

Thank you - and thank you to Poppy here in London, and Nadia up in Leeds for their FANTASTIC work for more than a year, staying the course and overseeing the organisation of these marches up and down the country.

When they first started planning, it seemed SO far away, but here we are. Thanks also for having us up here today to speak to you. It's a FABULOUS view!

You won't know it yet but new EHCP figures were released today showing an 11% increase in EHCPs— in just one year.

We're right where we all NEED to be today, STARING the policy-makers right between the eyes. And by the way, if you didn't know, the Department for Education is just over there in Great Smith Street...

For Poppy and Nadia, I know, it's not been easy, not least because they, of course, have children with disabilities.

And that's the SAME today, for EVERY parent here. It's not easy —as I remember all too well— trying to get your kids out of the house. Not when it's half-term and ESPECIALLY not when they need a lot more organisation to go anywhere, than the average child does.

I used to watch the kids next door out of the window heading out on bike rides with their parents and know that, for us, we'd be knackered from getting everyone to agree to go, getting kit on and to finish having meltdowns, before we ever got out of the front door. And that was just us parents

So it's a REALLY BIG DEAL that you're all here today, and that families up and down the country are out in town and city centres and even on a BEACH (I think we should go and join them). And not only families, but teachers, support workers, practitioners... and hopefully a few politicians too!

We've been writing about the reforms at Special Needs Jungle, since they were just a gleam in Brian Lamb's eye. It was promised they would end the adversarial, stressful, expensive fight to get the right provision for disabled children—the education that is theirs BY RIGHT. It was promised to be “wraparound” holistic care.

Both Renata and I went through the SEND pathfinder trials in our local areas, ever-hopeful that this really would be a new tomorrow.

But now, four years later, we've just passed the point where more local areas have failed their SEND inspection than have passed it first time.

It's true, you know, it's not just money that matters— it's the culture—the WILL to change that's lacking, but that has been made SO much worse because there is no money in schools, no money in SEND departments, no money in social care, definitely nothing in the CAMHS coffers.

There are fewer support staff to help children stay in mainstream—what was that about inclusiveness? Meanwhile the co-production of the SEND Support “Assess, Plan, Do, Review” system is about as rare as a white rhino in the wild.

It really is, as Robert Halfon, the MP who’s chair of the SEND Inquiry says - A BIG MESS. Parents, we have been MIS-SOLD — if this was financial services, we’d have ambulance-chasing lawyers on the phone, offering no win-no fee compensation.

Instead, parents are having to trek to the SEND Tribunal, or battle through the LA complaints system to get to the Local Government Ombudsman to try to get redress. And that’s on top of parenting their disabled child, and their other children and trying to out food on the table and clothes on their backs and pay the rent or the mortgage.

Too many politicians - both local and national — and way too many in LAs—still have this bizarre idea that SEND is full of sharp-elbowed, middle-class parents, on a mission to get a “gold-star” education for their “fake-disabled” kids. If they were here today, they would see that disability is the great leveller - we are parents from across the financial spectrum, from all parts of the country, from all sections of the community. And no matter how much or little money you have, your child is STILL ENTITLED TO GET EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT TO HELP THEM MEET THEIR POTENTIAL.

We shouldn’t have to battle for the same opportunities that children without disabilities can take for granted.

We shouldn’t have to spend ANY money or go to ANY additional trouble than any other parent to get our children’s basic needs for a suitable education met.

We shouldn’t have to wait for our child to attempt suicide - or worse - before they get help from mental health services.

We shouldn’t have to watch our children give up because they can’t understand what’s going on in class because there’s no one there to help them or because there have been no accommodations made, or because the teacher doesn’t understand what SEND is.

Our young people shouldn’t lack chances to progress because they can’t get a place at college, unless their parent can fight for it.

They shouldn’t have to be stuck doing nothing at home after the age of 16, because there are no local supported internships or no apprenticeships that are accessible to them.

Our children shouldn’t be excluded from attending mainstream school because their mobility needs or sensory support haven’t been provided for, or because there are no teachers trained to help them.

They deserve better: They deserve EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, but to get anywhere close to that, FUNDING— RING-FENCED funding that can’t be siphoned off to wherever else it’s needed, MUST be provided in the spending review.

And we need it NOW to save our children's futures - They are a VITAL part of the next generation and they CAN make a contribution - maybe even a SIGNIFICANT contribution, to our nation's future prosperity. But ONLY if they are supported - and that means significant funding NOW.