

Event Summary: Technology for SEND Education

- Event held** 12th June 2018, Palace of Westminster
- Chair** Lord Low of Dalston CBE (Crossbench)
- Speakers** Angela Rayner MP (Shadow Secretary of State for Education)
Sharon Hodgson MP (Labour)
Rt Hon. the Lord Blunkett (Labour)
Dr Abi James (British Dyslexia Association)
Patrick McGrath (British Assistive Technology Association)
Prof. Sonia Blandford (Achievement for All)
Lord Addington (Liberal Democrat)

Background

About the APPGAT

The APPGAT is an all-party parliamentary group (APPG) made up of MPs and Peers who are interested in the opportunities presented by assistive technology. The group is designed to facilitate discussion between the sector and parliament and make meaningful policy interventions in debates that are relevant to assistive technology (AT). Our mission is to promote policy that takes advantage of technology to make society more inclusive for all. Policy Connect provides the secretariat services for the APPGAT.

About Policy Connect

Policy Connect is the collaborative cross-party think tank, successfully delivering new policy ideas through research, evidence, political meetings and sector engagement. With no set ideology, we recommend the best approach from facts and data, and help influence policy decisions and law-making. We find the common ground and build consensus to improve public policy.

Speakers' details

Lord Low CBE

- Crossbench Peer
- Vice-president, and former chairperson, of the RNIB.

Angela Rayner MP

- Labour member for Ashton-under-Lyne.
- Shadow Secretary of State for Education.

The Rt Hon. the Lord Blunkett

- Labour Peer
- Formerly Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

Patrick McGrath

- EdTech Specialist.
- Representing the British Assistive Technology Association (BATA).
- BATA members are suppliers, AT professionals and organisations who provide support to individuals with disabilities who need Assistive Technology solutions.

Dr Abi James

- Chair of the New Technologies Committee of the British Dyslexia Association.
- Research fellow with the Accessibility Team in Web and Internet Science Group at the University of Southampton.

Sharon Hodgson MP

- Labour member for Washington and Sunderland West.
- Chair of the APPG for Dyslexia and other Specific Learning Difficulties

Prof. Sonia Blandford

- CEO of Achievement for All
- Achievement for All is a not-for-profit organisation that works with schools to improve outcomes for children and young people who are vulnerable to under-achievement.

Lord Addington

- Liberal Democrat Peer
- President of the British Dyslexia Association
- Chair of Microlink, a leading assistive technology provider

Summary



This summary of proceedings is based on a transcript generously provided by Notetalker with their Note Taking Express service.

Lord Low

The event began with Lord Low's opening remarks as chair. He welcomed the panel and attendees and noted that "Many of us in this room have seen first-hand the huge impact that assistive technology can have on children's lives and their education."

Setting the scene for the discussion, Lord Low then said that

the technology has developed tremendously over the past few years. [It] can do more, it's easy to use, and in many cases, it looks familiar to children and doesn't stand out. But this technological progress hasn't always be matched by the level of impact in schools that we want to see. So that's what we are going to talk about this afternoon, how can we get the policy right so that children in schools have access to the right technology with the right support?

Angela Rayner MP

The keynote speaker, Angela Rayner MP began the evening with a passionate address on the topic. speaking about her 10-year-old son Charlie who has a visual impairment she said:

Charlie amazes us every single day... He has completely exceeded every expectation that was given to him. I say that story because I think often ... [with] children with special educational needs ... [schools] look at the disadvantage. And they are looking at the child as if the child is a problem child to their school. I remember going around a school ... [and] they were looking at the difficulties rather than the absolute inspiration that children like Charlie are.

Ms Rayner then explained the importance of assistive technology within SEND support that does focus on children and young people's abilities:

we have to get in a position where every child is given that opportunity to use assistive technology. It is crucially important and giving people that independence and the ability to actually see their worth in life and to celebrate their successes and their achievements.

To realize this vision, the Shadow Secretary of State pointed to a number of ways forward. First, she pointed out that the majority of children with SEND are in mainstream schools and so those schools, in particular, need more support to use assistive technology. Furthermore, there needs to be stronger links between education and health services, from early years on. And we must ensure that Education Health and Care plans, which often include assistive technology, truly reflect children's needs as opposed to the

budgetary constraints of the school or local authority. There is, Ms Rayner told the room, “a lot of work to do to ensure that not only do we say warm words about inclusion but also make sure that the investment and the money is there”. And, turning to her party in particular, the Labour front bencher committed to ensuring that Labour’s proposed National Education Service is “a truly inclusive system”. Ms Rayner concluded by drawing attention to the importance of raising awareness around assistive technology and recognizing its value.

It's so important for everybody, including people that don't have special educational needs, to understand and celebrate and break those barriers, and assistive technology will help that. I don't even think it costs that much: it cost more not to do that.

