HOUSE OF COMMONS

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, HC 968

Tuesday 4 December 2018

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Lucy Allan; Ben Bradley; James Frith; Emma Hardy; Ian Mearns; Lucy Powell; Thelma Walker.

Questions 169 - 246

Witnesses

I: George Holroyd, parent, Kathleen Redcliffe, parent, Carl Rogers, parent.

II: Beth Foster, Education Lead, Hampshire Parent Carer Network, Penny Hoffmann-Becking, Trustee and steering group member of SEND Family Voices, Mrunal Sisodia, Co-Chair, National Network of Parent Carer Forums.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: George Holroyd, Kathleen Redcliffe and Carl Rogers.

Q169 **Chair:** Good morning. Thank you very much for coming today. For the benefit of the tape and those watching on the internet and Parliament TV, could you kindly introduce yourselves from our left to right? Thank you.

George Holroyd: My name is George Holroyd. I am the father of Theo, who is 11, who is blind and autistic.

Kathleen Redcliffe: Hi, my name is Kathleen Redcliffe and I am a mother to a 13-year-old boy who has dyslexia.

Carl Rogers: I am Carl Rogers. My daughter, Rhiannon, has autism and Down syndrome. She is 20 and she is currently at a special needs college in Manchester.

Q170 **Emma Hardy:** Thank you so much for coming because your evidence will be crucial. We could not do an inquiry into SEND without talking to parents, so thank you very much for coming in. I want to ask a bit of a big picture question to start with. Could you tell me a little about how aware you have been of the changes since 2014 to special educational needs and disability? What do you think has been good about these changes since 2014 and what has not worked too well? What has been difficult? What are your thoughts and impressions on how things have changed for the better or the worse since 2014? Or have you in fact felt no difference whatsoever? Would you like to start, Kathleen?

Kathleen Redcliffe: Interestingly, it has not made a positive impact. I feel that it has been probably more negative if anything because my son has been put on an "others" list rather than on the SEN list. We have tried to reinstate that but for me or for my son that has not been helpful because unless you are a teacher who has lots of hours before your lessons to see what those "other" needs are, his dyslexia has not been taken into account. I do not think it has been helpful. Overall, his educational needs are always challenging. I heard in one of the previous interviews that somebody used the word "fight" and personally I think "Fight?"—it is challenging but, yes, it has been a mental fight, and it is a mental fight for my child as well.

I do not think it has been helpful. I am still challenging, I am still fighting, I am still supporting his mental health to manage the education system, and I fail to see where the word "special" comes into it. I have yet to feel what "special"—

Q171 **Emma Hardy:** About what you are going through. Thank you. Carl?

Carl Rogers: Our daughter has quite high needs. She has Down syndrome and autism. We have found that the school has generally been very good but we seem to be constantly fighting the local authority SEN team whenever we try to get anything done. The EHC plan process was very long. I think in the end it took about 18 months to get a final plan. We found we had to constantly fight to get any meaningful detail into the plan. The authority tended to want to just keep broad statements in there, nothing that was very specific. As soon as anything might have needed any extra support, there was opposition to it. The idea that the individual and the parents are central to it all is a great idea but I do not think it follows through in practice. That would be our experience of trying to get the EHC plan together. It was a painful sort of process, really, to get it to mean something so that we recognised the young person that it was about.

Q172 **Emma Hardy:** Why do you think there was the difficulty in getting the detail? Why did the local authority not want the detail in your plan?

Carl Rogers: An example is that our daughter is incontinent. We approached the speech and language therapist and they put together quite a detailed programme which would have—excuse me, my voice is a bit hoarse this morning.

Emma Hardy: Do not worry, everyone has it. It is a winter cold, is it not?

Carl Rogers: To implement that programme the school felt that they needed more support in the form of one-to-one. The minute that came out, the authority opposed it. We have had probably six months of fraught meetings and the whole school year was wasted, up until the end of term. Rhiannon then went into a new class in the following year that had higher support and it was not quite such an issue.

That has continued, really. When she came to leave the high school, we wanted her to go on to college because of the rolling out of education to age 25. The authority immediately tried to cease the plan and we had a very long—

Q173 **Emma Hardy:** They tried to stop your—

Carl Rogers: They ceased the plan, yes. She had an annual review last November, I think it was. The SEN team came along, I remember, and they had no input in the meeting. There was no discussion of Rhiannon’s progress or needs, no talking about what they thought she needed to do next. They did not even want to know what we thought. It was quite a brief annual review with the school. Then about six weeks later—it was the last day of term before the Christmas holidays—we received a very abrupt letter from them. They did not mention the college placement; they just said that they were going to cease the plan.

Q174 **Emma Hardy:** Shocking. George, what are your thoughts since 2014, since the Act changed?

George Holroyd: It has not helped us. In actual fact, we do not have an EHC plan yet. My son still has a statement, believe it or not. He is also very high needs, being completely blind and autistic. On the financial reforms—I saw you had some previous witnesses who talked you through those—to be honest, I do not know the detail.

For the EHC plan, the local offer, parent/carer forums and things like this that have come in, they have not made any difference. In fact, moving from a statement to the EHC plan is in itself a big effort which we are still going through. As I speak, the county council have the pen in their hand and we expect to get another draft of Theo's plan imminently. It has been a long process. It has been about a year and a half. I was looking at it last night and it has almost the same sections as the statement. Needs, objectives, provision, and monitoring are the four bits of the statement you need to take particular care of as a parent. Then the EHC plan has aspirations, needs, outcomes, and provision. In that sense, it in itself does not make any difference.

The Act had some language about putting parents at the centre, which we have quoted, which has sometimes made a difference. The Act also talks about "the best possible outcomes", which are also a nice few words that you can throw at people if you need to, which also helps, but those are pretty minor things, really.

Q175 **Emma Hardy:** On the panel we had previously, one of the parents said that he felt that it was only people who could navigate the system, and he described it as a system of rationing. Would that be how you all feel about it at the moment, that it is a system set up that is very difficult to navigate unless you become an expert in EHC plans and SEND rights?

George Holroyd: To some extent. Maybe it is different for us in that Theo is a fairly black and white case and he will need a plan. There are lots of people who are arguing for a plan and are not getting one, and that is a huge issue for lots of families. For us, we are not in that situation. We are trying to get the best plan possible.

The biggest failure of the system for me is still the same as it was before, which is that the people who define the needs of your child, who advise you on the needs—as a parent, you are not the expert, theoretically; these other people are the experts and lots of them are very good—they define the needs in concert with you, but they are also the people paying for it. A different part of the same council is then paying for it.

If you have strong views about what your child needs and you can back it up, then you have a much higher chance of getting something close to that. If you are not sure, if you are busy, you are working, you have other kids or you just do not really know, then those needs will be defined much more narrowly. Even within the same county, you can have very similar children who get very different provision.

Q176 **Emma Hardy:** Right, and the reason they get different provision is not based on need but based on the parents' time and resource in arguing the system.

George Holroyd: Absolutely. Completely on the parents, yes. That is true nationwide, which you might expect, but even within the same county.

Q177 **Thelma Walker:** Good morning. Thank you for your courage, speaking out on behalf of your children and young people, and your courage for speaking to us this morning. I know it cannot be easy. In a former life I was a special needs co-ordinator for a number of years and one of the challenges I had in that role—I was a class teacher and at the time a deputy head as well—was that my capacity for giving the support I desperately wanted to give to parents and children was a challenge for me on an individual basis.

