



FOOTSTEPS

EPISODE 2 TRANSCRIPT

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Hi there and welcome to episode two of *Footsteps*, the brand new podcast from First Steps Together, showcasing specialist education.

We explore the people, the approaches, the ideas that shape our schools, while also hearing from our students as well.

A quick reminder that I'm Nick Ransom, the Communications Officer here at First Steps Together.

I'm autistic / ADHD, I've been an on-air journalist, an assistant producer on Chris Packham's *Inside Our Autistic Minds* and have worked as a neurodiversity consultant.

In episode one, we introduced you to the First Steps Together team, and now March has arrived, with British Summer Time edging closer, we're shining some light on EHC plans, or EHCPs as you may know them.

The centre of specialist education, they are critical to a learner being understood, and so to help you help them, in this episode we're going to be giving you all the advice and insight as to how they work and how they are produced.

I'll be joined by our SEND Coordinator, Claire Berry, as well as our Strategic Lead, Natalie Ogden.

You'll also be hearing from students, a parent, our new Chair of Governors, Andrea Lloyd, and our Acting Executive Headteacher, Catherine Donnelly.

That's all to come on this latest episode of *Footsteps*.

EPISODE THEME

So welcome to the second episode of Footsteps and thank you so much for the positive comments regarding our first one back in February.

If you missed it, do go back and listen.

I had a great chat with Matthew Higham, one of our two CEOs and Natalie Ogden, strategic lead, who we'll be hearing from shortly. In the episode, we go in depth into the origins of First Steps Together and our specialist education, transport, care services, it is all covered. So do go back and listen either on our website, [firststepseducation.uk](https://www.firststepseducation.uk) or Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Right, let's get started with today because EHC plans are absolutely everything for us as professionals, but also you as parents because they are a legally enforceable document. I'm joined today by Claire Berry. She's our SENDCo, which is SEND Coordinator, once you extend that out.

She oversees how we identify, support and track progress for pupils with additional needs, ensuring requirements are met through best inclusive teaching. Hi there, Claire. Thanks for joining us.

Claire Berry, SEND Coordinator

Hi.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Also here is Natalie Ogden. You'll have heard her on our first episode if you were listening. She deals with EHC plans day in,

day out, and being the mum of a neurodivergent child with an EHC plan knows the stress, frustration, and complexity of them.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

Thank you for having me.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Right, guys, we're going to try and take this back to basics, aren't we? Because it is, as we were saying, often a very frustrating, complex world to navigate, isn't it?

Demand for services has accelerated with a greater awareness of neurological differences, perhaps due to shows like I was mentioning from myself and the likes of Chris Packham.

We have a new white paper out from the government about the structure of education. A lot of people will have seen that in the news, and we'll be coming on to that later because I want to start at the very beginning, because we have EHC, EHC plan, EHCP. Just, what's the difference and what are we talking about here?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

They're very, very similar. People call them different things in different local authorities. We call it an educational health care

plan and that's because at the moment the health needs are incorporated in that paperwork.

Claire Berry, SEND Coordinator

The biggest thing is you don't need a diagnosis to go through the EHCP process. Basically, the purpose of it is to make sure that whatever is in place educationally is supported by those sections.

So you've got section A, which is all about the child, and that's the child's voice, but also the parent's voice and it could be things like aspirations, it could be also things like just their general background information, and it's just kind of giving that insight to kind of what that day in and day in out may look like. It's supposed to be a very brief process on that.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

It's a legal support plan, isn't it, essentially, for those that need additional help within school, and essentially, a certificate of needs, a kind of passport. There's lots of different sections, are there?

Claire Berry, SEND Coordinator

Yeah, section B is usually kind of what they struggle with, so it's got the different areas, so for example, like cognition and learning,

so that could be things that they struggle with, like maths, or it could start talking about things in school, like, so say they've got dyslexia traits, it could be that they struggle with being able to sit down and listen from a board and write things down. You've got like your physical and sensory in there , you've got your SEMH needs.

Sometimes it can reflect a student's behaviour, but it doesn't always, because some of our children do have quite complex and challenging behaviours in that as well. Then you've got your health and your care needs as well, which is your section C and D.

