

## **Questions & Answers from the sessions:**

### **Session A (Legal, Moral and Ethical environments)**

**Question:** What impact does the lack of funding have on education for children with autism?

**Answer:** The lack of funding is affecting all children in our schools, with the decline in real terms impacting on provision and support. Most schools do not have sufficient funding to cover the full scope of an EHCP and this can mean students are missing out on valuable parts of their plans. This decline in funding also means schools have to cut additional services and support for children, such as support workers or mentors: exactly the sort of staff who work closely with more vulnerable children. Finally schools have to pick up more work because local authorities are having dramatic cuts to their services. Schools cannot ignore the children who come to them each day and are therefore compelled to support. Funding and support is stretched thin. It also means that children with autism without an EHCP may get very little support or opportunity for additional access to the curriculum/provision.

**Question:** Do you think that special schools have sufficient specialist training for staff?

**Answer:** Special schools often have to address a wide range of pupil needs and therefore it will be the case that they will struggle to have sufficient specialist training for all staff. This is not a problem confined to special schools – investment in training/development of professionals is still too poor across education. This is not because of a lack of will, but simply one of resource. Schools are under-funded and cannot afford to give over the required time for professional development of staff. On-going training within both special and mainstream schools should comprise at least 10% of the working week; yet this is rarely reached. The additional problem with regard to autism is that our understanding is advancing rapidly and therefore accessing expertise anyway is challenging.

### **Session B (Social environments)**

**Question:** Is there too much focus on the difficulties and problems of autism?

**Answer:** The strengths and potential of children with autism are extremely important to recognise and celebrate. However, the difficulties and barriers facing children with autism in all types of educational settings require careful and thorough attention, including recognition of the everyday, sometimes small scale challenges that build up and make education exhausting. Many of these barriers can be removed relatively easily through greater understanding of autism.

**Question:** Should we use the term 'disability' in relation to autism?

**Answer:** Support services such as that at Cambridge University use the term 'disability' to place the challenges facing individuals with autism in the context of the environment - this is the social model of disability as opposed to the medical model, which suggests that the 'problem' of disability resides with the disabled person rather than with society. It is the environment that is disabling to an individual and therefore the environment, not the individual that needs to change.

**Question:** Are terms such as 'high-functioning' useful or appropriate?

**Answer:** The language used to describe and discuss autism is the subject of considerable debate and varies between contexts. Research into terminology shows different preferences in different settings and has certainly changed over time. Care must be taken to avoid implying certainty where none exists and to respect the preferences of individuals. Language referring to levels of function can be inappropriate where the ability to function varies widely between situations for the same individual so one suggestion is to talk about visible and non-visible autism, allowing for consideration of the context and the recognition that difficulties can exist and be managed at huge effort to the individual without being visible. Delegates considered the use of 'high' or 'low functioning' as not helpful on the whole, because it may mean different things to different people. The terms 'neurodiverse' and 'neurotypical' were felt to be more useful.

**Question:** Is the environment the most important influence on the ability of the individual with autism to communicate?

**Answer:** We know that certain environments and situations can make it almost impossible for some people with autism to communicate, so removing sources of stress and barriers within the environment is a good place to start.

### **Session C (Learning Environments)**

**Question:** Do you think that in the future executive functioning will be considered and assessed when a child starts school?

**Answer:** I would hope that this would happen as it would make a real difference to all children. When we are young our brains are very plastic and grow with our experiences. At age 5 to 7 years the elements of the executive functioning divide and assessments would let us find out which part of executive functioning there may be a concern about.

**Question:** My 10 year old son has autism; can you suggest any strategies that we could use regarding Maths?

**Answer:** My suggestion would be don't think about how to solve the Maths problem at the start. First look at what type of problem it is and work that out before then moving onto how to solve the maths problem. At home you can use puzzles and board games and these have

been shown to help the executive functioning of the brain. Also there are online 'working memory' resources that can help.

**Question:** You have said that the brain starts to develop differently at age 5 to 7, but your research is for neurotypical children. Is this the same in autism and do we know the ages that it happens in these children? Also the link to social competence, if we intervene earlier and help with social confidence can this have a positive impact on their brain's executive functioning?

**Answer:** Currently we do not know if this is the same for children with autism. For all children the earlier we can pick things up the better in every area.

**Question:** Why is The Cavendish School taking children from the age of 9? What about the younger ones? It seems that the system only kicks in when a system has already failed.

**Answer:** The age range of The Cavendish School has been extended to start from age 7 (Year 3).

## **Questions from the Post-it Board:**

**Question:** How much input did you have from people with autism in the design of the school buildings and the curriculum?

**Answer:**

The original plans for the curriculum were developed with input from adults and children with autism. These have been adapted over the past two years as our understanding of the condition and likely pupil cohort has increased. Along this have been our visits to other specialist schools providing for children with autism. We have been able to see first-hand and to talk to pupils there about their provision and compare it to what we intended to offer in TCS. We very much intend to do further work with local children with ASC on our curriculum.

The (draft) design of the school has been compared to those new builds created in Hounslow (at The Rise School) and in Norwich (at The Wherry School). Our discussions with staff and students there have influenced our current plans. Once the architects and contractors have been appointed we intend to engage with them and will ensure people with autism are part of the development.