-or-no answer on exactly what data we will publish. I think, as the Minister says, all this territory will be part and parcel of the plan that we set out in our White Paper. The Chair has referred to what we call the snap data, which is the data that we have systematically collected the last two years, where we talk to local authorities about the shortfall they are currently experiencing. Obviously, that sheds light in lots of important ways, including what we have heard about where there may be gaps in state special schools, which drive inappropriate reliance on independent special schools, for example.

My expectation is that we will continue to consider that important reporting from local authorities about where they are experiencing a shortfall. I also expect that the exam question may start to change a little bit, if you like, when we have a clearer expectation overall of how that



planning works and, as some embers have raised, how that might start to look different as we evolve a new system. Wherever possible we are accommodating children in mainstream schools, including sometimes specialist provision in that mainstream setting, as opposed to in a pure special school, if you like.

I think the data is important because it sheds light on this very consistent theme we have explored this morning, which is about variation within different regions or even different smaller localities. You see varying pictures and the data is important in getting under the skin of that. I cannot tell you exactly at this point what we would expect to publish in the future.

Q274 Mark Swards: That makes sense. You will be aware from the conversations around us that time is short, so I will just leave it at this question. You have obviously had this data; you have been collecting it for two years. What has your analysis shown you? Where are the needs?

Alison Ismail: I am very pleased to have had this data stream for the last couple of years because it underlines that point about the sheer variation in the system that we want to address. I think that sheds light on why it can be so frustrating for children and their families at the minute—it feels like it might be different if they lived in a different area of the country, but it can also drive quite an unhelpful binary feel that you are either in your local mainstream school or you are far away in a special school. We know that in some areas, there is a much more graduated system where schools work together, and alternative provision is part of that. It has shed a lot of light there.

I think what we do see pretty much across the piece, regardless of whether it is an area that has historically had a lot of special schools or one that has had many fewer and tended to support children in mainstream, is strong feedback that there is a shortage of specialist places.

I have spoken a bit about those particular areas of growth within SEND, so SEND has grown overall. If you look at, for example, hearing impairment, visual impairment, profound and multiple learning disabilities—some of those children who you might traditionally have expected to be supported in special—those numbers have stayed very, very steady. Where we have seen overwhelming growth is in autistic spectrum disorder, which we have mentioned; speech, language, and communication, which we have also touched on, especially in younger children; and in social, emotional and mental health, which covers a wide range of needs. So, mental health need, but also things like ADHD.

Some of the function of having that data stream for two years now is that it can help us see not just where there is need, but which types of underlying need are driving that gap in provision. I think that is an important part of the picture as well.



Q275 Mark Swards: So the most acute needs are going to be dealt with by the specialist school places, and that has stayed fairly consistent from the data you have seen from the last two years, but those other needs you talked about are going to be addressed in mainstream education. That is the general direction of travel, is that correct?

Catherine McKinnell: That is what we would like to see.

Alison Ismail: Obviously, there will be children within those groups who are very settled in specialist provision. We would not expect them to move, and we recognise it is a complex picture with many children having more than one need. However, in general, in all those real growth areas we would like to be doing more to support them in their local school where possible.

Q276 Dr Caroline Johnson: Minister, the National Audit Office said that misaligned priorities and incentives is undermining a whole system approach to SEND. What work are you doing, along with the Department of Health and Social Care, to ensure that your priorities are aligned to improve the care for SEND children?

Catherine McKinnell: Do you mind saying the last bit again?

Dr Caroline Johnson: How you are working with the other Departments, particularly Health and Social Care, to align priorities so you get a more joined-up system across Government to help children with special educational needs?

Catherine McKinnell: We work very closely with the Department of Health and Social Care and with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to make sure that as we develop a reformed system, we recognise the important role that different Governments have and are aligned in our future SEND and alternative provision reforms. There are strong overlaps with the Department of Health's neighbourhood health ambitions as well. We know they are working on their 10-year plan and, at the Department of Health, we are working on—particularly relevant to this—SEND reform.