Section E is your outcomes for that, so those are the planned targets that you're working towards at the end of that key phase for that child, so that could be things like looking at independent skills, so dressing.

It could be for some of our students being able to make GCSEs, so each outcome is going to be very different and very personalised for those children, but it's also, again, there's not really a set standard on how many outcomes you would have. Some students we've got, they've got like 25 outcomes where we've got some students who've only got three or four.

[Section] E is the outcomes in place for the child and section F is the strategies and the provision that would be in place, so as an independent school, that's where we kind of look at, we see if we can meet need on that because we would expect those strategies to be in place, part of that provision that we'd be putting in place in the schools. They might suggest things like one-to-ones. When we do the consults, sometimes we might say that we can do this or this, but not all of it and that's where we kind of look at it realistically and say what, as a provider, we can actually put in place for that child.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And so then we've got section G, which is the health support, section H, which is the social care support, section I, which is the school or college placement and then section J, the personal budget. Just give us a brief overview of what that is.

Claire Berry, SEND Coordinator

So personal budget is what the parents or the carers can request and that basically will go towards kind of making sure that the provision is in place. We haven't really got any parents that have gone through that, but basically it's where the parents and carers can ask for extra support really.

It's things like off-site, extra services so say if they're struggling like [in the] community and they're not be able to access support in school, it could be like social clubs and stuff.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And then section K is all the evidence with the professional advice, and so I want to skip to kind of back to section B because that's all about the needs, isn't it, and the things that make, you know, learning or social life harder for young people, whether that's communication, sensory issues, regulation and anxiety.

To bring this to life, I've actually got a clip from a student that we heard in our last episode talking about friendships.

Student

I am quite of a shy person when it comes to making friends. Sometimes I just try and fit into where I can, try and get through, try and make a friend, but sometimes it doesn't really end well.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And I can relate to that, having been an autistic person at school, it's a huge part of it, isn't it, the social element of it and that anxiety, I suppose, can form a big part of it, as we had his fidget

toy there as well. So if a young person experiences a challenge like that, how can parents ensure that gets across and included? I imagine a lot of that is in Section A, which is the child's voice, isn't it?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

The child's voice is what is at the centre of this EHCP. It's a legally binding document, that is true, but also I'm a big advocate that the students are involved in their own EHC plans, they're able to get their feelings and thoughts and anxiety through and that needs to be documented so that when they do go to a setting that's tailored for them, the teachers and the staff know how that child feels and they've got sort of that foundation to build on from there.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

You don't need a lot of technical language as a parent either, do you? I imagine there's a lot of ways that you can just sort of explain what's happening. What's your advice on how to communicate those needs, would you say?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

I think this is half of the problem that we've got at the moment is that we're looking at EHCPs and sometimes they're not relevant to

that particular child and I think that's because we have a hell of a lot of parents, and quite rightly, I was one of them parents that didn't understand what an EHCP was and how important it is and how their voices need to be heard.

It can be done in layman's terms and it should be done in layman's terms because that's how they feel as a parent and as a child, so to any parents out there, please do not think that you have to have a degree in English to be able to complete an EHCP.

Speak from the heart and speak about your child's needs and hopefully that will come through fully on that paper.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And I suppose these days it's so much easier to communicate in different ways, whether that's on voice memo or whether that's in person or on the phone or writing out over email. I suppose it's much easier to find your way of communicating, isn't it, which I suppose is a big tip there.

I also want to play you this. This is a student I spoke to last week talking about their favourite room in school.

Student

The orange room at lunch because you get to like eat food and it's quiet in there, so just like in communal it's not as quiet as it is in the orange room.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

So what element of the EHC plan is the orange room reflecting?
I'm guessing sort of regulation is probably quite a big outcome that you're looking for, isn't it?

Claire Berry, SEND Coordinator

Yeah, regulation can kind of feed into anything because if you're not regulated, you're not able to learn, so a lot of the time you find that those underpin a lot of areas, that's down to your cognition and learning, it could be your physical and sensory, it's also communication as well, because if you can't tell someone that you are feeling a certain way right now, that then causes a lot of students then to struggle being able to be in a classroom.