Thinking about your journeys as parents supporting your children, do you have confidence that staff in schools and colleges, much as they want and desire to help your children, have the capacity to give that support to you and your children? Can I start with Carl?

Carl Rogers: With our own experience, we found the school very good. The school is Dee Banks School in Chester and on the whole, they were good. They have always listened to us. Our negative experience was with the LA. The minute you need something which is just slightly out of the ordinary or anything that needs extra support, that is when the problems came, but the school themselves were very good.

On the theme of support, Cheshire West and Chester have an information and advice service—I think probably other authorities have that—and it has been excellent. That was a real positive because without them advising us, you just do not—you need to be an expert to get through the system. I think that is the problem. Most carers just are not experts. There are a lot of single-parent carers and they have had a hard time with a young person with special needs anyway. It is a tough journey, and then to have to have all this extra trouble going through the education system—we have other children and they just sail through. We see the contrast between someone without special needs and someone with, and it is a very different world. You do need a lot of support.

Q178 **Chair:** I am sorry to ask but could you just speak loudly?

Carl Rogers: Sorry, yes.

That support from the advice and information service we found was absolutely top quality. We were eventually forced to launch a tribunal to keep hold of the EHC plan and they guided us through that process of how to go about that. We found the authority and the SEN team tried a few sneaky moves, really, to try to set us off-track. They tried to get the tribunal blocked on technicalities.

Q179 **Thelma Walker:** So the school was a good bridge between you and the local authority?

Carl Rogers: We found the school very good, yes.

Q180 **Thelma Walker:** That is good to hear. Kathleen, your thoughts?

Kathleen Redcliffe: My son has been at a mainstream school. I would say that more staff are needed. There is no time for curiosity. I agree, the teaching staff are all for wanting your child to achieve the best but they do not have the time to be curious. We will need more staff. They need more people in there to allow the time to be curious. If a child is not accessing education the curriculum can move so fast, and for my son it moved way too fast. Reception probably was a waste of time because there was no one there with enough time to be curious and say, "He does not have his phonics. I wonder what that is about."

Q181 **Thelma Walker:** Even if the staff really do have that commitment and really want to support, it is just that they may be torn in too many directions?

Kathleen Redcliffe: Yes. They have 30 children's needs to meet and they are going to go with the majority. Unfortunately, my son did not fit the majority. Yes, all good intention but it is not effective.

Q182 **Thelma Walker:** Thank you. George?

George Holroyd: I think most mainstream schools have no idea how to teach a blind child. My son is in a mainstream school. They have no idea, and why should they? There are very few Braille-using blind children in Cambridgeshire, I do not know exactly but around eight or 10 of about 40 or 45 registered blind children use Braille and do not rely on magnification and other things. For me, with Braille you cross that river and you are in a completely different world. There are eight or 10 children in Cambridgeshire and that is quite a lot for a county. There are very few schools that have the first idea, naturally, and then you and the schools are very much reliant on the specialist service. Some in the UK are quite good and some are horrendous, almost non-existent. We know plenty of parents of blind children and anecdotally, what you hear is the level of support being completely different.

One of the main sadnesses in the last 15 years has been the disappearance of specialist TAs because almost all county councils used to have a band of specialist teaching assistants, and for Braille-using and for blind children they have almost all disappeared. They have in Cambridgeshire. I know they are still disappearing now in other counties.

Q183 **Thelma Walker:** You are saying funding is a factor?

George Holroyd: Clearly funding is a massive factor, but also in schools, schools need the specialist support. Just for us, when Theo was very small, when he was about four, in his very first statement we tried to get a line in there saying Theo's TA should know more Braille than he does. He was only four. He did not know very much. The council would not have that line in his statement. We are very lucky at the moment and have brilliant TAs, fingers crossed, but if one of them leaves he could get someone brand new sitting next to him, supporting him in lessons and transcribing his work, who knows much less Braille than he does. How does that work?

Q184 **Thelma Walker:** Yes, so it is about appropriate expertise and support, funding and consistency across the country.

George Holroyd: Yes.

Thelma Walker: Thank you very much.

Q185 **Lucy Allan:** Good morning and thank you very much for coming along today. I want to ask you about how involved you feel you are in the decision-making processes around your children because that is so fundamental and from what I have heard so far this morning, there is a lack of involvement and parental input. Perhaps, Carl, you could start with your experience because you touched on it at an earlier point.

Carl Rogers: We were eventually heavily involved with the EHC plan but we had to fight to get to that place. When Rhiannon made the transition from a statement to an EHC, the process started off quite well and we were quite closely involved. Then it seemed to break down. Probably the volume of the EHC plans they were trying to get through caused that.

Q186 **Lucy Allan:** Are decisions made without your consent or knowledge that are very impactful decisions you would want to be involved in and are not?

Carl Rogers: It was more things that the authority was trying to keep out of the plan. Generally we were included. The process did start off very well. The officer that we dealt with came and she listened to us and her input was very good, but then as it became clear that there were going to be details that we wanted to put in that were going to require more one-to-one support to implement, that is when the trouble came. That slowed the whole process down and we did feel that we were more excluded from it, really.

Q187 **Lucy Allan:** Kathleen, what about your experience of involvement and decision-taking with or without you?

Kathleen Redcliffe: I think I have had to do everything really, as a parent. The school do not have the funds to get the educational psychologist review. Whether they did not notice the need or they did not have the funds for the need, I do not know, but we had to get a private diagnosis. Then even with the recommendations from the psych review, we still had to put in external stuff at home. He is at high school now, year nine, and we are told all the time that he is not really on their radar.

Q188 **Lucy Allan:** It is not that decisions are being made without you; it is that you are having to do it all yourself?

Kathleen Redcliffe: Yes, because his need is not really recognised. It is low-level in comparison, isn't it?

Q189 **Lucy Allan:** If the local authority was going to make a decision about your child, would they consult you? Would the authority discuss it with you first? Were you just saying that you do not—

Kathleen Redcliffe: No, because it was going to put some support in place and I did not even know about it. It was then, "Is it happening or is it not happening?" The authority talks about support going to be in place and then you find out there is none. There is no difference.

Q190 **Lucy Allan:** Is that simply down to communication or is it a whole attitude?

Kathleen Redcliffe: I think I communicate quite well to the school, and regularly, and have done from early on. I think it is a case, again, of time and resources. What do they have to offer me or my son? What is available? It is a case of me needing to research and work out what is available to him. That is what I struggle with. How does he reach his full potential if I do not know what is available? It is trying to resource stuff externally all the time to then go back to school to say, "Is this available? Is this happening?"

Q191 **Lucy Allan:** George, did you feel that you were involved in decisions around your child?

George Holroyd: We have pushed really hard to be involved. We are probably a panel of self-selected parents who are very involved because that is probably why we are here. That is true for me, for us.

We have had instances when big decisions have been taken that have not been in consultation with us. The council once stopped all of Theo's mobility support, which is how he navigates the world, with no reference to us. We obviously fought back incredibly hard and he then carried on having mobility support, but there are lots of families that get none and carry on getting none. In Cambridge, the council did listen to us eventually so I cannot complain too much.

Q192 **Lucy Allan:** The parent voice is only really there if there are people like you, who are prepared to fight and are capable of fighting to be that voice. For an average parent, who may not have the capacity to do what you have done so brilliantly, you are saying that there would be a lack of involvement?