Sharon Hodgson MP

The next speaker was Sharon Hodgson MP, who is Shadow Minister for Public Health and chairs the APPG on Dyslexia. Ms Hodgson reflected on her and her colleague’s work on the 2014 Children and Families Act during the development of the legislation. She recalled the struggles of trying to improve the SEND reforms in the act. Then turning directly to the topic of assistive technology, Ms Hodgson explained that like her colleague Angela Rayner she has a child with SEND and this has given her direct insight into a key barrier to schools adopting assistive technology:

Without a considered plan for how assistive technology is procured in the education system, the technology can so easily be forgotten... As we know, schools don't know what they don't know: if they haven't got access to an expert, they don't know what technology could be out there.

...parents of children with SEND [have] got to become an expert... you're having to take [the school] on a journey with you. But if schools aren't equipped with the right tools and guidance and staffs training, it's all too easy for them to fall back on making short term adjustments for the child that in many cases, reinforce a feeling of what they can't do instead of what they can do, which would then help them build confidence and reach their potential.

What's more, Ms Hodgson stressed, when assistive technology is recognised as promoting independence and achievement it can be properly seen as an investment rather than a cost.

Continuing on the topic of procurement, Ms Hodson welcomed the Department for Education's recent formation of an EdTech team and expressed hope that it might take on some of the work previously undertaken by BECTA, a quango that advised schools and local authorities on procurement before it closed in 2011. Ms Hodson also seconded her colleague Angela Rayner’s commitment to address assistive technology as part of Labour’s proposed National Education Service. Finally, while noting that there are many examples of good practice in the use of assistive technology, she called on “every party” to “think [about] how their plans for education are going to elevate this good practice to be the norm and not the exception”.

Lord Blunkett

The chair then welcomed Lord Blunkett, whose talk began by developing Sharon Hodgson's points about the need for an effective model of procurement. To illustrate this, Lord Blunkett recalled an early video on industrial psychology:

This guy comes on and he says... "I want to play a piano". "What is the first thing I have to do before I want to play a piano? Get a piano." So the first thing we need to do is know what the technology is. Secondly, we have to lay our hands on it.

Another concern of Lord Blunkett's talk was integration. Not only can children with SEND benefit from using assistive technology but their peers can as well, and children can learn from supporting one another. This support network can be created if we "have people train to use [assistive technology] effectively and in turn to train young people ... to be able to use it".

Lastly, Lord Blunkett warned that investment in assistive technology has not always been effectively directed. If the support for schools and learners isn't put in place, the technology won't have the impact we know it can make. And investment in assistive technology must be made with an awareness of the fast-moving nature of technology: "When it becomes obsolescent, how could we update it easily and more cheaply?" Concluding on a positive note, Lord Blunkett told the room, "If we can do all those things now, then we can transform the lives of young people that everybody in this room cares about."

Dr. Abi James

Dr Abi James, who is chair of the British Dyslexia Association's New Technology Committee, gave a talk that began by reminding the room of how quickly society at large has adopted new technologies, even as the classroom has been slow to do so. Dr James explained that when teachers aren't supported to use the technology and overcome technical glitches, technology is often ineffective and then it is dismissed as inherently so. This lack of training also means that teachers may not know how to make digital resources, such as worksheets, in an accessible way. Continuing on the theme of training, Dr James, explained that much of the expertise in assistive technology is found within the technology companies themselves. Many companies provide training as part of a package of support that comes with procurement of their product, but, Dr James argued, we need to "systematically disperse that knowledge throughout the education system". Another key topic for Dr James' talk was the use of assistive technology in exams. For the technology to be fully integrated into teaching, it must be part of assessment as well. There is an accepted principle that children can use assistive technology in exams if the technology is part of their normal way of working. But in some cases, technical barriers or exam rules do prevent children from using assistive technology to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding.

Finally, Dr James drew attention to the key role of school leadership: "ultimately it comes down to policies within the schools if there is no senior leadership driving the use of assistive technology and considering the wider benefit or return on investment" teachers will not be able to embed it within learning. What's more, "we can't just rely on the SEND team, it needs to involve the whole school, everybody involved in education; the IT professional, the teaching assistants, the librarian, the senior managers and governors". Pupils, too, need to be involved, and their preferences should be taken into account: "They don't want to use it if they don't want it, just like anybody else.". But if we get it right, Dr James stressed, children and young people

can be wonderful digital champions. And we've seen projects where we've trained pupils up and then they have trained their teachers and trained the staff, and that can be so empowering to them and give them so much confidence.

Prof. Sonia Blandford

The panel's next speaker, Prof. Sonia Blandford addressed the importance of gathering data on the impact of assistive technology. Prof. Blandford is CEO of Achievement for All, a not-for-profit organisation that works with schools to improve outcomes for children and young people who are vulnerable to under-achievement. Her talk detailed the work of Achievement for All to test a framework for using assistive technology in schools. In a point that picked up Dr James's remarks on leadership, Prof Blandford explained that the framework involves working with a school's leadership and roles right across the school, to embed the use of assistive technology for the whole school, to benefit all students. Prof. Blandford then explained how assistive technology fits within the broader Achievement for All framework, a framework that emphasises Aspiration ('I can'), Access ('I do'), Attainment ('I have') and Achievement, ('I am'): access to assistive technology is vital and embedding it in schools enables the attainment and achievement.