So regulation is a massive thing, which we try and embed all throughout the sites as well, because the whole purpose is you're not going to be at one level all the time. As adults, we're not happy all the time, but it's being able to have those strategies to be able

to then support the learners so that they're able to make those learning goals or they're able to look at those physical and sensory outcomes. It's about those underpinnings' tools.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I want to address kind of some of the more kind of basic questions just in case people haven't, or are new to this. How do people apply for an EHCP? Who's doing it? Is it the parent? Is it the school? Is it the authority, you know, are central government involved? Who does it?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

That's quite a difficult one, but any parent can apply for an EHCP for their child. Will they get the outcome that they want? I don't know, but they can do that. As a school we can help to apply and I know that a lot of mainstreams, the SENDCos and the teaching staff there, they identify a particular need that they may be struggling with that particular student and then they help the parents to apply for that EHCP. We don't get to make any decisions on the EHCP as a school, we don't, we get sent that so all the information is collated, it's sent into [the] local authority and then that goes to a panel whether or not they think that student is in need of an EHCP.

I think obviously you touched on earlier, we've got all these reforms coming in with the new white paper and stuff and there's still a hell of a lot that we're all unsure about at the moment. What I will say to parents and carers is if you feel like there's some changes that need to be made to the EHCP or you've got a person within your circle who you feel like needs an EHCP, you are within your rights to go and ask for one.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Absolutely. And in terms of applying for these, then, is it an online form? Is it a trip to the Post Office? What's the journey for applying for an EHC plan?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

Yep, so it's all done online at the moment. If you're under any sort of social care or anything like that, you can work alongside them to help you with that. But it is done online, isn't it, Claire? And that's where you would submit all your paperwork, and all your evidence as to why you feel like your child needs that, and what I will say to parents and carers is gather as much information as you possibly can, from the schools, from outside agencies, and again, go back to the most important thing, which is at the centre

of it, which is the child's voice and submit that paperwork and hopefully you get the outcome that you need.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, and there's much more information on our website about this as well, and in terms of evidence, what kind of things should people be submitting to help it be as credible as possible.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

Okay, so just some of the things that you could submit in your evidence if they're under CAMHS, any evidence from there, any Speech and Language [reports], occupational therapy [reports], doctor's reports, school reports, speaking to the teachers and the SENDCo in their school that they're in and asking for some supporting evidence with what they are struggling with within that mainstream setting or even in a specialist setting and then gather all that information. The more information, the better, but I will say it is a long process.

At the moment, the statutory guidance is 20 weeks. Local authorities are under a hell of a lot of strain at the moment, so I wouldn't expect that 20 week time frame would be available at the moment and I think we're seeing that more and more, aren't

we, Claire? But you know, get that information in and just keep on checking on the progress of that as well. Sometimes when you knock on the door enough, they seem to answer a little bit quicker.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, it's like anything, you've got to fight for it these days, unfortunately, haven't you?

Claire Berry, SEND Coordinator

Educational psychologists as well, a lot of the time that schools will go through that placement. Obviously, the process again is different depending on the local authority, but a lot of the time if you look into that and the SENDCOs will kind of support you in that process to get the [educational psychologist] support.

The point of an [educational psychologist] is for them to come in and observe how they are in the school and provide the school with extra support and strategies so it would be more a school-based thing because they've got to see how it looks in a school environment for them to then be able to build on that strategy.

It's things like, it could be strategies to support their learning, so they need a text in a certain font or they need to have an environment in a certain way, so like a low arousal approach and that's where the [educational psychologist] would be able to put that extra support in place, but that's massive evidence that goes towards an EHCP.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

I think what you're finding now as well, when you've got students, [if] they're unable to access any sort of education at all at the moment, the [educational psychologist] would actually, in some circumstances, go around to the home or that safe space where they could observe the student there as well.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, I suppose having that psychologist involved is such a big part of credibility, isn't it, having that evidence.

