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Dear Colleague

Today the Coalition Government published its Green Paper *Support and aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability*.

You can find all of the detailed information on the Department's website. But in this letter I want to set out the thinking behind our approach and to encourage you to respond to our proposals.

The Green Paper is about the children and young people in this country who are disabled, or identified as having a special educational need. It is about their aspirations and their hopes. Their desire to become, like every child and young person, independent and successful in their chosen future, and, to the greatest extent possible, the author of their own life story.

It is about their families – who have consistently called for better support for their children and themselves. Families of the most disabled children who are providing 24-hour care from birth, or the families of children struggling at school and who don't know where to turn for help.

It is also about their teachers, their college lecturers, and the many skilled staff from the health and social care professions who do their best, day in and day out, to provide the right support and encourage the highest aspirations.

Life chances for the approximately two million children and young people in England who are identified as having a special educational need (SEN), or who are disabled, are disproportionately poor. By the time they leave school these young people are more than twice as likely to be out of education, training or employment as those without a special educational need.

We know that there is much that is excellent in the support for these children, young people and their families. But we also know that this isn't happening nearly enough. Whilst the circumstances of children, young people and their parents differ greatly; from young people requiring a few adjustments in class to children with life-limiting long-term conditions, hundreds of thousands of families with have a disabled child or a child with SEN have many shared concerns. Parents say that the system is bewildering and adversarial and that it does not sufficiently reflect the needs of their child and their family life.

Successive reports, such as the 2006 report of the Education Select Committee and Brian Lamb's report in 2009, have described a system where parents feel they have to battle for the support they need, where they are passed from pillar to post, and where bureaucracy and frustration face them at every step.

Disabled children and children with SEN tell us that they can feel frustrated by a lack of the right help at school or from other services. For children with the most complex support needs, this can significantly affect their quality of life.

Children's support needs can be identified late; families are made to put up with a culture of low expectations about what their child can achieve at school; parents don't have good information about what they can expect and have limited choices about the best schools and care for their child; and families are forced to negotiate each bit of their support separately. According to the Council for Disabled Children, on average a disabled child experiences 32 assessments as they grow up. Resources that could be spent on support and teaching are diverted into bureaucracy.

Proposed reforms

Our proposed reforms respond to the frustrations of children and young people, their families and the professionals who work with them. The vision set out in the Green Paper is informed by the views and expertise of families and national and local organisations working with them.

We want to put in place a radically different system to support better life outcomes for young people; give parents confidence by giving them more control; and transfer power to professionals on the front line and to local communities.

To support better life outcomes for young people from birth to adulthood we will help professionals: identify and meet children's needs early by ensuring that health services and early education and childcare are accessible to all children; work in partnership with parents to give each child support to fulfil their potential; and join up education, health and social care to provide families with a package of support that reflects all of their needs. We propose:

- **a new approach to identifying SEN** in early years settings and schools to challenge a culture of low expectations for children with SEN and give them effective support to succeed. A new single early years setting-based category and school-based category of SEN will build on our fundamental reforms to education which place sharper accountability on schools to make sure that every child fulfils his or her potential; and
- **a new single assessment process and 'Education, Health and Care Plan' by 2014** to replace the statutory SEN assessment and statement, bringing together the support on which children and their families rely across education, health and social care. Services will work together with the family to agree a straightforward plan that reflects the family's ambitions for their child from the early years to adulthood, which is reviewed regularly to reflect their changing needs, and is clear about who is responsible for provision. The new 'Education, Health and Care Plan' will provide the same statutory protection to parents as the statement of SEN and will include a

commitment from all parties to provide their services, with local assessment and plan pathfinders testing the best way to achieve this.

To give parents confidence by giving them more control over the support their family receives, we will introduce more transparency in the provision of services for children and young people who are disabled or who have SEN. Parents will have real choice over their child's education and the opportunity for direct control over support for their family. We propose:

- **local authorities and other services will set out a local offer of all services available** to support children who are disabled or who have SEN and their families. This easy-to-understand information for parents will set out what is normally available in schools to help children with lower-level SEN, as well as the options available to support families who need additional help to care for their child; and
- **the option of a personal budget by 2014** for all families with children with a statement of SEN or a new 'Education, Health and Care Plan', many of whom will have complex support needs. Key workers will be trained to advise families and help them navigate the range of help available across health, education and social care.

To transfer power to professionals on the front line and to local communities we will: strip away unnecessary bureaucracy so that professionals can innovate and use their judgement; establish a clearer system so that professionals from different services and the voluntary and community sector can work together; and give parents and communities much more influence over local services. We propose to:

- **give parents a real choice of school**, either a mainstream or special school. We propose to strengthen parental choice by improving the range and diversity of schools from which parents can choose, making sure they are aware of the options available to them and by changing statutory guidance for local authorities. Parents of children with statements of SEN will be able to express a preference for any state-funded school – including special schools, Academies and Free Schools – and have their preference met unless it would not meet the needs of the child, be incompatible with the efficient education of other children, or be an inefficient use of resources. We will also prevent the unnecessary closure of special schools by giving parents and community groups the power to take them over; and
- **introduce greater independence to the assessment of children's needs**, testing how the voluntary and community sector could coordinate assessment and input from across education, health and social care as part of our proposals to move to a single assessment process and 'Education, Health and Care Plan'.

Our Schools White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* set out our plans for reforming the schools system. We are committed to enabling all schools to acquire greater autonomy and independence. We have expanded the Academy programme and starting with those judged by Ofsted to be outstanding, all maintained special schools will in due course have the opportunity to become Academies. We have also set out

how it will be easier for teachers, charities, parent groups and others to open new Free Schools, including special Free Schools, in response to parental demand.

By injecting greater autonomy into the school system, we aim to create a system that is able to offer a range of high quality specialist provision for children with SEN; to innovate and pioneer new education pathways and curricula; and to offer parents a genuine choice of school for their child and to respond effectively to parents' choices.

International evidence shows that the most important factor in effective school systems is the quality of teachers and teaching. We want to ensure that teachers, lecturers, and school and college leaders have the right training and professional development to identify and meet the needs of disabled children and children with SEN. For those children that face the greatest educational challenges, high quality teachers trained to support pupils with a wide range of SEN will be the most powerful way to drive up attainment. In the Green Paper we set out our approach to improving the initial training and ongoing development of teaching staff and school leaders in special and mainstream schools, sharing excellent teaching practice in supporting pupils who are disabled or who have SEN, and identifying and developing special school leaders.

Central government cannot achieve this ambitious programme of reform through directing and managing change itself. The proposals we set out are for practical testing in local areas. From September 2011, local pathfinders will help demonstrate the best way to achieve our key reforms. We will also be working across government and with our local and national partners to set out detailed plans by the end of the year.

The Green Paper marks an important milestone in the development of our approach to supporting children and young people with SEN or who are disabled and their families.

We now begin a four-month consultation period on our proposals ending on 30 June 2011. We would like to hear your thoughts and reactions to *Support and aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability*.

If you would like to respond please visit the Department's website and let us have your views.



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