George Holroyd: Completely. The whole system sets up this terrible dynamic where you have some very good, for us, QTVI, qualified teachers of the visually impaired. Some of them are excellent, but they are put in a situation where they have to define the need to fit the council budget. They go into it wanting to do the best for the children and they make their career doing it, and then they find themselves lying to parents, literally, I am afraid to say—not in our case much, not now, but in the past maybe a bit and certainly with other parents—saying, "No, he does not need this, he does not need that", because they know that they cannot afford it if it is in the plan.

Q193 **Lucy Allan:** Yes. There is no point in having it.

George Holroyd: That is terrible for them.

Q194 **Chair:** Coming in on what Lucy is saying, is the system biased against parents who do not know how to work the system or who do not have—

George Holroyd: Completely.

Carl Rogers: If you did not know how to go about things or you were not determined to do it, you would be just left out. I do not think the system automatically includes parents. That is the problem. If you want to have that input and that influence you have to do it yourself, and that excludes people who struggle more.

Q195 **Chair:** For a normal parent who does not necessarily know how to lobby their MP or work with councillors, does the system of the EHCP mitigate against them?

Carl Rogers: Yes.

Kathleen Redcliffe: It is also about the parent who thinks the education system knows what they are doing, who is putting their trust into the idea that, "I send my child to school. I should not have to be at home worrying that they are doing their job". That is what I think the parent belief is and that is where I started off. I put my child into the education system because by law I had to put him in there, which is fine, it is a developmental thing, but I have to rely on the fact that people are going to be doing their job and having my child's interest—"the welfare of the child is paramount", they say in the reports, but unless you are going to voice that and be an advocate I do not believe it is.

Q196 **Chair:** What would you do about that? How would you change that? If you had the magic wand, how would you make the system easier to navigate for everybody, for people who do not know, who cannot work the system or do not have those advocacy skills?

George Holroyd: There are two or three things I would do. There are a hundred things, but maybe two or three big things.

I would have the people defining the need separate from the people paying for the need. Separate those. It makes no sense having them the same person because clearly what happens, happens.

I would have better monitoring. I know we have Ofsted now and that was one of the reforms but to be honest, for us, Ofsted know nothing about blind issues at all. Why would they? When they go and monitor—I saw there was a report out this morning, I think, it was in the news—it is great but there is nothing to measure against.

I would have better monitoring, I would separate the need and the providers, but then I also would have some kind of national quality standards. They would be different for different cases and obviously you would have to caveat them a lot because every child is different, but as a parent on the blind side we have almost nothing. When we say, "Our child needs this. Look, there is this report" or, "There is this statutory guidance", there is nothing to hang your hook on when you go in to fight for the provision. There is literally nothing. I think the RNIB have one or two reports and that is it, the National Sensory Impairment Partnership have one or two reports from a few years ago, but if you sit around with the table with 10 experts and they, "No, they do not", what do you do? You need some kind of statutory framework to say, "This is roughly the provision, give or take, that a child in this circumstance should get". That gives the parents then the power to go in and fight properly.

Kathleen Redcliffe: One thing I would definitely say is that SENCOs need to have a role apart, like you were saying. They should not be the head teacher. There should be one role for the SENCOs so they can have the time to be curious with the children's individual learning needs.

Carl Rogers: Again, we just found that the advice and information section within the authority was the best point of call to help you through that maze, particularly if you have to fight as we did to keep hold to the EHC plan. Without that, you just would not find your way through the system.

One of the biggest decisions that the authority made for our daughter that we had absolutely no say in and no involvement in at all was the ceasing of the plan. They did that six weeks after her annual review but there was no mention of that at all from the review from the local authority. They did not discuss why they felt that was the way ahead, they did not ask for our input, they did not involve us at all; we just received a very blunt letter stating that they were going to cease the EHC plan because it was no longer relevant for her. We had made a request to go to a special needs college but they did not even mention that request, they just ceased the plan, and we were forced to launch a tribunal. The information service guided us through it and they helped us to do it. It would have been almost impossible, I would say, without them.

Q197 **James Frith:** Thank you for your contributions this morning. Sadly your experience is casework on a weekly basis for many of us and I want to reflect on something you had said, Kathleen, about the absence of "special" in this provision. Our interpretation across society of specialists, of special care, of special delivery, is of an enhancement of an experience. They are deliberately given more focus, they are deliberately treated with additional responsibility or care, and yet it seems the opposite is true with special educational needs and disability experiences.

You have all talked about struggle. A fight for a plan and then a fight for meaningful detail, I think you said, Carl, in your experience. What are the moments when a catalyst, a thing that has been said or a particular emotion that has been conveyed, has caused a breakthrough in your experience? Albeit, Kathleen, your original contribution was that it has not been a wholesale improvement by any means, where have you inched forward with some progress around that special care and how do we try to put that into a systemic experience for parents and their children?

Kathleen Redcliffe: I am just trying to think of the positive. I am struggling with that. Systemically—I am a systemic worker—that is where I have had to pull on myself, my friends and the knowledge of the internet, whatever. I am struggling to answer that question. Where a breakthrough has been? It is that my child still goes to school, if that makes sense. I do not think that is anything anybody has done apart from his perseverance and the resilience that he has had to build up from being treated differently. I do not know. I think I will end there because I am struggling.

Q198 **James Frith:** That is very strong. Carl?

Carl Rogers: I think I probably feel similarly.

James Frith: You struggle with that?

Carl Rogers: The feeling that you do get after, now that Rhiannon's 20, when you just look back, it has all been a struggle. There have been good bits. We found, because it is a special school, that we will have had different issues with the school to yourself, maybe. We found that they were generally good and supportive, not perfect but quite good. Certainly things involving the LA, once budgets come into it and additional things, and certainly the EHC plan process was a difficult one. You do feel at the end that you have got through it but you are not quite sure how.

Q199 **James Frith:** Quite, yes. George?

George Holroyd: No, I struggle too. Two things, I suppose, where we feel we inched forward. One of them was three or four years ago when Cambridge County Council wanted to break up the sensory service. They wanted to divide it into three and so you would have three areas. This for us would have been awful because you lose the specialist provision. The brilliant thing about having a service is that the service can match the child to the specialist. You have QTVIs who specialise in teaching four year-olds Braille and you have some that sit in an A-level physics class doing physics Braille, which is completely different. You have a whole different range of skills. If you break it up you cannot give the right skill to the right child. Thankfully we won that fight and Cambridge County Council listened. A whole bunch of parents was involved, sensory, hearing and blind side. That was just to maintain the status quo but we did that and they listened.

For us, recently we have bound together with three other parents of completely blind children in Cambridgeshire and we have, all of us, demanded better mobility provision for our children because one of the terrible issues is that everything is focused on education, and I do not think brilliantly, but the mobility side or the habilitation side gets completely forgotten. If you are very lucky you can do well in the exams—though that is a different story because the exams have lots of Braille mistakes—but if you cannot get to your job, if you cannot get around, if you cannot go and make yourself a coffee, if you cannot put your coat on, if you cannot brush your teeth, you are not a very good adult, really. You are not a very effective adult. If you can do those things then you should be helped to do them and so many children are not. The positive is that with these other three families, we have demanded better support from the council for our children and they have listened. We are now, these three families, going to commission separately mobility provision for just our children and the council have said we can do that.

Q200 **James Frith:** Great. If you were talking to a parent venturing on this journey for the first time, what would your advice be to help shorten that journey and the struggle that you have experienced as a parent of a child with SEND?