Of course, the needs assessments with the local authority, but are you able to give us a bit of an insight as to what it's like and how it actually works and how you advise parents on those needs assessments?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

I think that's a really difficult one because like I said before, we're not involved in making them decisions. I think that obviously it goes to a panel within the local authority. I know that some have weekly panels, some have monthly panels, and some don't have panels at all, they just go to the senior leadership where they look at the paperwork and then it gets signed off or it gets declined.

I think it's really important for parents to be kept in the loop and what I would say, if you're allocated an EHCP Coordinator, which you should be, once that process has started, then ask them questions [such as] “when is it going to [the] panel?” and if the panel outcome isn't what you want, it's... I've been there and it's really, really difficult because you want what you want for your child to give them the best start.

What I'm going to say is don't give up. There is a process that you can follow. It is a long, drawn out process, but I do think that I was lucky enough to be able to get that EHCP that my daughter so needed. It is stressful for parents and carers, but I think in the long term, it really is the best thing because these EHCPs, [it] carries through with our children until they're 25 so that additional

support really, really is amazing for the students with additional needs.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, and I can imagine as a parent that you feel an incredible responsibility to get it right and get it across the line, and that emotional stress that comes with applying is difficult, particularly when, as we were saying, you know, it should take no longer than 20 weeks, but that's not always reality, and it might be worth playing this clip I've got for you now, actually, that we've got from a member of our community.

Rebecca has a son at First Steps Together who, she says, is really thriving after securing an EHC plan, but she has faced problems with securing another one for another child who doesn't attend any of our schools, as she explained to me last week.

Rebecca, parent of children with additional needs

I never had an issue with it. It all kind of went quite smoothly and it was only up until last year when I had to apply for one for his brother did I face a lot of problems. They refused to assess and he was really struggling in mainstream and it went all the way to mediation and on the day of mediation, it got overturned so the

stress of the build up as well of waiting for it and stuff and then it just got overturned on the day.

From looking at First Steps [Together] and then looking at mainstreams, everything does boil down to funding but it doesn't have to. A lot of the stuff, my youngest one is sensory needs and a lot of them things can be met without the funding. When they refuse to assess, nobody's actually met your child at that point.

All they've gone off is pieces of paper, but you can still get a refusal. How can you refuse something when you've never met the person?

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

You know, I suppose the local authority would say it's about the strength of the evidence, but I suppose there is something quite striking about that, but the people deciding don't actually meet the student involved. Are you able to kind of give us a bit of an insight into how that works?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

We're not set to bash the local authorities at all. I think that they're doing the best that they can do with what they've been

given and the amount of students that are coming through as well, [those] EHCP plans, so you can imagine that the workload is massive.

I do think that it is really, really difficult when, as a parent, when they haven't met your child because you do know what you're going through as a parent and the stress is massive.

Over the last two weeks I've had five different phone calls off parents asking me questions [such as] “Natalie, they haven't got the place that they wanted, they haven't got the...”, unfortunately, our hands are tied but what I do say to them is I can point them in the right direction and the local authorities that we are working with, they are trying their best with what they've been given and just keep on pushing.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And I suppose as much as it sounds like something off *The Traitors* it does have to come down to evidence, doesn't it? And I guess you do need some objectivity and I suppose logic when making these decisions. Yeah, we're not in control of the purse strings either, are we.

But I guess also parents witness their child, you know, not maybe not in education, but sort of throughout the week, don't they? But I suppose there has to be a cut off somewhere, doesn't it, and I suppose everyone's aware of that.

Obviously lots of change at the moment in terms of specialist education and there's obviously this white paper that's about to change everything potentially over the next few years. There's obviously a lot of talk about mainstream education and what they can provide. I suppose you want inclusion, don't you, but also you want provision, and I suppose those are two words that kind of clash, aren't they?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

Yeah, definitely they do and listening to what the government are proposing, it sounds absolutely amazing, and it seems like there's movement going on for all students with SEN needs, whether it be with our school or any other school, that's what we want to see, we want to see the best for these young people but I also think that we need to be really, really realistic what a mainstream provision can provide.

