

**STATEMENT TO BE MADE BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE EDUCATION AND
HOME AFFAIRS SCRUTINY PANEL
ON TUESDAY 14th JULY 2014**

Members would have received SR3/2015 examining Special Education Needs in Jersey.

As a new Panel, when deciding on our first review it was unanimously important to us that we chose a topic which would have a positive impact on children in the island. Combining this with our awareness of relevant issues, we settled on a review of Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision in the hope of adding value to the services provided to some of the most vulnerable children in Jersey. The policies of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture were new in this area, which made SEN a perfect choice for a Scrutiny review.

Given that our focus as a panel throughout the review has been to help children and put their needs first, we have found much common ground with the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture and the staff within his department. A constructive relationship has been built around which to facilitate the scrutiny process. The Panel has been challenging yet fair, and as a result has found the Minister, Director and their officers to be cooperative and reflective in the way they have interacted with us. It is never easy to hear criticisms of the work you do, and as a whole we have found that the Minister, Director and SEN department certainly work very hard and try to do their best for children with SEN. Of course because no human being is perfect, no processes designed by them are perfect and there is always room for improvement.

This review has found that the ESC Department and all teachers and staff in Jersey schools can be immensely proud of the work they do to help children with SEN. The areas that we have found with potential for improvement have been condensed into three main recommendations which we believe are reasonable, achievable, and once implemented, will add value to the service that children with SEN receive in Jersey schools.

The panel's visits to numerous schools in the Island have evidenced that the provision of SEN in Jersey is of an exceptionally high standard. The teachers provide caring and efficient learning environments and seem to be working very hard at integrating the new SEN policies into their classroom routines. The creation of the new processes & policies relating to SEN, which the panel has found to be generally reasonable and potentially very effective, appear to have been implemented upon the teachers with limited consultation and insufficient training. It seems clear that changes need to have been made to the workload or policy in other areas to create capacity within teachers' time to actually implement the new policy. The new SEN policies appear to be very good when viewed in isolation and would be even more effective if a holistic view was taken as to how they fit in with classroom/school life as a whole. This could be achieved by engaging more with teachers at the consultation stage and again when the policies are first implemented to keep them under review and adjust them once they are in place to make any necessary improvements. I'm sure teachers will be looking forward to hearing details of specific areas of unnecessary paperwork which the Minister has committed to cutting down (at the public hearing) so that they can focus on the important tasks of directly interacting with and planning for the children in their care. Training for Key Workers, who often spend most time with the children, must also be a priority as schools are struggling to recruit qualified staff in this area. Ongoing training and reflecting on the policies is key, along with sharing practice between teachers and other staff from different schools.

That leads me to the first recommendation: **‘The Minister for ESC must increase the consultation and training provision for teachers and key workers in relation to the provision of SEN.’**

The Panel has heard, first hand, of some heart-breaking personal circumstances, where parents and children have had a difficult relationship with schools and the Department. Despite many changes recently, there are still many who believe there is insufficient information available, information is difficult to access or that they are excluded from decision making processes which relate directly to their child. The Department has worked hard on making information available, however the problem still exists. It was noted by the Panel, with appreciation, that the Director of Education recognised this as a problem despite robust defence from his staff at the hearing and accepted that more needed to be done. This relates to the second recommendation, **‘the Minister for ESC must improve lines of communication with parents of SEN children.’**

This review has dealt with difficult issues, but more importantly, the Panel has had to deal with matters of a very confidential nature. The evidence referred to has been collected, collated and referred to in a manner that the individual children cannot be identified.

This report discusses how parents need a single point of contact to help with SEN matters. We could look to the Scottish example of appointing each child a named person at birth, or a dedicated Liaison Officer but anything along those lines would be an improvement. It is important that the processes are humanised so parents and children don’t feel like they are just data or being ‘managed’ but that someone actually cares and will advocate on their behalf. It would be wonderful if the Minister could facilitate the creation of a parent support group and ensure that group is kept well informed with accurate information. This is covered by the Panel’s third recommendation: **‘The Minister for ESC must engage in initiatives to provide appropriate forums to support parents of SEN children.’**

I would like make it clear once again that the provision of SEN in Jersey stands up very well to national standards and the problems the Panel has evidenced are minor adjustments to a sound process. I look forward to seeing which particular initiative the Minister will work on first - as however, good the SEN policies may be, **consultation with and training of teachers, good communication with parents and independent support forums for parents** are all essentials in giving children the best learning experience that the Island can provide. As I have said throughout, it is all about the needs of the children. I hope that this report will assist the Minister to add value to this important area of education in Jersey.

I would like to see our education system designed around the needs of children, appropriate to their stage of development, and based on what they need to grow up into decent, functioning human beings – rather than focusing on numerical targets. It is important to recognise that, rather than the child’s behaviour not being appropriate for school, it is the school system that should be appropriate for the child’s needs. The provision of SEN has changed significantly in the last couple of years and in general has gone some way in the right direction. I make no apology for repeating the three areas that our recommendations focussed on: **consultation and training of teachers, good communication with parents and independent support forums for parents.** With these improvements we can have a truly excellent system which our children surely deserve.

Finally, I would like to thank the Minister and Director of Education for their levels of engagement, but particularly, the Head of SEN and his dedicated staff, who have provided the Panel with huge amounts of information which has taken much of their valuable time. They supported the Scrutiny Process from the start including spending the whole of one day joining the

Panel in school visits. Thanks also must go to the panel's officer, who has steered us expertly along an objective path for this review and worked extremely hard in organising visits and public meetings and gathering all the evidence together. Thank you also to my panel for their time and especially Deputy Judy Martin who was co-opted for this review. We have greatly benefited from Deputy Martin's experience and wisdom. I could not miss this opportunity of thanking the head teachers, teachers and all staff of each school we visited for their provision of wonderful learning environments, their enthusiasm, professionalism and caring attitudes. They are doing an amazing job for Jersey's children – keep going!

Most importantly of all, the Panel wishes to thank all of the children at the schools we visited, from special schools/ special provision through to mainstream schools. It was an absolute pleasure to talk to the pupils on the visits and see the fantastic learning they are doing. We hope this report helps them to have the things they need to flourish.

We commend our report to the Assembly which we encourage States Members and the public to read.