Carl Rogers: I would say, access the support that is available. Presumably that varies from authority to authority but that would be my one tip. In the case of Cheshire, that support does not seem to be particularly well publicised. We only discovered it when we initially lodged for an appeal and then this information and support service came on the radar. They were absolutely essential in that. If we had known about that service earlier on, we would have accessed it far more. I have a personal friend who is an SEN professional so I have had that support from outside but the support from within the authority has been very good. Ultimately, if you then struggle even further, we have been and had a meeting with the lead councillor for young people's services and again I would say that was a very positive experience. She seemed very good.

Curiously, there seemed to be quite a noticeable difference between how the councillors perceived things and how the authority staff work. I used to work in that same authority and I used to go to committee meetings. I was on the press and PR side. We used to go to committee meetings, I used to observe some of the committee meetings and how the officers talked afterwards once the councillors had gone. I noticed a slight imbalance, shall we say. One of the things I decided to do was to go and see the lead councillor and make her aware of exactly what the staff at the education authority were doing. That has proved quite a positive thing to do. I would say, do that. There is a lot of reluctance from the average parent to do that. It probably depends on what your job is or what you perceive you can do.

They have been the two best things that we have done. Without that, you do not get anywhere with the authority on their own.

Q201 **James Frith:** Kathleen, do you have any tips for parents starting out?

Kathleen Redcliffe: Protect your own mental health. That is a big challenge for parents, knowing your child is going to school and struggling. Protect your child's mental health, making sure they are having positive things outside of school. Then access every bit of information you possibly can and always be a little bit on the side of, "Maybe they are not doing what they are doing". You need to be on their backs, which is a horrible thing to say because you do not want to be and that takes a lot of effort. Try to trust but also be aware that things might not be going as it is said they are.

Q202 **Thelma Walker:** I want to pick up on an interesting use of language, George, when you said earlier, "We won that fight". That says an awful lot to me and, I am sure, the Committee. Is that how you would express how you are feeling, that it is an ongoing battle to get the appropriate support for your child?

George Holroyd: Yes and no. You have particular peak points where you face that but also you have to be very aware that the people you may be fighting with ultimately are sitting in the classroom with your child. There should be, but there are limits to how far you can go. It goes back to what I was saying about the whole structure of the system. It sets up this dynamic which is deeply unhelpful. You really should be co-operating, and we want to. We have to. These are the specialists who can help our son.

Thelma Walker: You are, the three of you, intelligent, articulate people who are up for that fight. It is about the parents who do not have that confidence to speak up.

Q203 **Lucy Powell:** Thanks very much for coming in. It is obviously very personal and difficult to talk about your own experiences but it really will help the inquiry.

Following on from some of the themes that have come up, your point is very well made about the structural problem here, the gatekeeper also being the person who is advising on need. That has come through previously as well.

In relation to empowering parents though, which is related but not entirely the same point, as others have said, obviously all of you have become very articulate and are very able, now, to navigate this system. As that Ofsted report this morning almost said, there is a lot of hidden SEND where parents perhaps do not know that their children have needs. That comes out as behavioural challenges which then schools often exclude. That was a very powerful report.

Do you have any thoughts about how we can enhance the parent-teacher role, other than George's point, to ensure that it is not just the middle-class parents or those who can identify the needs of their own children better who are able to get that sort of support? Have you come across any examples of that? Have you thought about that side of it, how we can support parents better? George?

George Holroyd: The best support we have had is from other parents. There are various charities that bring together parents once your child gets to a certain age on the blind side, and it has been really helpful to hear what they have to say. In terms of Government being able to do that, it is tricky. It is really hard.

The whole system is fractured and broken. Money is one of the main things and you have heard that already, but for visually impaired and blind children it is also the disappearance of the sensory services. Every year some just vanish. Then you get individual schools commissioning and the whole thing becomes fractured. Even if you had more money, the system itself still would not work as well as it could. It is not only money. In terms of supporting parents to navigate this, my son has a sensory service in Cambridgeshire; down in the south-west, they do not. It is completely different in different places. In Essex I know, some schools do it directly. How can Government tell parents? It is different everywhere. For us personally, the best support we have had is other parents.

Q204 **Lucy Powell:** What about maybe a system that was more based on funding due to need rather than having this same thing, that there would be almost incentives in the system for schools and others to get plans and put people on the register, because it would give extra resource.

George Holroyd: Yes, that would be fantastic. I do not want to monopolise it. Just the last thing from me, I think that every incentive at the moment is just to keep the children in the school, not causing too many problems. What they need, "the best possible", no, forget it. I am not talking particularly about my son but that is the incentive out there for councils and for schools. As long as the kids are not causing too many problems and they are not disrupting the class, job done.

Q205 **Lucy Powell:** In the same way that, say, pupil premiums revolutionised the focus on disadvantaged children—which it has, I think, in many ways—do you think we could maybe look at something a bit more revolutionary like that, where there was extra base support that came with a lower threshold that would perhaps put a bit more oil in the wheels or something like that? What do you think?

Kathleen Redcliffe: For me, what would have been helpful is to have more staff aware of my child's needs in school, SENCOs not only having one day allotted a week to educational needs, having the week allocated to be able to look at the different learning needs and having more specialist training within the schools to have an understanding of it. I do not know if teacher training—I am not sure.

Q206 **Lucy Powell:** That has come up before, yes.

Kathleen Redcliffe: Yes. I am not sure whether there needs to be a difference. It feels to me that the curriculum is one model that has to fit all and our children have to try to fit into the system. A lot of children do not fit into that teaching need, there is no time, and there is no flexibility or curiosity to think, "He is not quite getting that and I wonder why he is not getting that. Do I need to take a different stance on it?" rather than just telling them the same thing over again because that is what you have time for, and maybe speaking a bit slower because that is going to help.

Q207 **Lucy Powell:** That came through very strongly in our inquiry on alternative provision and exclusions. We increasingly have a sort of straitjacket around education and more children do not fit in it.

Kathleen Redcliffe: Yes, and it is not that long ago that there were a lot more TAs in primary schools in the very early years. In a reception class, how are one teacher and one TA going to explore those children? How are they going to be curious? We are just going to see more and more escalating behaviours and more exclusions. Where I live in Norfolk we are high up on the exclusion list and it saddens me immensely that nobody has the time to be curious. What is it about these behaviours? That stress goes home to the parents. The parents then say, "Why are you behaving like this at school?" and are not in a position to support their child because their child is now in the middle. They get it at home. They get it at school.

Q208 **Lucy Powell:** Perhaps that parent does not recognise that they are special needs. They just see it as behaviour.

Kathleen Redcliffe: No, they would not know. "Why are you not doing the work?" That is what I was saying. "You know you are a bright, articulate child. Why are you not getting it on paper?" There was nobody ever curious enough to think, "Hmm, we will get some further testing". It is we parents thinking, "I need to get the bottom of this". I did not know about dyslexia. "What is stopping you?"

Q209 **Lucy Powell:** No good. Well, good for you, anyway.

Finally, can I ask if any of you have had to go through the tribunal process at all?

Carl Rogers: We had to launch a tribunal to challenge the authority's decision for the EHC plan and they took it right up to the very last day before they stepped down.

Q210 **Lucy Powell:** How much did that cost you? Did it cost you anything at that point?

Carl Rogers: No. It cost us about six months of stress.

Lucy Powell: Very stressful, yes.

Carl Rogers: Yes. The process we went through was that we launched a tribunal to challenge the ceasing of the plan and then we went to a series of meetings where we were supposed to present evidence for Rhiannon making progress, because basically their case boiled down to that she was not making enough progress to stay in education. We made arrangements to bring extra evidence for the fact that she is making progress. Meetings were cancelled the night before and we never had the chance to show the authority that evidence. Therefore, we then took it all to a tribunal.