A lot of the students that come through to us, their EHCPs are really quite robust with quite a few additional needs on there and it isn't a one-size-fits-all, so it's really good if it comes to fruition.

There's a lot of money being put into it and I totally agree that our young people deserve every bit of this funding and it's been a long time coming. Hang tight and let's see what comes of it. There's a long road ahead when it comes to the white paper and SEN provisions.

Claire Berry, SEND Coordinator

The important thing that I've learned as a teacher is the fact that they are putting that funding into supporting teachers because I was really lucky that I didn't go into mainstream and I'm from a family of mainstream teachers so I've always been in SEND and I think it is really hard as mainstream teachers to provide that support when you've got a class of 30 odd and mainstream is appropriate for some of our learners and it doesn't mean just because they've got any EHCP that they should have a specialist place. It's just making sure that everyone's working together to support that child.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, no, absolutely and I suppose everybody's needs are so different and I suppose the diversity of life is great, but every school is different, as I've heard a lot from you over the last few weeks that some places can't meet the need and that's quite a big part of the process isn't it as well?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

It is yes and I think that there is going to be students that First Steps Together can't meet need for and that's okay. It's about trying to help these families, parents and carers to find what school does fit for their child because every single child deserves an education, whether it be with First Steps Together, in a mainstream school or another specialist provision, this is about, at the centre of it, these young people and their futures and feeling like they're a valued member of society because additional needs doesn't mean that you have no future. We should be aiming for the stars.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

It's interesting for me actually, as somebody who grew up in a mainstream school, and has now learnt in my 20s that I'm autistic and ADHD, that actually there's that element of, if you have all

this support when you're younger and you're told you're neurodivergent, I mean, how ambitious do you get? And for me, because I had no label on me at all, I was kind of like, let's aim for the stars, let's move four hours to the north, and you know, here we are, so it's finding that balance of saying, “look, we can give you support and this is your reality” but also don't let it hold you back, isn't it?

Claire Berry, SEND Coordinator

Yeah and I had a similar experience, so I was diagnosed neurodiverse when I was applying for [university] and I think it's hard because when you go through that system, you don't realise you are that person that has that lived experience but it doesn't matter just because of your neurodiverse need that you can't do that.

I think the difference is people being more aware of it and making sure the right support is in place, and that's the whole point of an EHCP, it's making sure that everyone's working together and it's making sure that everyone is aware of what that means. I think the hardest thing for parents is it's got a lot of jargon and a lot of teacher talk in that, whereas, for me, I've been in education over 12 years now so I understand that really well and I think the

difficult thing is parents then being able to fight for the right support because it doesn't always reflect what they understand, and I think it's just making sure that, like I said, we're all working together in it.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And we've also been updating our website as well, haven't we [Natalie], to try and make it as simple and not dumbed down or patronising but make it as accessible as possible because there's a lot of times where, as you say, there's a lot of jargon and it's quite difficult to understand, isn't it? So I suppose it's the more accessible the system and the more people could communicate in different ways then the better, I suspect.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

100% I wish that I would have had that going back 14 years ago when I was fighting for my daughter's EHCP because it is daunting and I think there was a lot of sleepless nights. You're googling what does this mean and what does that mean.

It doesn't make you uneducated in any sense of the word because you don't know what this paper's about. That's why it was important that we had something that was accessible on the

website because I know that that's what I needed when I was looking, and no question's a silly question because [this] EHCP carries through with your child, and if we can do anything right, we've got to make sure that that's right.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

The reality of it is it's a legal thing, it's a legal process and so there are going to be technical terms and I suppose the more we can make that accessible, the better really, so I recommend going to check that out.

I just want to mention actually that Rebecca, who we heard from earlier, is now actually taking the local authority to a tribunal because despite an emergency review of the EHC plan, nothing was changed from this student that wasn't at First Steps [Together], but amazingly, between 2024 and 2025 in England, government data says that 98% of parents won at least some of their appeal at a tribunal, and of course, challenging the plan, challenging the school named or decision on a needs assessment will always be a thing, but I wanted to ask you a little bit more about this reform on specialist education.

