



## APPG for London Meeting on SEND Inclusion in London's Schools

**Meeting date:** Monday 4 November 2024

**Location:** Palace of Westminster

**Chairs:** Florence Eshalomi MP, Peter Fortune MP, Munira Wilson MP

**Speakers:**

- Cllr Ian Edwards, London Councils Executive Member for Children and Young People.
- Ros Luff and Claire Richmond - London Regional Representatives, National Network of Parent Carer Forums
- Amanda Allard – Director, Council for Disabled Children and Strategic Director, National Children's Bureau
- Jan Shapiro – Headteacher, Addey & Stanhope School

**Also in attendance:**

- Liam Conlon MP
- Dan Tomlinson MP
- Danny Beales MP
- Daniel Francis MP
- James Asser MP
- Lord Davies of Brixton
- Lord Mountevans
- Baroness Pidgeon

**Summary of the meeting**

Florence Eshalomi MP opened the meeting by announcing that Liam Conlon MP would need to step down as Vice-Chair due to his role as a Government PPS. A vote was held for the vacant role of Vice-Chair and Dan Tomlinson MP was elected.

Florence Eshalomi outlined how SEND inclusion is an issue MPs care deeply about as it comes up in their inboxes on a regular basis and hear the challenges faced by pupils and their families.

She explained that London's cohort of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is growing at a rapid rate, and now stands at over 17% of all pupils, with seven London boroughs with at least a fifth of all pupils identified with SEND.

As this cohort of young people in London has grown, Eshalomi said we know many mainstream schools are struggling to be able to meet the needs of SEND pupils faced with mounting challenges including around funding, accountability and workforce shortages.

She outlined that concern about the inability of many of London's schools to meet the needs of children with SEND is now widespread across the education sector, from young people themselves, to their parents, schools, local authorities, the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofsted.

She said there is a need to understand how we can make mainstream schools more inclusive, so that more children with SEND are able to thrive there.

Cllr Ian Edwards, London Councils' Executive Member for Children and Young People explained that Mainstream education is struggling to deliver a truly inclusive experience for many children with SEND. With the pressures on schools and the limitations of local authority funding, many schools are finding it difficult to create an environment that is supportive for all students.

Cllr Edwards explained that today, London Councils released their own report on SEND inclusion in London's schools. They commissioned Mime to identify best practices in inclusive education and explore why some schools struggle to meet inclusion goals. He argued this is not about attributing blame but about recognising that change is possible if we work together—families, schools, local authorities, and national government alike.

Cllr Edwards outlined several key challenges that prevent effective inclusion for SEND children and young people in schools across London, including the SEND population in London growing rapidly, the workforce capacity not keeping pace with the growth in the size of the SEND cohort, and funding being inadequate for many schools and local authorities.

He said that London Councils' and Mime's research found many examples of effective inclusion across London, showing a widespread commitment among school leaders and local authorities, including reasonable adjustments applied to uniforms, the curriculum, homework and sports day. However, this commitment is not consistent across all schools.

Cllr Edwards argued that moving forward, a strategic vision for inclusive education must include adequate funding, targeted teacher training, accountability measures, and flexibility for SEND students.

Ros Luff, London Regional Representatives on the National Network of Parent Carer Forums said that from her perspective, inclusion starts with creating a sense of belonging, of being wanted and given the support, tools and environment to thrive. Inclusion isn't forced participation conforming to be like everybody else. It should never be a 'bolt on'

She argued inclusion doesn't have to be expensive, a flexible attitude to practice and policy can be all that's needed to make the difference. She said where reasonable adjustments are made it helps to share that positive ethos and models good inclusion to all pupils and staff.

Ros argued schools should be encouraged to see parents as part of their team, often a parent can help unpick the pupil's perspective of issues at a time when they are calm and able to reflect. A parent has a developed understanding of their child to enable that conversation.

She said that lack of understanding of a child's needs can lead to disciplinary actions, increased anxiety, and low self-esteem, even resulting in serious mental health issues, saying families often

bear the fallout from issues overlooked at school, leading to rising cases of school avoidance and the need for home education.

Ros said that poor inclusion can affect long-term outcomes, such as employability, social stability, and mental health, impacting entire families and communities.

She argued schools should adopt a SEND-first mindset which fosters empathy and understanding. Schools need collaborative support from external professionals (e.g., therapists, psychologists).