They followed that right through until the very last day that they had to stand down. They even tried on two occasions to get the tribunal blocked on technicalities from the way we had filled the forms in to launch the tribunal. Then at the very last minute they stepped down. I found that quite annoying, that they would take it right to the very last day and then they did not have the faith in their own stance to face it at a tribunal. When I saw the council guy I said, "That is the thing that really got me. They did not have the faith in their own stance to defend it at a tribunal".

Q211 **Lucy Powell:** We get back to that point about being the gatekeeper and the person deciding on the need. It is holding both of those things.

Carl Rogers: Yes. Going back to your other point on the support you received, we had very good support on that right the way through and the one thing that would improve things is for that support to be better publicised. We have been talking to other parents who have just accepted the authority's decision. They do not seem to be aware that there is somebody who will hold your hand through the whole process if that is what you need.

Q212 **Lucy Powell:** Who held your hand then?

Carl Rogers: It was the advice and information service. They are part of the authority, as I understand, but they are independent. They are almost a gatekeeper that is not also a fundkeeper . They are there to help you. They tell you what your rights are, they informed us about the process that we went through, and a lot of it was unintuitive to me but we took their advice, we followed it and it was perfect. I am full of praise for them.

Q213 **Lucy Powell:** That is really helpful. I wonder if everywhere has those. I do not know if they do.

Carl Rogers: I do not know, no.

Q214 **Chair:** You talked about training and more teacher training needed. What do you think of the general quality of the educational system in terms of your children and the general quality of education support in the schools that they have been in?

Kathleen Redcliffe: There is good intention, really good intention, but there is very limited support.

George Holroyd: It is varied. At the moment we are very lucky. We have two fantastic TAs with my son, Theo, who have been with him for a while. They know him and they know Braille.

It is an incredibly specialist thing, trying to educate a blind child in a mainstream school. I brought some resources with me; I do not know if after you want to have a look. This is his maths folder and these are some Braille diagrams, which you need in school. One of the issues is that making things like these diagrams is incredibly time-intensive and you need skills, and all across the country you have sensory services where the skills are disappearing, where people are retiring or people are being laid off. I cannot speak for them but in Brighton I remember all the specialist teachers were going to be sacked and they were just going to have general SEND providers, who cannot do this and who do not know Braille.

Q215 **Chair:** Are you saying it is a lottery of quality provision?

George Holroyd: "Lottery" almost does not come into it. It is extraordinary. For us, we are lucky. Right now, we are okay, but we know plenty of families that are not.

Q216 **Chair:** Carl?

Carl Rogers: Because Rhiannon went to a special needs school, generally our experience was that it was good. It has not been perfect, there have been things that could be better, but generally I think we have been fairly happy. She has moved on now to the Seashell Trust in Manchester, which is a charity but is run very differently from the local authority school, and we can see a difference in that, mainly in the staffing levels. Rhiannon has a one-to-one all the time throughout and that is just better. I guess there is no real solution to that other than vastly greater funding, which is not going to come, but under the circumstances we found the school good.

Q217 **Ian Mearns:** From all of your answers today it sounds to me like the whole system, if we can call it a system, is laden with different steps that are all based on rationing, whether you have the appropriately trained teachers in the original school who can help parents to identify what an educational need might be in the first instance or whether it be the appropriate amount of staff once a child has been properly diagnosed and has a plan to meet their needs. Even the plans themselves seem very full of resource-led statements or resource-led plans as opposed to needs-led plans. Does the system need a system? That is one question. Do we need more resourcing or is it much, much more than that?

George Holroyd: Sorry, the first question, "Does the system need a system?"

Ian Mearns: Yes.

George Holroyd: I will answer the second one first because it is easier. Do we need more resources? Yes, clearly. I looked at some of the other evidence you have had and I think everyone would say yes, but I think it is more than that. Without question, you could do much better with the resources that are there now, but yes, you do need more resources ultimately, I think. The fragmentation, as I alluded to earlier, just means that the specialisms are lost.

I have to say this. Without the specialist support—for a blind child, a super specialist—they have no chance, but what gets me is that even if they get the specialist support, when they get to national exams, can you believe that on your average science GCSE there are six Braille errors that have a major impact on your ability to answer the question? That is on average, in every single science GCSE. On average in GCSEs there are two major Braille errors, high-impact errors, in every single GCSE paper. Even if you get to your GCSE, you then get a GCSE paper where two or six of the questions you cannot do. My son is 11 so I have five years to try to fix that problem.

Q218 **Lucy Powell:** There was a major error in last year's GCSE for everybody. It is ridiculous.

George Holroyd: They have an error rate for sighted people and it is something like 0.1 on average. Yes, they have the occasional error but it is 0.1, whereas it is 2.2, I think, for Braille. There are so many things you could fix but keeping, retaining a specialism, that for me, for something that is low-incidence, high-need, you then need mass. One person cannot cover—

Q219 **Ian Mearns:** That is a very technical point about there being errors in the Braille translation.

George Holroyd: That is just an example. It is so easy to fix, you know.

Q220 **Ian Mearns:** Absolutely. I am just wondering if, coming out of this, we should be saying to the DfE and to the exam setters that they need to properly proofread their Braille translations of exam questions.

George Holroyd: No, completely, but there is nobody who enforces this. There is nobody sitting above it saying, "Oh my goodness, that is terrible. We will fix that".

Q221 **Ian Mearns:** Your answer about a fragmentation to a large extent says to me that you are answering yes to, "Does the system need a system?"

George Holroyd: Yes.

Q222 **Ian Mearns:** All right. Is there anything you want to add to that?

Kathleen Redcliffe: No. I just think the system needs a lot more curiosity.

Q223 **Ian Mearns:** Carl?

Carl Rogers: Our experience has been that it is really a funding issue. The only real explanation for the way that the local authority keeps away from us and does not involve us in things is where they anticipate extra funding, such as moving on to a special needs college. The authority was determined to get Rhiannon into social care and did not want her to stay in education. We wanted her to stay in education and she has that right to stay in there while she is still making progress. That is a funding issue, really. I do not think there is any other reason why you would take young people with SEN out of education.

Ian Mearns: Thank you very much indeed.

Chair: Thank you enormously. It is wonderful for you to come here today and to give evidence. A lot of what you have said will form our evidence and go into our report. Thank you very much indeed. I wish you all good luck.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Beth Foster, Penny Hoffmann-Becking and Mrunal Sisodia.

Q224 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody. Thank you very much for coming. We are going to finish just after 11.20 am. For the benefit of the tape, could I ask you to introduce yourselves, please, and your titles, from our left to right?

Mrunal Sisodia: My name is Mrunal Sisodia. I am the father of Aaron, who is 10 years old and has complex needs. I am also one of the Co-Chairs of the National Network of Parent Carer Forums.

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: I am Penny Hoffmann-Becking, I am the mother of a 15 year-old with severe cerebral palsy who is at a mainstream school and I am also representing SEND Family Voices, which was until recently the Parent Carer Forum for Richmond and Kingston, and I was the lead for education, health and care plans and all things related to that.

Beth Foster: Hello, my name is Beth Foster. I have two autistic children. I am the Education Lead for HPCN, which is the Hampshire Parent Carer Network.

Q225 **Lucy Powell:** I could see you three nodding away with much of the evidence from the previous panel. Given that you all have more of a leadership role, if you like, within your local authority, can I just ask you a more general starter question about parent carer forums? Do you think that you can meet the needs of parents in your area? What would you do to improve parent carer forums? As part of that, could you say if you think there is a possible conflict there between where you have to apply for your grant from and who approves your grant and so on, as to whether you can really be as pushy and as vocal as you want to be. An opener, really. Could each of you please answer that?

