



All Party Parliamentary Group for Families in the Early Years

Chair: Lucy Powell MP

Vice Chairs: Bishop of Durham and Tim Loughton MP
Secretary: Ian Mearns MP; Treasurer: Earl of Listowel
Secretariat: Coram Family and Childcare

Getting the best start for disabled children

Committee Room 16, Palace of Westminster, 20 May 2019

Megan Jarvie, Head of Coram Family and Childcare, welcomed the guests and speakers, and introduced the topic of how well the early education and development of children with SEND is being supported in the early years, and what improvements are needed to make sure that all disabled children get the best start in life. She passed on apologies from Lucy Powell MP who was unable to attend the meeting due to constituency commitments.

Anne Brook, Director of Family Support Services at Contact opened the meeting by discussing how both the population of disabled children and the challenges for families with disabled children are growing. She shared that there are more than a million disabled children in the UK, 33 per cent more than a decade ago. Contact's recent research reveals that disability costs are rising, while disability support for families is falling, making it harder for families to juggle work and care. More families with disabled children are going without essentials like heating and food, or going into debt to pay for these. Families are increasingly fighting through the courts for services to which they have a right. Contact offer support for families with disabled children to bring them together and help them to take action for themselves and others. Anna argued that getting support early can be the difference between flourishing and floundering for families with disabled children. Contact's *Brighter Beginnings* programme helps families with young children through workshops where parents learn about where to access support, what they are entitled to, and how to feel more confident to make decisions about their children. Parents who attend the workshops go on to access more support services, use more childcare, and receive more financial benefits than those who do not. More services like this could help families with disabled children to get the support they need and are entitled to.

Beatrice Merrick, Chief Executive of Early Education spoke about the role of maintained nursery schools (MNS) in supporting children with a special educational need or disability (SEND). She shared that MNS have higher proportions of children with SEND than other early years settings. Early Education's own research finds that a quarter of MNS offer specialist SEND provision. Beatrice said that staff at all levels tend to have a wide range of specialist qualifications and are often provided with extensive continuing professional development on supporting children with SEND. Children with SEND are often referred by other professionals to MNS because of their known expertise. But MNS are also increasingly

regarded as providers of last resort, with children with SEND being transferred to other providers who cannot meet their needs. Regardless of the availability of funding, MNS tend to prioritise the admission of children with SEND. MNS can support other organisations in the sector by sharing expertise, and often do so for little or no charge, but few local authorities are making use of this opportunity. Early Education's research finds that funding for MNS is not consistent across England, with different local authorities offering funding in different ways. Many MNS find there is not enough funding to support children with SEND, with one in eight settings receiving no specific SEND funding, despite all of these settings caring for children eligible for support. There is concern within the sector that this level of funding is unsustainable. Beatrice concluded that more research is needed to assess the impact of recent policy changes, including funding for providers supporting children with SEND and the impact on childcare take up of the entitlement to 15 and 30 hours free childcare.

Purnima Tanuku, Chief Executive of the National Day Nursery Association (NDNA) shared the perspective of nursery settings in the sector. She said that different parts of the early education and childcare sector should work together on this issue. One key difficulty that nursery settings are facing is getting the right staff – those who are experienced and skilled enough to be able to provide specialist support for children with SEND. The pool of trained staff is shrinking. Purnima said that 11 per cent of children attending private, voluntary and independent settings have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Meanwhile, local authorities who provide support to childcare providers are facing significant challenges themselves. While demand for specialist support among children in the early years is rising, the support that local authorities provide is becoming less consistent, with 26 local authorities in England without a dedicated Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO). Some childcare providers, Purnima said, are having to pay for support from the local authority; problems with administering payments and late payments can mean that settings have to ask parents for support. For many children, this means that by the time these issues are resolved they are already in school.

The meeting was then opened up to discussion from other attendees. Concerns about the workforce were raised, such as that the skills and abilities of staff in the setting are what counts, and worries about the effectiveness of continuing professional development alone. It was discussed that with further calls to extend funded childcare, there is a risk that governments promise to deliver something that they cannot afford. It was also raised that we need a stronger definition of what the skills gap among staff is if the case is to be made that more funding is needed to plug it. Concerns about newly qualified staff were raised, such as that some are missing basic knowledge about child development, prompting providers to have to fund their own training. While local authorities have some freedom about how they spend money to support children with SEND, they lack the funds they need. It was raised that volunteer-run parent and toddler groups can help the sector to provide support for families.