The Secretary of State regularly meets with Cabinet colleagues, including the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, to discuss SEND improvement. I also meet with Minister Kinnock on where we can collaborate and work together, particularly on workforce challenges, because we know that the Department of Health is the pipeline for many of the workforce that we know are needed to deliver on our SEND reforms.

One good example of our partnership is ELSEC, which I have mentioned—early language support for every child—because that is delivered in partnership with the Department of Health. It is a joint workforce initiative where Department of Health specialists will upskill the Department for Education workforce to deliver what are life-changing



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interventions, early interventions. We are at pilot stage at the moment, but we are seeing good feedback and outcome from them.

There is also the Partnerships for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools programme, which deploys specialists from health and education to build teacher and staff capacity to identify and better meet the needs of children in mainstream primary schools, to understand neurodiversity and to use evidence-based methods for unlocking learning for all children.

Q277 Dr Caroline Johnson: Alison, you talked about the data that the Government have been collecting and explained that the rise in cases relates to SEMH, ADHD and autism. What information, Minister, do you have on whether that is an increase in diagnosis or an increase in cases and prevalence of those conditions? Presumably, it is a bit of both, but which is the major driving factor? Going back to the 10-year plan you described, on the issues of prevention, what work can be done potentially to prevent some of these cases in the first place?

Catherine McKinnell: Starting with the latter point, I think I have already set out the approach that we want to see that does not rely on a diagnosis, that does not rely on a label, that assesses what is a need that the child may be presenting with and has a trained and upskilled workforce to meet that need, regardless of what any diagnosis may be beneath it.

That is very much to ensure that every child accesses their education, regardless of diagnosis. It is very much a needs-led and support-first approach. The good practice that we want to see rolled out is already happening. Children's needs are being identified, they are being identified early, the education is being delivered, and the evidence shows that the vast majority of children may go on to never need an education, health or care plan, or indeed may not even seek a diagnosis because their needs are being met within the education system and their outcomes are good, which is fundamentally what we want to see.

Q278 Dr Caroline Johnson: You have seen an increase year on year of need, so what is driving that increase in need and is any of that need preventable with other measures?

Catherine McKinnell: We are seeing an increase in need not being met, and that is the big challenge that we want to overcome. That is why we are focused on upskilling and training the workforce. That is why we have the pilots on the early intervention. It is why we are focused on early years and improving and upskilling the workforce within the early years sector. There is a persistent attainment gap at GCSE level and it has a strong correlation with the attainment gap in reception year as well.

As a Department, we are very focused on investing in the reception year, from my perspective; in our key priorities for our regional improvement of standards and excellence teams, RISE; in our attendance, because we know that the number of children not attending school is a big challenge;



in inclusion within mainstream schools; and in attainment, because we see that the way to tackle that persistent attainment gap is to recognise need at the earliest point possible.

We are focusing first and foremost on the earliest years, but we are also supporting schools at every stage of the educational journey through the universal offer that we provide through the regional improvement of standards and excellence teams. The RISE teams support every school to strive for better and for excellence at every stage of the child's education so that we can identify what that educational need is and meet that need. We are doing that in a whole range of ways, which I can go into, in all the interventions that we have.

Q279 Dr Caroline Johnson: Minister, the question was not so much about the interventions you are putting in place. We can see that there are more children with need, and they need support, and you want to make support for everyone; you have said that repeatedly. The question is what is driving the need for more children to require support than was previously the case. Is there anything that you think you can do to reduce that tide of an ever-increasing number of children requiring additional support? Is there something that can be done to help those children to prevent it, or not?

Catherine McKinnell: I feel that this is about all children within their education settings and driving better outcomes for all children. Some of the evidence and the evidence-based practice, the tools, the assistive technology, the teacher training, the English hubs, the inclusive PE—it is all part of a big picture of how we drive better outcomes for all children, and clearly within that are children with special educational needs and disabilities.

I think upskilling, improving and progressing our ability to teach and meet educational need of children will not only change the lives of children with special educational needs and disabilities—change the current fight that their families have—but will drive better outcomes for those children who we know do not get the outcomes that we want to see at the end of the education system. It is about driving better outcomes for all children and clearly, by focusing on children with special educational needs and disabilities, we drive that better practice, which will drive better outcomes.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Perhaps, Minister, you could write to the Committee with some information on the data that Alison described on the drivers of the increasing number of children with special needs.

