

Speaker and Chair Biographies



Amanda Allard, Director, Council for Disabled Children; and Strategic Director of Practice and Programmes, National Children's Bureau

As Director of the [Council for Disabled Children](#), Amanda is determined to work towards a fully inclusive society where all disabled children and young people can achieve their aspirations and do not feel excluded. Amanda has worked in children's policy both as a researcher and campaigner for the last 30 years; first for The Children's Society and NCH (now Action for Children) and latterly as Head of Policy and Communications for Treehouse, the autism education charity. During that time, she covered a diverse range of areas including youth unemployment, leaving care, homelessness, family support and issues facing disabled children and their families. Amanda is passionate about participation and whilst at NCH developed a charity award-winning youth arts participation project. Amanda joined the Council for Disabled Children in 2009, her areas of responsibility included health, mental health and participation. During her time at CDC, Amanda has significantly increased the organisations engagement with health bodies and research organisations and was one of the key researchers in a joint NIHR funded project with Exeter University which researched parent/carer and children and young people's priorities in terms of health outcomes. Amanda ensures that policymakers understand the reality of frontline service delivery; that the sector is aware of and engaged with forthcoming change; and that providers are prepared for the implementation of new regulations and requirements. She is proud to have supported Rochdale with their recent work on SEND improvement which has led to them receiving both a Children and Young People Now and a Municipal Journal Award. Amanda has researched and written extensively on issues affecting disadvantaged groups of young people. Amanda was part of the leadership team that delivered the phase 1 and phase 2 report for the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel on safeguarding children and young people with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings.



Councillor Zena Brabazon, Cabinet Member, Children, Schools and Families, Haringey Council

Zena is currently Councillor for Harringey Ward and Cabinet member for Children, Schools, and Families. She has been a Councillor for almost seven years, serving on many different committees and in many different roles. Prior to that she had a long and varied career in public services, which has given her a clear and comprehensive understanding of social and public policy. After university and qualifying as a teacher, Zena spent seven years as a community organiser in inner city Boston, Massachusetts, where she established and supported a local neighbourhood board advocating for children's services. This amazing experience set the course for her future career, which has always been underpinned by a commitment to community engagement and participation. On returning to the UK in the 1980s, she established a voluntary agency in Camden for children and families with learning difficulties, which promoted social and educational inclusion. To her great pride this is still thriving over 30 years on! She then spent 20 years working in Haringey where she developed Haringey's play and early years services, gaining national recognition for the services provided. She led Haringey's Sure Start programme, serving on the Friends of Sure Start committee hosted by HM Treasury. Working in regeneration, she also led on securing Haringey's £50m New Deal for Communities - a 10 year community development programme focused on Seven Sisters. After working in neighbourhood management, she moved to Islington where she supported the children's centre programme. Zena has also worked to support Roma communities in eastern and central Europe to develop early years services, enabling Roma children to access mainstream education.



Ben Bryant, Director, Isos Partnership

Ben Bryant is a Director of Isos Partnership. Ben specialises in developing approaches to support young people with additional needs. He has undertaken high-profile national research on inclusion, additional needs and SEND for organisations such as DfE and the Local Government Association, and worked with numerous local areas to strengthen aspects of their work around inclusion and SEND. As part of "What Works in SEND", Ben leads on developing case studies of effective practice in local areas. Ben is currently co-leading research on a future approach to inclusion and SEND for the Local Government Association and the County Councils Network.



Oliver Cheney, Director, Colleges, Ruskin Mill Trust

Oliver is Director of Colleges for Ruskin Mill Trust and a member of the Executive Team. Oliver has 25 years' experience working with young people with Autism, ADHD, learning disabilities and mental health issues. Oliver joined Ruskin Mill Trust as a Support Worker in 2001, progressing to Principal, Executive Principal and Regional Director for Midlands. Oliver brings a wealth of knowledge and experience regarding the work of the Trust; in particular his in-depth understanding of the needs of the individuals the Trust works with. Oliver has worked internationally, has lots of experience working with regulators, and manages the most complex organisational challenges and interventions.



Kelly Dillon, Senior Manager, Progression, Transition and Removal of Barriers, The Careers & Enterprise Company

Kelly leads on The Careers and Enterprise Companies work to remove barriers for young people and support work on progression and transition and works closely with the network of Careers Hubs across the country who support the education institutions in their area. As a qualified Teacher and experienced in working with young people 11-19 in a variety of settings, Kelly is passionate about ensuring all young people have access to the support they need to make their best next step when approaching key transition points. Kelly is also a Governor at 2 Alternative Provisions in the North East.



