

Children's Minister speaks to the National Network of Parent Carer Forums

Good morning and thank you for inviting me here to mark the inspirational work you do. I'm very glad to be speaking to you today as the new Minister for Children and Families.

Throughout the pandemic, parent carer forums went above and beyond. You did everything possible to keep in touch with parent carers, working with local authorities and services to help meet families' needs. You have persevered day in, day out, to support families and improve services so that people can thrive.

I have been impressed by the way many of you have gone above and beyond every day to support children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Your work exemplifies the impact and importance of the forums, to families across the country and to us in government.

In my first 3 months, I have been listening hard to as many varied voices as I can. I have visited mainstream and special schools and providers, met with sector organisations and hosted roundtables. I have also spoken to children and young people, their parents and families – listening, and learning as much as I can.

It'll be no surprise to you that Mrunal [Sisodia, Co-chair] and Tina [Emery, Co-chair] were high up on my list of people to speak to. I know I can trust them to relay the realities of your experiences and to give support and vigorous challenge to me and the department.

Going forward, I pledge to listen carefully to the lived experience of parents, that I will always speak to you straight, and that I will put you and your children first as we forge a new path forward.

Because I have heard how you have suffered disproportionately during this pandemic. How it has intensified existing issues. I have heard, loud and clear, that too few children and young people with SEND maintained access to all their usual support, and particularly therapies, and too many are still waiting to have their full menu of support put back in place.

And while, as a father, I know how important it was to get children back to school, for some it has understandably been really, really difficult.

So why am I talking about forging a new path forward? I am here because I recognise improvements to the SEND system are urgently needed. I am here because we know what will happen if we fail to act.

We need to take action now and in the future.

As just one example of the steps we can take to support children and young people now, earlier this year we offered training to teachers in using assistive technology which can reduce or remove barriers to learning for children with SEND.

Today I'd like to take this opportunity to announce that from January, we will be working with Nasen and MicroLink to launch a pilot which will test how training can increase school staff confidence and capability in using assistive technology.

But of course, we need to do more. And we will.

I am fully alive to the frustration many feel with delays to the SEND review and have committed to seeing it published for public consultation in the first 3 months of 2022.

What I say to you today, and to all parents and families of those with SEND who are not getting the help they need, is that this review is a priority for me. It is a priority for the Education Secretary and Health Secretary. It is a priority for this Government.

Work is moving at pace to finalise proposals. But we would not have got this far without you, the forums. As forums, you've contributed a lot to our understanding and really helped to shape the work of the SEND Review. You – and others – you have told us what we should focus on. You've offered constructive engagement and helpful solutions.

It is clear we need to get mainstream provision right so that needs are identified and met early and effectively across mainstream settings – whether in early years, schools or further education. We must reduce inconsistency of practice and end the postcode lottery.

Alongside this, you can expect the review to have a strong focus on clarifying accountabilities at every level of the system.

There will also always be a place for a strong specialist sector for those whose needs cannot be met by high quality mainstream provision. That is why I was so delighted to see the October spending review provided new investment of £2.6 billion between 2022 and 2025 to deliver new places and improve existing provision for pupils with SEND or who require alternative provision. This funding represents a transformational investment to improve the lives of so many of the nation's most vulnerable children.

Fundamentally, our proposals must lead to improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND and improved confidence in a financially sustainable system. They must realise the benefits of aligned education, health and care provision and prepare children and young people for a happy and rewarding adult life.

That means improved outcomes in attainment, health and wellbeing, employment and independence – every facet of life. I want to see high aspirations across education, health and care at every level. I want to ensure we have the right resource, in the right place, at the right time, always.

And through all of this, the voice of children, young people and their families must remain central.

I know I will need to take some difficult decisions. It is clear that the issues the SEND system faces are extraordinarily difficult. I do not and will not shy away from that fact.

I know we have a duty to get this right, which is why public consultation on our proposals will be critical to shape our future reforms. We will make the consultation as accessible as possible so that we capture the widest range of views – and I hope you will encourage as many parents as possible to take part.

And finally, I want to say thank you.

For the work you have done to be a candid friend of local and national government.

For the leadership and courage you demonstrated throughout the pandemic and the work you are doing to help us improve the SEND system.

For the real difference, over many years, you have made to families.

Thank you.