Mrunal Sisodia: Perhaps if I can start, it is essential that the parental voice is heard when you are making strategic decisions and parent carer forums are a good way of doing that. It is essential that parent carer forums are run by parent carers. I am not a representative, I am a parent carer first and foremost, and I think that most parent carer forums would say that we are all parents, we all kiss our kids goodnight and we all know that we have to do right by them every day. Frankly, I do not think there is any conflict in being open, honest, transparent, holding people to account and challenging them because that is what we are here to do. That is why we are here and if we are not doing that, and if local authorities and CCGs are not willing to hear that, then that is a problem.

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: I do not know if you are aware but we recently closed down.

Lucy Powell: Yes, we were aware of that.

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: We started out with great enthusiasm to co-produce with our local authority four years ago and I think absolutely everybody in our group believes that if you can work with something, that is the way to go. Working against is a terrible waste of everybody's energy. However, what I would say is that we have found it is very difficult to regularly attend meetings with the local authority, which we have to do because that is part of the way that our grant requires us to work, to try to work co-productively, and to simultaneously raise concerns from the parent community.

You are trying to straddle a line, being a critical friend, and in our case being critical was unfortunately seen as "critical" rather than trying to be a critical friend. We have been incredibly constructive. I think we have a lot of evidence that we have done a lot of work to be constructive, but in the end, the LA has all the power in the relationship between parent carer forums and the local authority. We are in the meetings by their invitation. If you take a stance that is not seen as constructive, they can choose not to invite you to meetings, they can choose to withhold information so that you do not know what is being discussed, and in our case ultimately they can decide that they do not want to approve your funding. We were very surprised that they were able to do that, but that happened to us.

That makes it very difficult. You have to be extremely confident to step into those meetings. If everything is going well then it is nice to have that opportunity to shape policy but I would say that things are not going well at the moment. We have found ourselves having to take really difficult messages to our local authority and I do not think they thanked us for it. The thing that makes us the most sad is that everything we have been feeding back to them for the last three years has been recently confirmed in an Ofsted report, and we did bring a lot of evidence, we collected an issue log, it was all objective, it was fact-based. I understand it is hard for them to hear things are not going well, but if you cannot get beyond, "You are being too critical", I do not think the relationship works productively.

If I can take that one step, when we voted to close the charity it was not about funding, it was because we are very concerned that if you cannot get a productive relationship, a parent carer forum just becomes something that legitimises decisions that perhaps are not in the interests of parents because the local authority can say, "But we have spoken to the parent carer forum". The parent carer forum may have said something that goes completely against what the policy is but they use that badge sometimes—at least our local authority has—to say, "Parents have been consulted" and that is not correct.

That is the complex dynamic with parent carer forums. I think everybody sincerely wanted to do the right thing but it is very hard to walk that line. Ultimately I do think that there is a problem that we do not have any power except to be influential and be nice.

Lucy Powell: Beth?

Beth Foster: I think that with funding you need to be able to show that you can challenge the local authority. You have to be very careful about how you manage which parents go into meetings. There is a feeling that if you have a parent who is very emotional, who is going to be upset at the local authority, it is going to damage our relationship. So we spent quite a long time trying to build this relationship with the local authority in Hampshire and we do have a good working relationship, but it is that need to constantly maintain it. If you are trying to manage which parents are going into meetings, the really important messages are not getting through because the parents it needs to hear from are the ones that have been let down, because that is the only way that you are going to be able to see where there are gaps in your provision.

In terms of funding, there are some parents who have a distrust of parent carer forums because of that, and we have to constantly prove that that is the case. Within parent carer forums, having peer-to-peer support, having that sort of framework is very, very powerful, and having a parent carer forum funded means that in Hampshire we have Futures in Mind programmes, we have Talk Together programmes, we have Get Together programmes, Learn Together programmes. We also have a regular meet the SEND team, which means that we can bring the local authority and parents directly together. That can be quite challenging at times but the local authority is very keen to do those. It recognises that it improves communication and that helps it do its job.

Q226 **Lucy Powell:** Is there sufficient funding or is it about where the funding comes from and you think that should be more independent? Which is it?

Mrunal Sisodia: Parent carer forums do a huge range of work across the country. No parent carer forum is the same across the country, because they represent their local communities, and what works in Tower Hamlets will not work in Norfolk, so they are very different. Depending on what the local need is, some forums are well funded, others are hardly supported at all by their local authority.

If I could build on something, there is a survey of parent carer forums done each year and the last one was in November 2017. In that survey 69% of parent carer forums felt they had a good, productive relationship with their local authority. If you flip that around, there is roughly a third saying that they do not, that they are not at the table in the way that they should be, they are not being listened to. That in itself tells you that four years in we still have a hell of a way to go.

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: Can I say something else about the funding? We did not take any funding from the local authority at all. All our funding came through the grant, which is administered by Contact and ultimately comes in to the Department for Education, but it has to be signed off by somebody in the local authority who says they are prepared to work with you as the parent carer forum, even though it is not local authority money.

I think the problem with that for us was that gives the local authority the sense that they can choose the parent carer forum, which I do not think is the intention at all but it certainly gives that impression. We did push that and we did push it all the way up to the Department for Education and we were told, "No, that is the way it is. The local authority ultimately has to decide if it wants to work with you". That, I feel, further imbalances the relationship between what is basically a group of very busy, very under-the-cosh parents, who are volunteering, and an organisation that is paid from taxes to look after our children. It does not send the right message, I think.

Q227 **Lucy Powell:** How would you improve that?

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: I think there needs to be somebody who can sit above the local authority and say, "Unless your PCF is completely useless or doing something that is wrong, then you have to work with it". That did not happen in our case. We did try to escalate it through Contact but we were ultimately told, "If the local authority will not sign off, then you cannot have the money".

I do not want to make it about the money, because that is a symptom of the relationship, but I think it is unhelpful that that authority is there, because it gives the impression that we work for the local authority, which we were very clear we do not and should not. We always were there for the parents, so we have to work in the best interests of the parents.

Q228 **Lucy Powell:** Finally, do Ofsted look at the relationship between local authority and the parent carer forum as part of an inspection? Is that something that could help?

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: It did come up but we have only just had the Ofsted inspection for one of our local authority areas and it did highlight that there was a problem in the way the local authority had behaved towards the parent community and the forum. By then, unfortunately, we have had six months of battling in order to try to find a way back and we were at a point where we said—

Q229 **Lucy Powell:** What I am getting at is the statutory requirement for the local authority to ensure that relationship works well and is a viable, function parent carer forum. Do you think that is strong enough?

Mrunal Sisodia: Ofsted does look at the relationship between parent carer forums and the local authority. If you read the inspection reports that are published, many of them will refer to that relationship and a lot of them are really, really complimentary about parent carer forums and the work that they are doing and how important they are in local areas.

I think the point is a really good one that it is the responsibility of the local authority to put in place measures so that it can show that it is co-producing and engaging with the local community of parents, but that does not mean the local authority can choose who it talks to. The parent carer forum has to be drawn from the local committee and chosen by the local community and of the local community.

Q230 **Ben Bradley:** That leads me on neatly to the next bit. I was going to ask in addition about the story there in terms of how that relationship has broken down with the local authority and whether you feel that is replicated around, but it seems that survey has touched on the answer to that question. Perhaps there is a role there for Ofsted or DfE or the Children's Commissioner in terms of an independent oversight of that relationship.