Catherine McKinnell: I will just see if Alison has an answer to that first. I might not need to write.

Alison Ismail: I am happy to add a little bit. I agree with the Minister around that early support being one of the best mitigations around escalating need. On your specific question about what is driving some of



that need, unsurprisingly it is quite a complicated picture. Some of this is in line with quite a lot of global trends, autism for example, or children with autistic traits. Those numbers are rising in lots of different comparable countries. To some degree, lots of the countries we look at you would see more and more children in general being identified as having additional needs.

Where we are more of an outlier in England is the amount of children for whom that results in the need for statutory support. Again, I think it is back to the point around how you can look at those children's individual needs but again think carefully about the whole cohort in planning your provision all the way through—whether that is how you organise your workforce, how you plan your capital provision or how you look at your curriculum—to make all that line up to meet the needs of the children coming through.

On your point about what we can do to divert escalation of need, because of the sheer range of children designated as SEND there is no simple answer to that. Some will have complex physical needs from very early on in their lives. Others we do see need presenting itself later on in their school career or, for example, as they approach transition to secondary, which we recognise is a key moment.

We do have some evidence to help us here. For example, there is evidence that high-quality early years education and the early years foundation stage, if it is delivered well—to pick up on the earlier question—can help with diverting the need for SEND provision later on. As ever with SEND, it is a little bit of a mixed picture, but we do have some evidence about what can help with avoiding that escalation of need if it is not going to be helpful in improving outcomes for that child.

Chair: We are getting very short on time. We have a number of other topics that we would like to be able to question you on, so I encourage you to be concise in your answers and then we will get to the end of all our topics.

Q280 Darren Paffey: One way of strengthening multi-agency working that has been suggested to this Committee by the charity Contact was to strengthen the Children and Families Act 2014 by making these joint legal duties between Health and Social Care and Education for delivering those EHC plans. In your view, would that be effective? What other legislative levers can you pull to encourage greater health service involvement in delivering the support that is needed? That is, again, something that we have heard a lot is not happening.

Catherine McKinnell: At the moment, the statutory duties are clear that Health and local authorities have a duty to ensure the integration of educational and training provision with health and social care provision. That means that they have to make joint commissioning arrangements with local partners in order to meet the needs of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.



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Clearly, the thinking behind that is that should enable partners to make best use of resources available in an area to maximise the outcomes for children, and that is happening better in some areas than others.

I mentioned before the Ofsted and Care Quality Commission joint inspections under the new framework. About 54 local authorities have been inspected so far. Some have come out really well from that inspection, others with room to improve, and others need significant work to improve those outcomes.

That work is already ongoing, but I know that the local inspection arrangements are constantly under review as well and are being improved. There is training being put in place to make sure that as they are being undertaken, the inspectors can make the impact that they need to make to improve those outcomes. That is the current system.

Clearly, as part of our White Paper, we will set out what accountability framework will be there to underpin our reformed system as we envisage it.

Q281 Darren Paffey: In that White Paper, do you accept that in some cases, responsibilities that should be Health's, and therefore the cost of them, are falling to schools, colleges and local authorities? Do you accept that in the White Paper, that needs to be addressed by some change in the legislative levers?

Catherine McKinnell: You identify a big challenge, and we want to improve services that support early identification and intervention where it is needed, and whole-school inclusive practice. The local authority and the ICB as joint commissioners of services will clearly play an important role within that. We will need to set out the detail in the White Paper.

Q282 Chair: The SEND code of practice in the Department's document supporting pupils with medical conditions does not address the question of the delegation of medical support to unregulated school staff. We know this is a situation that leaves potentially both pupils and staff extremely exposed because there are unqualified staff delivering medical support in school settings. That is a situation that is unacceptable. What work is the Department doing jointly with the Department of Health and Social Care to regularise that approach to make sure that there is clear guidance, but also to make sure that the financial responsibility for delivering medical support in education settings is borne by the Department of Health and that it is not eating into the already stretched high needs block, which we know is happening too much at the moment?

