Lamb Inquiry
Special educational needs and parental confidence

Rt Hon Ed Balls MP
Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
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December 8th 2008

Dear Ed,

At our meeting last week, I undertook to provide you with an update on the progress of the Lamb Inquiry. I also want to recommend action based on some of the very early findings from the Inquiry.

The first phase of the Inquiry has been focused on setting up the projects and the Advisers and the Reference Groups. I have excellent advice from the Expert Advisers Group and they have agreed that I should alert you to my early findings. Through the Reference Group I have access to groups of parents, teachers and others. All this is helping me to shape the issues on which we will hold a wider consultation early in 2009.

The main source of evidence to the Lamb Inquiry will be the projects which will report in August 2009. It is too early to say anything on the back of the projects yet. However, some serious concerns have emerged from the meetings we have had, the research we have gathered, departmental data and, in particular, meetings with parents. My meetings with parents suggest that many of them do have confidence in the system, particularly where they feel they have a good SENCO, but too many feel the system is not on their side and say they have to ‘fight’ or ‘do battle’ with the system to get what they need for their child.

Given what I have heard, my immediate concerns are:

- lack of compliance by schools and local authorities with their duties in relation to children with SEN and in relation to disability requirements;
- significant gaps in information for parents;
- a lack of focus on outcomes for children with SEN and disabled children; and
- a failure to consider SEN and disability issues in some mainstream policies and programmes.

In relation to each of these, I believe there is action that should be taken now:

Compliance and information

There needs to be a much tighter focus on compliance with legal duties. This should be checked more systematically at a school and local authority level, in particular for the aspects of the requirements that create the greatest difficulties for parents.

A major concern for parents is the lack of transparency and lack of information about school and local authority SEN policies. Much of the information is required by statute. Many parents do not even know that schools and local authorities are also required to publish a disability equality scheme. The lack of information, or the difficulty that parents have in getting hold of information even where it is available, is having a significant and detrimental impact on parental confidence. I propose that there should be a review of the information that is required of schools and local authorities to ensure that the requirements meet the needs of parents, encourage greater transparency in the system and focus on outcomes for children with SEN and disabled children. This review should inform the implementation of the SEN Information Act 2008.

Focus on outcomes

In our discussions, parents have been very willing to talk about what would really make the difference for their child and what their longer-term aspirations are for their child. What has struck us quite forcibly is that it seems that no one has had a discussion with parents about the outcomes they aspire to for their child. In addition I have my own concerns, based on the Department's research, that schools do not encourage parents of children with SEN to have high expectations. There needs to be a much clearer focus on both attainment and wider outcomes for disabled children and children with SEN at every level of the system: at school, local authority and national level; for children at School Action, School Action Plus and for children with a statement; in school and in the extended day. I think you could build on the Department's Making Good Progress pilots to explore both attainment and wider outcomes for children with SEN. Parents and children themselves should be central to this work. I believe action should be taken on this now.

Embed SEN and disability

Improvements for disabled children and children with SEN hinge crucially on improvements in the way that other policy areas take on board their needs. This requires the embedding of SEN and disability in mainstream policies and programmes. I would ask you to ensure that SEN and disability are taken into account across a range of policy areas. I want to welcome the way this has been achieved in teacher training and the major investment in this area. We will be watching the evaluation of the materials with interest. Parents, teachers and others have highlighted the importance of school leadership in developing an ethos in which disabled children and children with SEN can thrive. As an immediate priority, I would ask you to make SEN and disability considerations a key part of preparation for school leadership.

I have mapped out some key areas where I believe action should be taken sooner rather than later. The information that we have gathered to date is only partial. We have more evidence emerging on:

- the allocation of significant amounts of time from the least qualified staff and difficulty in accessing relevant expertise;
- the bullying and social exclusion of disabled children and children with SEN; and
- the growth in numbers of pupils identified as having SEN, in particular the growth in numbers at School Action.

We will gather further information on these issues from the networks and from research. We will explore, with the Expert Advisers Group and with the Reference Group, potential solutions to problems we identify. We will conduct a full consultation early in 2009 and gather the information from the evaluation of the projects next summer. I have already met with Jim Rose and I am keen to draw on what his review of dyslexia can tell us, in particular the responses to his call for evidence. Early discussions suggest that his findings, that some parents of children with dyslexia have to struggle to secure appropriate provision, chime with what is emerging from my Inquiry. I will ensure that we continue to make links with other work being carried out.

While more evidence needs to be explored, I believe that action in the areas I have outlined is a matter of principle and should be taken regardless of any subsequent findings from the Inquiry on the need for wider changes to the framework itself.

There is much more work to be done.

With best wishes,

Yours,

Brian Lamb

Brian Lamb OBE