Amy Hallam, Functional Skills and Additional Learning Support Manager, ELA Training

Amy has been teaching in Further Education for 22 years and oversees Functional Skills and Additional Learning Support for ELA Training. Amy developed ELA's successful bid to join the DfE Maths & English pilot, and pioneering the screening and assessment process to qualify and engage learners onto the pilot. Amy has a great passion for supporting learners with a learning difference, ensuring they have adjustments in place to support achievement. She holds a Certificate in Education, L5 Teaching English Certificate, L7 SpLD (Dyslexia) Certificate and has recently completed her L7 CPT3A qualification to assess learners for reasonable adjustments.



Annamarie Hassall, Chief Executive, Nasen

Annamarie Hassall is Chief Executive of Nasen - the national association for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) the leading membership charity that exists to champion, connect and support those working in the education community - from the early years to schools, post-16, specialist schools and wider settings, with and for children and young people with SEND and learning differences. Annamarie has held local, national and government advisory roles that span the breadth of education, children's social care, early years and SEND. Currently the Chair of the Whole School SEND Consortium and the National SEND Reference Group, regularly invited to join advisory panels. Awarded an MBE in 2011. Annamarie has Non-Executive Director roles as a Trustee at a Multi-Academy Trust and of a UK based charity with interest in pathways to education, training and employment for young people and adults.



Clare Howard, Chief Executive, Natspec

With 25 years of experience in the public, private and voluntary sectors, Clare became chief executive of Natspec in January 2016. Clare worked at the Association of Colleges for six years and her career has included posts in local authorities, funding agencies, schools and colleges. As a consultant in the 2000s, Clare worked on more than 200 projects and took interim posts across the education, sport and health sectors, developing a passion for further education and a particular interest in services and education for people with learning difficulties and disabilities. She has worked with special schools, specialist colleges and national disability organisations and her expertise includes organisational development, funding bids, training, change management and governance projects. She was awarded an OBE in 2023. Some links to view: [Vision for SEND in FE](#); [Policy Priorities](#); [Manifesto](#)



Sarah Johnson, President, PRUsAP; and Director, Phoenix Education Consultancy

Sarah Johnson has worked in education for the last twenty years. As a qualified teacher, Sarah has enjoyed roles in mainstream schools, Pupil Referral Units, Alternative Provision and psychiatric in-patient services. Sarah is the author of the book 'Behaving Together: A Teacher's Guide to Nurturing Behaviour'. Sarah's most recent contribution to supporting schools are her books "All about SEMH" which are practical guides for primary and secondary school teachers to support children. As a member for the Department of Education's Alternative Provision stakeholder group, she has supported development of policy such as the recent SEND and AP green paper as well as chairing a range of panels and events within the education sector.



Rebecca Jones, Director, Inclusion, GLF Schools, Surrey; and Deputy Regional SEND Lead, Whole School SEND

Becky Jones is a Regional SEN Leader with Whole School SEND (WSS), covering the South Central England and North West London region. WSS are contracted to share delivery of the 'Universal SEND Services' funded by the Department for Education. The contract aims are to improve the quality of teaching to children and young people with SEND, particularly in mainstream settings, and to ensure that needs are identified and met earlier and more effectively, and that preparation for adulthood is delivered from the earliest stages, to support effective transitions, including into employment. The programme has a strong emphasis on high-quality professional development. Becky's substantive role is Director for SEND, Inclusion and Vulnerable Groups in a large MAT of over 40 primary and secondary schools. Becky is an SLE and was previously Headteacher of a special school for children with autism in North London. She is a qualified SENCO with practical experience in both the primary and secondary phases. Becky is passionate about facilitating exchanges of good practice between schools and local authorities. She enjoys designing and implementing SEND-specialist CPD programmes and loves the creativity and challenge of transdisciplinary work. Becky's is dedicated to improving education for all through excellent professional development for all.



Ali Khan, Managing Director, ELA Training

Ali is the Founding Director of ELA Training, a national Apprenticeship provider specialising in sectors such as Early Years, Residential Childcare and Adult Social Care. ELA employs more than 60 learning practitioners and delivers to approximately 1500 Apprentices. Ali has been developing and leading Adult Education provision in socially and economically disadvantaged communities, and employment sectors where learners have significant barriers to learning since 1999 when he opened a computer based training and English language centre in one of the most deprived wards of Manchester to serve the long term unemployed, refugees and asylum seekers.



Catherine McLeod, Chief Executive, Dingley's Promise

Catherine has been a charity leader for over 25 years, and is passionate about equity and inclusion for children and young people with disabilities. She became the Chief Executive of Dingley's Promise in 2015, and has grown the organisation from a small local charity to a national one that delivers training and influences policy alongside its core local support services. She was awarded an MBE in 2011 for her work in Sri Lanka, and today is a mentor for ACEVO, a national speaker, and an advisor to a range of governmental and non-governmental bodies on early years SEND inclusion.