Ros argued schools should consider recovery initiatives to aid pupils affected by non-inclusive practices, supporting future generations with embedded inclusivity.

Amanda Allard from the Council for Disabled Children said that while we talk about the rise in the numbers of those identified with SEND, it is really important to think about whether or not that should be necessary.

She argued we have a system which requires the othering of children rather than one which acknowledges different learning styles and processing skills. One which requires parent/carers with sufficient capacity to work out how to access support. She claimed we are pathologizing children because we have created a school system that is so rigid and inflexible.

She said we have a system we can't afford with current levels of funding, despite that level being higher than it has ever been, and that we have a system in which best practice is possible but it is hard work, it requires staff to go above and beyond.

She stated that in London and some other areas we have a specific issue around housing and the impact of insecure housing on young people.

Amanda said she absolutely supports the recommendations in the London Councils/Mime report on upskilling the school workforce. She said she sees integrated partnership being absolutely key.

In conclusion she said that we are in a bad place. But there is lots that we can do with the staff and the resources that we have once we're 'set to SEND' and the fact that we are in a critical place does mean that SEND is a real focus and there are some things already in train that will hopefully mean we start to see children's experience improving.

Jan Shapiro, Headteacher at Addey and Stanhope School stated that the first challenge is defining what inclusion means; and then defining how it is measured – across the system.

She argued Inclusion is not about creating separate 'inclusive' policies but challenging and revisiting existing ones to consider the voice and experience of 'others'. At Addey and Stanhope, inclusion is a process, which has as its goal the point at which every child feels they belong, where they are happy and feel seen and heard.

She said this takes years to build and is not a 'quick fix'. Jan argued there is fantastic work happening in schools, but it is siloed across the system. What could be strong and coherent and growing is currently beleaguered by gaps, confusion, and conflict.

She said the way schools are measured is not inclusive; it is exclusive by design. The focus on numbers (attainment, decontextualised progress) means that if there are many SEND pupils in a resource base or in mainstream that 'results' will be impacted. The current system rewards schools for not being inclusive.

Jan argued the second challenge is the range of diverse needs in a school and how to manage this with far too little resource. She said the system requires a mature, sophisticated, skilled workforce. A staff trained on 'how to teach' children with SEND is crucial, but at Addey and Stanhope they all receive input from educational psychologists and other experts in trauma and attachment and how this may manifest in a classroom and from this, collaborative solutions emerge.

She argued the third and final challenge is what has been in recent years the dominant educational discourse – the one that has as its panacea for all ills in schools - 'managing behaviour'.

She said many schools put their energy into moving those children on that are perceived as 'other' or difficult as this is likely to dent school results. Parents and carers who have children with SEND are very unlikely to want their children to go to schools like this in the first place. She argued that this kind of discriminatory practice may be justified in terms of a school's success.

In summary, she argued the SEND system does not support early intervention well. It favours middle class articulate confident parents. She said SENDCO training is not practical. It is primarily about research methodology and does not teach us how to secure the best outcomes for our children in liaison with LAs. She argued Initial teaching training barely touches SEND, and that we have an assessment system for 16-year-olds where over 30% 'fail', and it is therefore no great surprise that pupils with SEND and those from less advantaged backgrounds continue to be heavily over-represented in this group. We need alternative, viable pathways, so that every young person is experiencing and building upon success.

Peter Fortune MP asked a question on where are we in terms of the crossover preschool into early years. Amanda answered by saying there is an issue that we move from the early years foundation and into the school system and we don't always transfer that knowledge that some children haven't reached expected levels by the time they leave early years, so they're joining school already not at the level of which schools expect to be able to teach them. So then they fail before they even get up.

Danny Beales MP asked about the impact on carers and asked what would good look like from a parent and carer perspective. Ros answered by saying parents need to be listened to more in the system, especially as they understand their child's needs best.

Munira Wilson MP asked if panellists are suggesting we don't need any specialist provision. Panellists all said specialist provision does have an important role. Munira Wilson MP then followed up to ask

Baroness Pidgeon asked about the importance of respite for carers and school holiday clubs. Panellists agreed more was needed in this area.

A member of the audience asked a question about whether training for swimming teachers needs to be improved to support children with SEND. Panellists agreed that it does.

Finally, a member of the audience argued that the school system is very dated and that children go through their whole life labelled and it is a problem. Members and panellists agreed.