What does it tell us about how things may change going forward, and I suppose it's changing day by day, isn't it, in terms of the conversations that are being had and what people are thinking, but in terms of your assessment at the moment, what might change?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

I think it's really difficult to answer that question because, like you just said, every single day there's something new, and I don't think, if I'm being open and honest, I don't think that local government are fully understanding what they're going to offer yet, so I feel like everybody's just sort of making their own assumptions of what they think things are going to be.

I'll just go back to what you're talking about there, in defence of the local authorities, that they don't want it to go that far and I do know that majority of the local authorities that we work with are trying to come up with a resolution before we get to that stage. [The] tribunal process can take anything from 12 months. I've known parents wait three years, which is a hell of a long time.

It's a lot more costly to the local authority as well to go down that road so I'm hoping that, if one thing that changes quite quickly is,

the mediation and the resolution [gets] a hell of a lot quicker than what it has been of late, but like I say, I know that local authorities do not want to get to that point. We're all in the same boat here, waiting to see, and I think April time will be the time when it actually comes out and it's set in stone, but between now and April, things are going to be ever changing. So my advice to parents at the moment would be, wait until that comes out, and it's there in black and white and this is what we're going to move with because we know that things can change.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Absolutely. There's no point us giving advice or insight that we don't quite know is grounded in fact yet. Well, in terms of practical advice, I want to throw to our Acting Executive Head Teacher, Catherine Donnelly, because I've been talking to her about all this recent noise around specialist education and what parents can actually practically do.

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

I think at the moment it is quite unnerving in terms of what's to come. We just carry on doing what we've always done and that's putting the needs of the students first and just see what happens and we embed those changes in. Don't be frightened of it and

we're absolutely here to support you through it. I'm a parent, one of my children has ADHD so I understand from a parent's perspective. Our staff are here because they've personal experience of children with additional needs, whatever those are, and we are absolutely here to support you, and if there's anything that you're unsure of or it feels a little bit overwhelming, don't be afraid to reach out to us.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Great advice. Individually, what are your top tips for parents? Of course, reaching out to us is probably number one, but I suppose, what's number two, I suppose, in terms of managing this EH plan process? Claire, we'll start with you.

Claire Berry, SEND Coordinator

It's not a scary process. I think we have a lot of parents that obviously it's a legal process and we need to make sure we're doing it to make sure the right support is in place but it's not a scary process and it's hard, especially like section B, because it does talk about the challenges of the student.

That's not a bad thing. The purpose of it is to make sure the right support is in place, so it's not a scary process. The reason the

parents are involved is to make sure one, they understand it, but also so they can give their point of view. It might be that a professional can suggest something and they don't see it, which again is okay. It's about working all together and being collaborative.

It's not a scary process. It's just a meeting to make sure that; one, as a school, we're doing the right thing; two, we're showing that support; but also that the parents and the children are really part of that process as well.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I suppose a big part of it is letting everyone do their own jobs, just giving the evidence that you see and what you witness, rather than speculating, I guess, on what should be done or what shouldn't, I suppose letting everyone do their thing. What's your advice, Natalie?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

Just echoing what Claire said really, I just think be your child or youngest person's biggest cheerleader and make sure that what you want [reflected] of your child is there on that paper and, like Claire said, please don't be daunted by saying, my child struggles

with anger, or my child struggles with this behaviour. Every form of behaviour is a form of communications for all our students. [Be] open, honest, transparent, and carry on with what you're doing and if you need us, reach out, and if you're unsure of anything, no question is a silly question.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, I suppose that's it. No-one will ever know everything about how it works, but I guess the more open and transparent, the better, really.

Amazing. A huge thank you to my guests, Claire Berry, SEND Coordinator here at First Steps Together and our Group Strategic lead, Natalie Ogden. Thanks so much.

**Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead and
Claire Berry, SEND Coordinator**

Thank you, Nick.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Well, lots of great information there and as we were saying, if you'd like to find out more about EHC plans, we do have a page on our website which has lots of frequently asked questions. Just

head to firststepseducation.uk/ehcplans and you can find out more about applying, evidence, appeals and so much more.