You talk about the representative elements of the forums. How do you ensure that your parent carer forum is genuinely representative? We have heard from the previous panel and in other discussions particularly about less engaging or less articulate parents and how you ensure that they are equally able to access the support as everybody else is. Where do you draw on parents and how they access the forums?

Mrunal Sisodia: Again it really varies based upon each forum. What works in Tower Hamlets does not work in Norfolk. They are different issues and different communities. The best way of learning what is going on is meeting people and talking to them. There are lots and lots of conversations with parents that parent carer forums organise, from coffee mornings, to lectures and we try to listen to what people are saying face to face. There are also things like surveys, there are things like social media. The SEND community is very active on social media, but the point there is around there are hard-to-reach communities, there are seldom-heard groups and they are the same groups across society and disabled children are no different.

What parent carer forums have done recently is there have been webinars about how to reach seldom-heard groups. There has been some work done by Contact in supporting how to reach seldom-heard groups. What I am saying is it is the most vulnerable children who are the ones we need to listen to.

Beth Foster: I think PCFs need to have enough funding so that they can set up programmes that can go into schools and have good get-togethers so that they can try to draw parents in and give them an opportunity to discuss directly with parents. Quite often a lot of parents that you meet, once they find a PCF—there are quite a few people who are quite broken and the idea of communicating and trying to solve problems, it is almost as if the gate is nearly closed. It is trying to get into places as soon as possible and trying to meet people as early on in their journey as possible so that the impact is greater. I think it is just having enough funding to be able to set up as many programmes as possible.

Q231 **Chair:** Do local authorities refer people to forums?

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: A lot of SENCOs would refer because we did a lot of work building relationships with SENCOs in the school in the way that Beth is describing. One of the things about building links into the community is—well, we set up four years ago and by the time we closed we had directly, on our newsletter, about 750 parents, and we are quite a small local authority area. However, our steering group was comprised of the local charities. We had a hub-and-spoke model so we were reaching out into wider communities. We had the National Autistic Society and a Down's syndrome charity. But it takes a long time to go out and meet parents. We reached maybe a third of the parents that we should have been reaching by the end of four years. It takes a long time.

There is another point, which is that the LA talking to the parent carer forum does not mean that parent voices are being represented. Parents and children are not a homogeneous group; they have very different needs. I do not think it is realistic to expect a parent carer forum to speak on behalf of all parents. What we became, in Richmond and Kingston, we saw ourselves much more as a conduit. We would set up opportunities for consultation to happen. Some of our parents were very clear they did not want to have anything to do with the PCF, but if we organised a meeting they were happy to come and have their voices heard. Other parents will never come into a meeting like that and you have to go into the schools or find them through other organisations.

I think you need to be careful. A PCF can never been be wholly representative of all the parents in a community, I would say. We can do a lot to bring those voices together but I would hate it to be used as a convenience for local service providers to say, "We have spoken to the PCF. That is it, we have consulted parents". That is not the right way.

Q232 **Ben Bradley:** That is an interesting point and one that I had not thought about prior to this discussion, about local authorities being able to say, "We have a parent carer forum and therefore we are consulting so we are fine".

The final question from me is you talked about different things that go on: online seminars, meetings, coffee mornings. Is there advice and support nationally or from local authorities about the kinds of things and best practice that you should be doing as parent carer forums or is it so localised that you have to make that up for yourself?

Mrunal Sisodia: Yes and no is the short answer. There is some national guidance that is supplied. The charity that supports parent carer forums is Contact and it does fantastic work supporting the parent carer forums.

It is a thankless task trying to organise 150 community groups up and down the country. Also I think it is really important that parent carer forums are local and they are set up locally, and they look and feel very different across the country because they reflect their communities. They should reflect their communities.

Q233 **Thelma Walker:** Could you tell me why you think some local authorities have fewer tribunals than others? What are they doing that others are not, or is that to do with the effectiveness of different parent carer forums?

Mrunal Sisodia: I think it is about culture. Some local authorities try very hard to have a zero tribunal rate because they genuinely try to put children, young people and their families at the centre of their provision rather than trying to shoehorn them through the provision that they have. Some local authorities have a very different culture and approach, and you can see that. You can see that through all sorts of statistics about tribunal rates.

Thelma Walker: So it is about relationships?

Mrunal Sisodia: It is about leadership and relationships, yes.

Thelma Walker: Thank you. Beth?

Beth Foster: I think, from the previous witnesses, a lot of parents recognise almost that game of chicken that local authorities can play with parents of, "Who is going to blink first as we go towards tribunal?" It is only then stepping off once you realise you are right up against it, "Oh, the parents are not going to give up. Let's step back". I think that it is quite a bullying kind of tactic. I know that a lot of our parents have recognised that sort of behaviour and I think it comes down to there is few resources and it is trying to figure out where to put them. It is who is going to fight hardest for it.

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: I think our experience is very similar to what Beth has just described. It is almost used as a tactic to get parents to accept something that they are perhaps not very happy with. The thought of going to tribunal is such a huge hurdle. It can be very expensive, but the previous witness talked about the stress. I have seen awful stress in families caused by tribunals. Therefore, a lot of families will say, "I do not think that school is okay but I am not prepared to put myself through what this will take".

Q234 **Thelma Walker:** There is £70 million at the moment going on tribunals. That is £70 million that could be spent—

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: Yes, but that is the ones that get there. Like in Hampshire, our local authority area, I know many cases are dropped just before they go to court.

Chair: That is an important point that came up before about the parent who took it right to the end and then it was dropped, but all the stress they had to go through.

Q235 **Ian Mearns:** We have seen evidence, some of it submitted by you, that strategic co-production parent carer forums still report that engagement is patchy and the whole idea of co-production being embedded across the whole of the country, it is really more of a patchwork quilt. Is that your feeling about it?

Mrunal Sisodia: Yes. We hear of some really fantastic examples of co-production where things work. What is interesting is we always see three characteristics of good practice when we see it, which is co-production, working across agencies—agencies breaking down barriers and wrapping around—and the third thing is person-centred rather than provision-led services. We always see that. But it is by exception rather than the rule and we see co-production as—you used the phrase of the patchwork quilt and I think that is fair. We see some great examples and we hear of some appalling practice, some appalling stories, as well.

Q236 **Ian Mearns:** Is that your experience as well?

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: Can I talk a bit about co-production, because that is obviously what parent carer forums ultimately are set up to do? In our closing statement we wrote that we did not think it was possible in the current climate. Could I expand on that? The first problem is the degree to which unlawful practice has become embedded within the way that local authorities operate because of the need to ration what is handed out. We have a lot of evidence of the local authority not following the code of practice, and the Ofsted report confirmed that.

Our conversation has become increasingly about trying to hold the local authority to account to implement the code of practice lawfully. That surely is not something that parent carer forums should be having to do but that seems to have fallen to us to do that. That is not a good basis for a co-productive relationship. I do not know where else in the system anybody, apart from the voluntary sector and parents, are holding the system to account except Ofsted, and it comes around every three or four years. That is the first problem. The second problem—

Q237 **Chair:** Be concise if you can, because of time.

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: Yes, co-production of cuts. The agenda in our local authority is unremittingly about cuts, massive cuts. How can you ask parent carers to co-produce massive cuts to services? It makes no sense.

The third point is legal knowledge. You need to know a lot about the law to be working in a co-productive environment, and the parent carer forum does not really provide that. You can find yourself in a consultation where you are agreeing to things that are not in your interests, because you are not totally clear about the law.