Achievement for All has tested the framework for the use of AT, in two schools in Birmingham, but the organisation is now looking to carry out a much larger pilot. This will collect data to determine whether the framework can be scaled up and used across all settings: special schools, mainstream, and pupil referral units. As Prof. Blandford highlighted, it is only by demonstrating the impact of assistive technology on students' outcomes that we are able to make the case for the use of these tools. And, moreover, any proposed framework or model for introducing assistive technology into schools must demonstrate its ability to scale, so that isolated good practice can be translated into improvement for the whole education system.

Patrick McGrath

The event's penultimate speaker was Patrick McGrath, who spoke on behalf of the British Assistive Technology Association (BATA). The association has members among suppliers, needs assessors and others within the sector, and aims to promote assistive technology on behalf of all those who use or work with it. Mr McGrath, himself an EdTech Specialist, argued that the major causes of the procurement challenge, that other speakers identified, lies with the devolution of procurement to individual schools. In England especially, local educational authorities have pulled back from procurement and "we are left with a vacuum" in which schools are expected to make decisions with little or no guidance. This affects all three of, schools, suppliers and pupils themselves: schools risk making "uninformed decisions" or failing to invest in technology at all, while suppliers are unable to reach every school one-by-one, and pupils lose out on the opportunity to learn using assistive technology.

Yet, Mr McGrath explained, there are more centralised and effective procurement practices in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland that can serve as a model for England. Mr McGrath then made recommendations for addressing the procurement issues in England. First, any new procurement advisory service, on the model of BECTA, must not lock out smaller developers and start-ups, as, he argued, BECTA

had tended to do in the past. More broadly, the speaker from BATA proposed a new 'procurement framework' comprising three elements:

Number 1, centralised or regionalised procurement. Number 2, a dedicated advisory service supporting effective provision from both an assistive technology and special needs / teaching and learning perspective. And last but not the least, a practical mechanism to achieve deployment at scale to reduce expenditure, increase value and create pupil outcomes.

As Mr McGrath, said, such a framework would enjoy broad support within the AT sector and would set us on the path to achieving the true potential of assistive technology in education.

Lord Addington

The series of panel talks was concluded with an inspiring call to action from Lord Addington, one of the group's new parliamentary members. Lord Addington drew the room's attention to the central issue of the benefits of Assistive technology for children and young people: it can help them study and learn independently and in step with their peers. Yet, Lord Addington also pointed to some of the ways in which procurement of assistive technology can be mismanaged. The assistive technology company Microlink, whose board Lord Addington chairs, found that technology is often left unused when schools have too many different products thrown at them and it's not made clear how they all fit together. Procurement, in other words, isn't a single event where schools get all the technology they will ever need. Rather, Lord Addington explained, the best results are found when we "introduce a few tools to a teacher, train them properly, train them on how it should be used". Another issue is compatibility, making sure technology is procured with an understanding of the existing IT infrastructure in the school. Concluding his remarks, Lord Addington said:

I hope that ... my parliamentary colleagues... take that message and get it into government. You've got to make sure that [assistive technology] is an integral part of what you are doing. It's not something that's done as a bolt-on. 20% of the school population has special educational needs; many people believe it is higher. How many of them would not have a problem if they get the right supportive tech early on? We are within touching distance of a solution to many of the problems in education, through assistive technology – if we use it correctly and if we make sure that everybody knows what it can do.

Discussion

The chair, Lord Low opened the discussion out to the whole room. Attendees from a wide range of organizations including schools, charities, technology companies, and from the Ofqual and the Department for Education, made contributions on each of the core themes of the event: procurement, supporting schools to use the technology, and exams and assessment.

The first discussion centred around exams. Several attendees added to Dr James' remarks on that subject and gave examples of children and young people who have not been able to use their technology in exams. We also heard that SENCOs and exam officers have found the process of setting up exam arrangements overly bureaucratic. In response, a representative from Ofqual stressed that many pupils do use assistive

technology in exams and the regulator is committed to ensuring this continues. Another dimension to this discussion was exams for skills and employment, which may not take place in a schools setting: these too must be designed to be open to the use of assistive technology.

On the topic of procurement, one contributor extended Patrick McGrath's point that there are models of procurement that can be adopted more widely. One such model is lending or loaning technology. Crucially, it was pointed out, the loaned equipment comes with support from an advisory service. Another contributor to the meeting offered evidence, as a technology supplier, that the distribution of procurement between special and mainstream schools doesn't match what we know about the distribution of children with SEND across settings: mainstream schools appear to be vastly under-investing in assistive technology, even relative to special schools.

Finally, another major theme was the role of the Department for Education in promoting assistive technology. One contributor noted that the Department doesn't have a dedicated team for assistive technology. Attendees from the Department's SEND team and EdTech team assured those present that both these teams, and others, do work on assistive technology issues.

Following the meeting, attendees had an opportunity to network, and several participants arranged a follow-up meeting with Ofqual.