Now, I'd like to end today's episode with a bit of my chat with our brand-new Chair of Governors. Andrea Lloyd has become a well-known face in Tameside when it comes to specialist education and we're thrilled that she's joining our team.

A Chair of Governors is primarily responsible for the school governing body, so strategy, compliance and overseeing the head teacher. I started by asking Andrea a little bit about her background and how she came to join us.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Originally, I'm from Mottram [in Longdendale] and Hattersley. I moved to Denton when Devon was like two, so he's 11 now so.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Your son, that is.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah. And even though I'm not from here, I want to make a difference. I just want to try and make Tameside a good place for our children, for our families and to be inclusive.

I came upon First Steps Together when I was supporting another child, a long time ago when they first started and I just loved the education environment and I said to Natalie Ogden “I'll see you when Devon's 11” and Devon ended up going to school here, and I've just watched them grow and then they've asked me to come on board because they value my opinion. They know I'm vocal, but they know I'll always come with a solution.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Where does that passion come from? It sounds like it's your own son, right? Tell us a little bit about why you're so invested in it.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

I started the journey with my own son, needed to apply for EHCPs, was looking for some peer support. There wasn't really much in Denton, so I thought, right, okay, I'll start my own coffee mornings, which we did, and lots of parents started joining and I started to learn quite quickly around what I would need to best support my

son and then that's where my journey continued and then we had [the COVID-19 pandemic] and then we relaunched right after [the pandemic], after we opened up, so from there we do a lot of engagement in the area.

We are DAAFS: Denton, Autism, ADHD, Family Support and we're on Facebook, and we offer peer support and try and help the community where we can, with [autistic children], [children with] ADHD, EHCPs, applying for them and that's what I really do within the local community.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I suppose people are often looking for that validation, but also...

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Absolutely.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And just so people get a sense of what a Chair of Governors does, give me a bit of an insight into what you're most looking forward to about the role and some of what you'll be getting up to.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

I'm really excited to start going into schools and speaking to our young people, speaking to all the staff, seeing how they think our children are doing and where can we make any changes, and just really listening to the children because at the end of the day it's their schools, it's their environments, so it's just about learning, I think, about other schools that we've got.

I know Peak Forest because my son's there and we've borrowed the goats before, for a parent-carer forum event, it's about getting into the schools and seeing, because those are what are First Steps Together. We're sat here in [the] head office and obviously we need this space to run and make sure that everything runs as good as it does, but I'd like to just get in and see what the children think, see if there's anything they'd like me to change.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I wonder what it's like for you where people have called you a 'pillar of the community' and all these things...

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

... how it feels, maybe to have the responsibility, but also the pressure of people coming to you and wanting support. How do you deal with that?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

It's really difficult because I can't say no, because I don't want a child or a parent or a carer to suffer. I had a child that was out of education, [he] only had a part-time timetable for three years, so because I've been there, I can't say no and I will always endeavour to support everybody, even if I'm left tired.

We've been given a white paper, some things I like, some things, that's a bit too much, but I just think it's just really difficult for parents at the moment with uncertain times.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I suppose it's difficult not to be so invested because it's talk of change, isn't it?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah, and I think as well, this is the time, if parents want to be heard. Now is the time because this white paper is consultation.

So we've got three months to gather evidence of what does good look like to us as parents and carers and also what looks good to our children in *all* of this fight, there's children.

It's probably [being autistic]. It's that injustice, isn't it? We hear the stories of what children and families are being put through, not just in Tameside, up and down the country, but because this is where I am, it affects me and then obviously the double empathy will kick in.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yes, Andrea is neurodivergent and we'll be hearing her story of being diagnosed as autistic in her 40s in our Easter episode, which will be dropping in early April. We'll go through more of what parents are experiencing, the wider work of First Steps Together, holidays, routines, so much more.

A huge thank you to everyone who has appeared on the podcast this month. If you want to get involved, share your story or ask a question, go to firststepstogether.uk/contactfootsteps. That's firststepstogether.uk/contactfootsteps.

For now, it's goodbye from our staff and our students here taking their first steps together.