The final point is we bumped into a situation where there was a complete refusal to acknowledge the problems in the system. We had to be seen to be keeping the ship going. If you cannot acknowledge the problems in the system, you cannot fix the problems in the system. We have bumped up against that for years in our local authority. We kept saying, "No, it is not right, it is not right" but we were not listened to. You cannot work co-productively if you cannot agree on the problem.

Chair: In a nutshell you are saying it is a great idea but not working in practice, in simple terms?

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: It did not work for us at all, yes.

Q238 **Ian Mearns:** Are you aware of anything being done strategically across the board? Is the DfE doing anything to try to improve things on that?

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: In the current funding climate I am not optimistic, because I think a lot of this antagonistic behaviour comes from the local authority being caught between the law that says it is a needs-based system, and the funding, which is a ration system. I do not know how you can have a co-productive conversation where we are all in that strange vice.

Ian Mearns: Sorry, Beth.

Beth Foster: With parent carer forums you have to also think about whether you are just a voice or whether you are involved with the decision-making and what co-production is being looked at. If you are just invited to go to a forum, that is not really co-production, that is just allowing you to have a parent voice within that. But if you are allowed to start right at the beginning of something—in Hampshire we have done the HCA hub that right at the beginning we have been saying what it needs to look like, but it is not across the board.

We have also had to pull back from getting involved with consultations, because we do a huge amount of work with parents to put our voices forward for consultations and all of the consultations go through because that is how much money they need to save. We have had the short breaks funding cuts, we have had the home-school transport cuts and it has all happened despite what parents have said and all the work that we have done to get those voices in. It has still gone through. So we have to balance what we are doing with the local authority with what we are saying to parents because if parents lose trust in what we are doing, then we do not have a voice to give to you and that breaks down the whole fabric of parent carer forum.

Q239 **Ian Mearns:** My next question is a bit loaded, but as with the co-production across the country, are parent carer forum themselves a patchwork quilt? We have had some evidence that some parents see the parent carer forum as kind of a gatekeeper for the local authority. Would that be fair?

Mrunal Sisodia: Yes, I think parent carer forums are a patchwork quilt. I think you are falling into a third, a third, a third. I think a third are fantastic and do incredible work, a third are good and they are getting by and a third need a lot of support. That is the picture nationally, yes.

Q240 **Ian Mearns:** Would some parents in some areas be fair in saying they do not feel they get any support from the parent carer forum at all?

Mrunal Sisodia: You are always disappointed when you hear that but it may well be that the parent carer forum cannot provide what that parent is looking for, yes.

Q241 **Chair:** We have touched so much on this already, but would you say that the system, contrary to what was set out, is particularly adversarial and that things have become worse rather than better?

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: I feel that many parents that I speak to are living in a constant state of anxiety because even if you have managed to secure something good now, there is always the worry that it could be cut next month or next year. Our children are uniquely vulnerable. My son I can put in any number of different schools. My daughter is in a very good school, she is very well looked after, but there is always the worry that the teaching assistant who supports her will be cut or that something else will happen.

Q242 **Chair:** You all are very eloquent and you run parent groups and so on. How do you reach out to those who are, who do not have those skillsets or do not even know what is available and, as I mentioned before, do not necessarily to lobby their MP or their councillors, do not know how to work the system, people who are struggling in the day-to-day but have no one to help them? How do you solve that problem?

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: We tried to be in the community as much we as could. Similar to what Beth was describing, we do community events and we specifically try to target the hard-to-reach areas, but hard-to-reach parents are hard to reach. There are some special schools where some of the parents have special needs themselves. We try to reach out to those communities.

We have done a lot of work publishing—this is not the publication for the hard-to-reach parents but we have published a lot of information. We have tried to reach out through schools, but even up until when we closed I would get people phoning our phone line—we had a helpline so people could text us because we thought that might be easier than sending an e-mail for people—who did not know who we were, and we are quite a small area. It takes a long time to become well known.

Chair: What about you? You were about to say something?

Mrunal Sisodia: I think it is really important. Co-production is one way of changing the world, sitting down with people and explaining to them what is working and what is not. Some parents want to take a more militant route and they want to protest and I think that is great. Their voices have to be heard as well.

Q243 **Chair:** I am not talking about those ones. Those are the people who know what to do and how to campaign and so on. I am talking about the many, many, many parents who do not even know or have those abilities or even necessarily know who their MP is or whatever.

Mrunal Sisodia: Yes. I think the key is localised support, face-to-face support. One of the other panellists spoke about independent advice and support services. Those are critical. The parents who are the most vulnerable need keyworkers who can help them navigate the system. As long as we are seeing the system is going to stay, you need local support, people who understand the local system, who can talk to them face to face. That is the key.

Chair: Thank you. Beth?

Beth Foster: It important to really stress that if we can set up peer-to-peer support within the programmes that PCFs set up, that is really, really powerful, but we need to make sure that schools are on board to let parents know to signpost them to us. I do wonder whether there is an attitude that if we support one parent and they tell everybody else what we have supported, that is opening a floodgate. There is a feeling that maybe there is a certain amount of divide and rule, "If we can keep it secret what we have done for you—" My support for my children in our school is very good but I know within the same school there will be parents saying, "But I am not getting any support".

Q244 **Chair:** My worry about the system is that if there are parents who know how to—everyone goes through a struggle, it does not matter what, but the ones who know how to campaign and have the time and effort to do the politics, local or national, they are going to get the help. That is their right, of course, but then there will be a lot of people left who are not getting that help and are not in touch with your kinds of groups. I am trying to understand how you square that circle, if you like. We need you, the advocates and the campaigners, to highlight what is going wrong but we also need to make sure that everybody benefits.

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: Can I add something? One of the things that we struggled with our local authority with was to try to get it to implement the code of practice correctly so that the thresholds for doing a needs assessment, the way the needs assessment was done in a consistent and high-quality way and that still has not happened. If that were in place, the system should pick up people who come into it and assess based on need.

The difficulty that has come is even though the guidelines—we wrote a whole bunch of guidelines for people around it. If they are not followed, then only the strong who can fight and say, "No, no, no, I know the code of practice and I know you cannot reject my request based on this" can get through the gate.

Q245 **Chair:** The final question is do you think there should be—and it was mentioned in the previous session—a national framework or some kind of contract or template that was given to every parent who had a child with special educational needs so that they know what their rights are, how the system works and what they can do? Obviously that is not the only thing but that could be an important start.

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: I think if that was in an accessible form. The problem that has happened—we have spent a lot of time doing documentation and trying to bring systemic change that way and I am sure other local authorities have done the same. The problem is the poor practice trumps that. We have written down guidelines but if you then phone your caseworker and you are told something different—adherence to the code of practice would be the first thing I would be looking to try to improve. If the local authority had the funding and the will to adhere to the code of practice, then I do not think as many of these fights would have to happen.

Q246 **Chair:** It should be a national code of practice, though.

Penny Hoffmann-Becking: It is a national code of practice.

Mrunal Sisodia: It is, it is.

Chair: If no one knows about it, that is the problem.

Mrunal Sisodia: To build on that, I think that is exactly right. I think there is not a great deal wrong with the code of practice, it is its implementation that is the issue. The language we are using, these are the right reforms, they are in wrong environment. They are swimming against the tide.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed, first for what you have been doing but also for giving evidence today. I think many parents will be watching out there and thinking it is lucky there are advocates like you who know the system and who understand it and who can present before the Select Committee. We hope very much that our report reflects some of your recommendations. Thank you, everybody.