Catherine McKinnell: We appreciate the appetite for updated guidance on the delegation of clinical tasks by healthcare professionals to school and college staff. I am pleased to confirm that officials and Department of Health and NHS England colleagues are developing non-statutory guidance to clarify the roles and responsibilities, because clearly this is an



important area. I think you set out the challenge very well. We plan to publish this as soon as possible in the autumn.

- Q283 **Chair:** Are you working cross-departmentally on the budget issue? Certainly, I have seen examples in my own constituency of different local authorities taking different approaches, so NHS staff are in some schools, and in other schools the same support is being provided by teaching assistants. It is straightforwardly unfair to an already stretched high needs block where that happens.

Catherine McKinnell: The purpose of the statutory guidance will be to clarify those roles and responsibilities. The intention would be that that would be clarified through that.

- Q284 **Amanda Martin:** Minister, you touched on this with the earlier question from Darren, but I just wanted to explore further joint commissioning. The Council for Disabled Children told this Committee it would like joint commissioning to be a requirement rather than an expectation. In three parts, how would you assess the current joint commissioning practices, and what steps is the Department taking to improve joint commissioning arrangements for children and young people with SEND, particularly to ensure more effective collaboration between education, health and care services?

Catherine McKinnell: Clearly, it is working well in some areas and it is not working well in others. Generally, as part of our SEND reform, we want to harness where that is working well and where that good practice is, find the ingredients and make sure we have a much more consistent approach.

Where partners are not meeting their duties, we can monitor, support and challenge local authorities as a Department. We also work closely with NHS England to tackle weaknesses where they sit with Health partners. I totally recognise the challenge that you identify, but I can say that that joint working between integrated care boards, local authorities and education settings will remain a key part of our reformed SEND system.

As I must have said—you will be able to count it up at the end of this session—more detail will be in the White Paper in the autumn.

- Q285 **Amanda Martin:** Thank you for that. The joint commission relies on robust data and information sharing. You have just highlighted that there are some areas in the country that are doing it well and others that are not. Are you taking steps to improve the data that is collected and do you anticipate the introduction of a unique identifier for children and young people that will enhance the collaboration and understanding between local authorities and education and health services?

Catherine McKinnell: Yes, I think there is a real opportunity here to get good data that can inform how any reforms are delivering in practice, but also how to keep it continuously improving as well. We have a data



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strategy that we are currently working on as a Department. We want to make improvements to the data and the oversight of the SEND system. We want to improve the data we collect. We want effective data monitoring and accountability. We want much greater sharing and insights and collaboration. There is obviously much to be gained from having good data that then can drive improvement and reform.

The single unique identifier, which is in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, I think will be an important tool for schools to have and to ensure that that information is shared between the different partners, so healthcare, local authority and schools. That is one of the challenges we know is regularly identified—the sharing of information obviously must be done sensitively in terms of protecting that child's data, but using it in a constructive way to deliver a better service and ultimately better outcomes for them.

Generally, in the school system there are real opportunities with technological developments to improve the data and the way we use it to drive attendance, to tackle some of the underlying issues that are holding children back within school and to support school leaders to have a strong base to work from.

Q286 Amanda Martin: I have one final thing. As a former teacher, I am aware that often Education takes the heavy weight of this. Are there any plans for these costs to be shared with the Department of Health and Social Care instead of it just falling in Education, because it often comes from the high-needs budget? Are there any plans to share this?

Catherine McKinnell: Yes. The spending review will take per pupil funding to its highest ever level, and that will enable us to transform the SEND system. We recognise that a huge amount of the needs that are being identified and the support that can be provided is through the school system, and that is why we are determined to support schools to be able to deliver that. Clearly, there is a role for Health as well where there does need to be a health-led approach.

Where we are working on pilots together—particularly the early speech and language, where it is about neurodiversity, better understanding and training, where we need the health workforce just to underpin some of the change and reform that we want to make—clearly we need to work together and make sure that there is the Health funding for that, which underpins what we can deliver as an education system.

