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CC:

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Dear Councillor Seccombe,

Tackling an ableist culture in SEND provision

As you are aware, on the 25th January 2024, three Warwickshire County Councillors made unacceptable comments regarding children identified as having Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and the council resources required to provide legally obligated support.

The comments ranged from blaming social media use and “parenting skill shortages” as the cause of neurodevelopmental impairments such as ADHD, dismissing the existence of such impairments, and claiming that children with said impairments are “just really badly behaved” and “need some form of strict correction.” Most concerning, Councillor Hammersley seemed to advocate for the exclusion – or even segregation – of Disabled and neurodivergent children when he claimed that we should go back to historic ways of “dealing with them”.

We are deeply concerned by these comments and fully support SEND Crisis Warwickshire’s ongoing complaint to the council on the matter.

While we support local campaigners' calls for individual accountability, we are concerned that for councillors to have felt emboldened to share such ableist and harmful comments speaks more critically to the culture at Warwickshire County Council – and more widely, the culture around SEND provision nation-wide. One which shames parents and children, has no accountability, and consistently fails to follow the law.

The recent incident at Warwickshire Council is not an isolated incident and only highlights how this culture is entrenched from policy making to delivery.

SEND support and, more specifically, Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are not easy to access – with less than 4% of students identified as having SEND being able to access one. The resources needed to deliver these plans are also wasted attempting to gatekeep support at the first stage – with councils spending over £425.6 million fighting parents at SEND tribunals last year, and councils losing 98.2% of tribunal appeals. This means that at almost every tribunal, councils are found to be acting unlawfully. To suggest that this is the fault of parents, or children who need “strict correction”, is both inaccurate and unacceptable.

Equally – accessing a diagnosis for impairments like autism and ADHD is a difficult and enduring process. Due to chronic underfunding of the health service and the de-prioritisation of children's health and well-being - wait times for autism and ADHD assessments can be up to 5 years. Almost half of a child's time in education. To suggest that diagnoses and support are handed out to families after “automatically accepting the plea of a mother” after “swapp[ing] tips on social media” is woefully ignorant and unjust.

The conduct and views of these Councillors suggest that Warwickshire County Council are unaware of the realities and adverse impact the SEND system has on Disabled children and their families. We recommend you urgently meet with SEND Crisis Warwickshire and local parents, children, and young people to take their valuable input and lived experience on board.

We also understand voluntary Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training is offered to councillors. We urge you to ensure EDI training is mandatory, delivered via a system of accountability and verification which ensures it is effectively engaged with. It must also include SEND Awareness and Disability Rights content and be co-produced with recognised Disabled Peoples' Organisations – starting with the undersigned. Local campaigners' current complaints must also reach a full and satisfactory conclusion.

To the UK Government, we call on you to urgently increase the funding for SEND provision, ensure accountability is delivered, and meet with us to discuss the many other ways that the SEND crisis needs tackling.

It is exhausting for parents, carers and young people who are battling with the SEND system every day. Superficial apologies from councillors are not enough. We need action locally and nationally now, to support Disabled children and young people to reach their full potential.

Yours Sincerely,

Kamran Mallick
CEO of Disability Rights UK

Ellie Costello
SEND Crisis Warwickshire
Executive Director of Square Peg

Additional organisations who support this letter:

Birmingham Disability Resource Centre -

Louise Mckiernan, Chief Executive and Chair of the West Midlands Regional Stakeholder Network

Contact – *Imogen Steele*

Disabled Children’s Partnership – *Stephen Kingdom, Campaign Manager*

EOTAS Matters - *Heidi Mavir, Founder*

Gesher School - *Ali Durban, Co-Founder*

Kids - *Katie Ghose, Chief Executive*

Let Us Learn Too - *Hayley Harding, Founder*

The National Autistic Society - *Caroline Stevens, Chief Executive*

Not Fine in School - *Dr Beth Bodycote, Founder*

SEND Action - *Gillian Doherty, Co-Founder*

SEND National Crisis - *Roanna Brewer, Co-ordinator*

Special Needs Jungle Ltd - *Tania Tirraoro, Co-Director*