Matt Pennington, Strategic Development Leader, Diverse Academies Trust

Matthew Pennington is the Strategic Development Lead for Personal Development at The Diverse Academies Trust. He has over 20 years of experience in education as a teacher, senior leader and principal since gaining QTS in August 2000. Almost exclusively serving communities with high levels of deprivation, Matthew has long-standing strategic beliefs that have been honed to modern societal and educational context. His belief that Personal Development is the binding ingredient in all School Improvement strategies is now realised in the Diverse Academies Personal Development Strategic Objectives seeking to sustain or improve: Sense of belonging; Sense of purpose and self-worth; Culture of kindness; Culture of school based parenting and care; Culture of accountability.



Lisa Pigg, SENDCo, Sir Alexander Fleming Primary School, Shropshire

Lisa is Assistant Headteacher and SENCO at Sir Alexander Fleming Primary School in Telford. In October 2023, Lisa and her school were recognised by NASEN for winning the 'Primary Provision of the Year' award. Lisa has been a teacher for 18 years and has worked in various educational settings, including alternative provisions, small and large primary schools. For the past 6 years, she has been a SENCO. In her current school, Lisa has established provisions that meet the ever-changing needs of students in a mainstream setting. Her teaching practice has always focused on Quality First Teaching to ensure all learners have access to a broad, balanced, and meaningful curriculum. Additionally, Lisa also holds various roles in the school, including Inclusion Team Leader (SENDCO), Deputy Designated Safeguarding Lead, EAL Lead, and Designated Looked after Children's Teacher.



Andrew Poole, Assistant Head, Everton Free School, Liverpool

Andrew is currently the Assistant Head and SENDCo of Everton Free School and Football College (EFS) with responsibility for the quality of education and attainment. In April 2024 it was judged by Ofsted as being outstanding in all areas stating- "Pupils, and students in the sixth form, attend an exceptional school. The school provides an inspirational offer that enables pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), to excel. EFS is an Alternative Provision located in one of the most deprived areas of the country for pupils either at risk of exclusion or who have been excluded. Most of the students have SEN with 20% having an EHCP. At the 2023 NASEN awards Andrew received The Leader of the Year award. Since 2021 Andrew has also been the project co-ordinator of the Everton Free School Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforce having been successful in securing EFS as one of the PRU's chosen to be part of the Government's multi-million pound AP Task Force. Andrew was a science teacher/Head of Science who qualified in 2007 after previously having a successful legal career.



Leigh Powell, National Officer, UNISON

Leigh trained as a schoolteacher and worked in comprehensive schools in South and East London for over 20 years. After a 2-year spell working in strategic education roles for the Local Authority, with a remit in SEND and in children's social services, Leigh joined UNISON as a National Officer. She has held this position for over 6 years, negotiating terms and conditions for school and college support staff, including those who support learners with SEND. Her remit includes conducting and commissioning research around learners' behaviour and staff mental health in education as part of UNISON national policy development.



John Roberts, Deputy News Editor, TES

John Roberts is a journalist with more than a decade of experience covering the education sector. He is currently the deputy news editor of Tes, having previously been its North of England reporter. His work for Tes has involved reporting and providing analysis of education policy, academies, school structures, Ofsted and special educational needs. Before joining Tes he was education correspondent for the Yorkshire Post from 2007 to 2016. He has also worked as a communications officer specialising in education for Bradford Council.



Sharon Smith, Co-Director, Special Needs Jungle; and PhD Researcher, University of Birmingham

Sharon Smith is co-Director and a regular contributor for Special Needs Jungle, a parent-led website providing information about SEN, children's health and disability. Sharon has a 19-year-old daughter who has Down syndrome. She has just submitted her PhD thesis at the University of Birmingham, relating to her research undertaken with parents of disabled children exploring educational inclusion and exclusion. She has 18 years' experience of working and volunteering in SEND related roles, including being Chair of her local Parent Carer Forum in the lead up to the 2014 SEND reforms and working as an Education Advisor for the Down's Syndrome Association.



Katy Tomlinson, Headteacher, Sir Alexander Fleming Primary School, Shropshire

Katy Tomlinson, a dedicated educator since 2001, leads as the headteacher at Sir Alexander Fleming Primary. With a Bachelor of Education degree in primary teaching, she fosters excellence in learning. Outside the classroom, Katy finds joy in walking her dogs - Bella, Honey, and Jay - and cheering at football and rugby matches. Her passion for travel enriches her life, complementing cherished moments with her daughter, Esmé. Under Katy's guidance, Sir Alexander Fleming Primary achieved remarkable recognition, winning the NASEN Primary SEN Provision of the Year and the RHS Primary Garden of the Year awards, exemplifying her commitment to holistic education.



Matthew Walker, Senior Research Manager, National Foundation for Educational Research

Matt is a Senior Research Manager at NFER, and has over 20 years' experience of leading qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research and evaluation projects in education. Matt has an extensive track record in research related to teacher professional development, school improvement, EdTech and STEM. Matt is the co-author of the report: [The MAT Factor: Exploring how multi-academy trusts are supporting pupils with SEND.](#)