Chair: I emphasise the need for short answers so we can get to the end as soon as we can, now that we are almost at 12 o'clock.

Q287 Jess Asato: Schools Week estimated that there are now 360 fewer full-time equivalent educational psychologists in 2023 compared with 2010, and over half of EPs feel unable to support children effectively due to their current workload. How does the Department evaluate the current deployment of educational psychologists and relevant allied health



professionals for pupils with SEND? What specific action, if any, are you taking to maximise their impact on these pupils' educational outcomes?

Catherine McKinnell: I will try to be short. Clearly, we know we need to develop the pipeline of speech and language therapists and educational psychologists. For speech and language therapists we now have a degree apprenticeship route. We are keen to support as many pathways and routes into these specialist areas that we need more of.

We know that educational psychologists play a critical role. We are investing over £21 million to train 400 more educational psychologists this year. It is about retention and holding on to this workforce. There is a whole range of measures that we are taking because we recognise the challenge. We need this workforce. We are working in a quite holistic way to bring through the pipeline but also hold on to the good experts that we have.

Q288 Jess Asato: The Committee received positive feedback on the Nuffield early language intervention, PINS, which you mentioned, and the early language support for every child programme. What plan does the Department have to scale these initiatives universally and sustain their impact once current funding ends?

Catherine McKinnell: You are right, we have had really good feedback. I have seen it for myself. It is uplifting to see it in practice and to see the impact that it is having both on the children, but more so on the whole school and the workforce, and how empowered and confident they are as a result of this intervention. Yes, I am very heartened by the feedback.

In terms of further rolling out of these programmes, we are still waiting for it to be fully analysed. Clearly, we want to make sure we put every pound and all our efforts behind proven interventions. We will report on whether it will be scaled up, and to what extent and in what way, in due course.

Q289 Jess Asato: We also know that an increasing number of families, as I said, are turning to the SEND tribunal system, 97% of which are actually upheld. That is an extraordinary waste of valuable time in a child's life, but also costs money both for the local authority and for the parents themselves. What steps can you take to prevent this escalation and ensure that local authorities meet their legal duties on SEND from the outset? Do local education authorities have the funding to fulfil their legal obligations?

Catherine McKinnell: This is a big topic, and I appreciate I have been asked for brevity. Fundamentally, we want to create a less adversarial system. We just want to prevent parents from having to seek legal redress to get their child's education. That should never be the case, but I recognise for a small proportion of parents that is currently the reality.

One way is effective mediation. We know it can reduce the number of tribunals, particularly the volume of appeals, so we know that is



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underused and underutilised. When we came into government, the first thing we did was reset the relationship between the Department for Education, Government and schools and the teaching profession, because we wanted to stop this adversarial approach and that sense of combat within our education system.

We want to build and foster a sense of collaboration and partnership and real delivery and the change to outcomes, but we recognise that there is still a role for the tribunal, so that where the duties are not being delivered on, redress is available. We will set out more details of how that will work in practice as part of the White Paper, but we take the concern that you outlined. It is very prevalent in our minds as well.

Q290 Jess Asato: We have heard that certain local authorities repeatedly breach SEND guidelines and regulations. Is the Department taking sufficient action to intervene and hold these repeat offenders accountable?

Catherine McKinnell: Have you got a response to that?

Alison Ismail: I would say that all this, as the Minister says, is in the scope of looking at the future system. How can we make it less adversarial with clear duties and responsibilities, and keep all that with much more transparent balance going forward? We have also discussed area SEND inspections, which take a look at how local authorities are operating and discharging their SEND duties.

Again, we would agree that even though it is only a small proportion of families applying for or receiving EHCP who go through the tribunal, it is growing and, as you say, a very high proportion of cases are found, at least partly, in favour of the parents. That suggests that it is not a helpful part of the system, in that respect.

I do not have data in front of me about exactly which local authorities are appearing most at tribunal, but it is one thing that they very consistently recognise as part of a systemic problem in the same way that parents and families do. While it is a hugely important part of the redress system that we will maintain, I would expect us to look at that in the round as part of our White Paper proposals.

Q291 Jess Asato: Finally from me, local authorities have the responsibility for the delivery of SEND provision but have frequently lacked the power to do so, so they have not been able to open new schools, they have faced capital restrictions to expand existing well-performing schools and they have lost influence over pupil place planning and admissions policies. What steps are you taking to address this, and are we in this mess because of the fragmentation that academisation has created?

Catherine McKinnell: Gosh, there are a lot of issues in that question. I think we are bringing through some changes to the school admissions ecosystem when it comes to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. They are not significant changes, but we do recognise the challenge that



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we need to make sure that schools and local authorities, regardless of any structures within a local area, do co-operate on a local area to make sure that places are provided for local children. That is obviously one of the challenges, that local authorities are sending children out of the area. We need to make sure that there is a real co-operation within a vicinity so that as many children as possible can be educated in their local school.

As you identify, we also recognise that local authorities have huge responsibilities to deliver for children with special educational needs, but that needs to be delivered both through schools and in co-operation with Health. The reforms that we will set out do look to foster that spirit of co-operation, collaboration, partnership and joint commissioning, and make sure that we have a much more joined-up system so that no parent is left having to fight for any part of that process to be completed. We want a robust inspection framework that local authorities are assessed against in order to make sure that is upheld.

Q292 Dr Caroline Johnson: Minister, children with special educational needs are twice as likely to be on free school meals; 44% of children with an education care plan are entitled to free school meals. The Government have ended free school meals for children on UC transitional protection. How many children will that affect? How many children will lose out? What proportion of them are children with special needs?

Catherine McKinnell: No children will be impacted by the expansion of free school meals because it is an expansion, and obviously any impact in terms of transitional arrangements will continue.

Dr Caroline Johnson: My understanding is that you have removed the transitional protection for children with UC transitional protection, and therefore those children will not get free school meals any more. Are you saying that is not correct?

Catherine McKinnell: I am struggling to hear you with the fans; I am sorry. Do you mind repeating your question?

Dr Caroline Johnson: You are saying that with the changes to UC transitional protection, no child who is currently receiving free school meals will stop getting those free school meals? Is that what you are saying?

Catherine McKinnell: As far as I am aware, the free school meal expansion will apply to more children, and clearly any family currently receiving universal credit will now receive free school meals, and any associated impacts in terms of the benefits that flow from that, or other receipts that flow from that, will be looked at. We are not looking to remove any free school meals from children. We are looking to expand the access to all children on universal credit.

Q293 Chair: Perhaps you could just write to us on the detail of that afterwards, if that is okay.



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The final question is from me. I had some discussion this morning of the new proposed Ofsted inspection framework, and this obviously has an important role to play in strengthening school accountability for inclusion. How do you propose to monitor the impact of the new inspection framework and how will you know that it is being successful?

Catherine McKinnell: In terms of Ofsted? At this stage we have not set out the proposals yet, and we will also set out our consultation outcomes at the same time. That will come in the autumn.

Q294 **Chair:** What emphasis are you placing on the role of that inspection framework in driving a more inclusive mainstream school sector?

Catherine McKinnell: Clearly, effective inspection is important, both to keep children safe but also to maintain and drive high standards. It is a non-negotiable for us in terms of inspection, and settings will be held to account for how they support pupils with special educational needs. Ofsted is going to put focus on inclusion within mainstream schools as part of its inspection.

The draft inspection toolkits already set out expectations for how leaders should ensure needs are identified and met, how barriers to learning and engagement are removed, and there is an expectation that special educational needs will be quickly identified, accurately identified and supported. Ofsted has taken on board a lot of feedback to its consultation, so it is reviewing the toolkits. The final toolkits and the framework we will get the details of in the autumn.

Chair: Lovely, thank you very much. Can I thank you both for coming to give your evidence to us this morning? We are working as quickly as we possibly can following this evidence session to finalise our recommendations in our report, which we hope will be useful to you as you chart a way forward in this very important and very complex area of policy. Thank you very much.