



FOOTSTEPS

EPISODE 3 TRANSCRIPT

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Hello there and welcome to episode three of Footsteps, the practical 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.

If you missed episode one and two, do go back and check them out, because we've covered so much already, including our management, our heads of school, and those who oversee EHC plans.

Nick Ransom here, the Communications Officer here at First Steps Together. Autistic and ADHD, I was an on-air journalist, an assistant producer on Chris Packham's *Inside Our Autistic Minds* series, and have experience as a neurodiversity consultant.

The Easter break of course brings its own set of challenges, but despite the season sending our schools somewhat silent, we're catching up with our staff to reflect on the spring term, but also share advice on how to get through the rest of the Easter break.

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

Be kind to yourself, you're doing your best.

Mike Smith, Head of School, Kershaw Wood Manchester

Movement breaks, keeping that body moving, look online for some community events.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

The Tameside Umbrella Parent Carer Forum page, but don't follow society like 'oh yeah, I must take the children here', I must do this with them. No, do YOU.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

You'll also hear why they do what they do.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

There's a lack of trust. I don't want a child, a parent or a carer to suffer.

Mike Smith, Head of School, Kershaw Wood Manchester

These students have just made me honestly on top of the world. I thoroughly love my job.

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

I ended up staying 3 hours. I was scootering, we were searching for monsters. It reminded me why I do this job.

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

That's our Acting Executive Headteacher, Catherine Donnelly, who will be joining me in a moment, our Chair of Governors, Andrea Lloyd, she'll be talking about her neurodivergent diagnosis after a chat with one of our Heads of School. You'll hear them all on this latest episode of *Footsteps*.

EPISODE THEME

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

So welcome to this third episode of *Footsteps*. Let's crack on then and throw you right into my conversation with Catherine Donnelly, currently our Acting Executive Headteacher.

We started by reflecting how quickly the spring term has gone.

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

It's gone quick, actually, really, really quick. I have been learning so much and feel like I'm really getting to know the students, the families, the staff and I'm really excited because I'm just seeing some wonderful things. I had a brilliant week, one day I went to a school and I had so much work to do, [I] go into it thinking 'oh, I'll just get there really quick and just spend an hour and get off and get back to my things to-do list' and I ended up staying 3 hours!

And it was just... the joy and I was outside with the children, we had a picnic for lunch, I was scootering, we were searching for monsters and I just got immersed into it. It was the best thing I could do because it just reminded me why I do this job and I just left with my heart full.

To see staff just meeting the students where they are and just going and almost seeing the students lead their own learning and seeing such huge progress in such a short space of time, seeing children who I've never heard speak, talking to me and making eye contact, those are the little wins, but there's such big wins as well.

It's those things that really keep me motivated and keep me going.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, it must be so special to go out to these schools and particularly when you're firefighting a lot of the time to go out and see lessons in action and seeing the smiles on kids' faces, that must be quite special.

What would you say pupils have done particularly well this term or engage with best?

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

What I've seen from pupils in lessons is a response to changes from the teachers. I keep saying this sentence and I've been saying it a lot recently. We've got to meet the kids where they are

and we have to adapt to the students' needs, not the other way around. I think education goes wrong when we expect children to be moulded to meet the needs of the curriculum or what the school's expectations are, where I think we have to mould and change and adapt to meet them in order for them to be successful. That's what I've enjoyed seeing, and when that's happening in action, seeing that it works.

We've had a lot of new staff. It's just been nice to see those staff come in and be part of the teams and building those relationships with our students, pets, tortoise that's now joined, and that's just brought so much joy as well. Those little moments that I've really enjoyed.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yes, Dylan the Tortoise was introduced to Kershaw Wood Manchester to support emotional regulation. This is how it sounded as Dylan was introduced to the students.

Mike Smith, Head of School, Kershaw Wood Manchester

Everybody be nice and quiet.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Do you want to touch it? You can touch it when you want. Go on.

Student

What is that?

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

It's just a shell.

Student

It's a tortoise.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

You can touch it when you're ready.

(student touches tortoise's shell)

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Wow!

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

Hi, what's your name? I've not met you.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yes, it was a fantastic day at Kershaw Wood, Manchester and you can find out more about that, including some photos of Dylan the tortoise. Just go to firststepseducation.uk and head to the news page.

I can tell you that Dylan has already been helping out, listening to one student who was distressed, the conversation ultimately cooling the frustration, which is really great to hear.

Now let's return to Catherine, who told me a little bit more about how her week plays out.

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

Every week has been really, really different, depending on the needs of each school, so last week I managed to get out to every single school, supporting our ECTs. So ECTs are our Early Career Teachers. It can be firefighting problems that come up in the day so often I'll have a very clear plan on what I'm going to do that day and that can quickly go out of the window; meeting with the heads of school, we meet regularly, obviously making sure that we're driving improvement.

Recruitment's a big thing at the moment, so I've been involved in that, really looking at developing the curriculum and how we teach and approach our teaching. We have our directive days when the students are on holiday and staff come in, so we've been planning for that and that's why I love this job because no day is ever the same.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, it's always changing, isn't it? There's so much to keep track of and I can imagine one day looks like this and then it turns out totally different.

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

Yeah.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And in terms of the kind of message to parents about dealing with the Easter break that we're in at the moment, give us a bit of an idea as to what they can be doing at this time to try and keep the kids engaged, but also giving them a bit of freedom, and it's a delicate balance, I imagine.

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

Yes, and I'm probably the wrong person to ask, because although I am an educator, I'm also a parent, and all the things that I put in at school quickly go out the window at home, so there's lots of bribery with my own children. My own daughter struggles with school, she has ADHD, she's not been going in and we've come down to bribing her that if she goes in every day, she gets £10, it's actually worked. How long that'll work for [I don't know].

It is really challenging, the holidays, for anybody with children and it's just being kind to yourself. Don't put those high expectations. I think with social media, there's all these perfect parents and families put in front of you and it does make you question, but you know, you're doing your best, and we all have those days where, do you know what, let's just stay in our pyjamas and watch videos all day and eat junk food and do you know what, that's okay because it's needed.

Be kind to yourself as a parent, get out there, walks, things are very costly these days, even just going out on Easter egg hunts if that's your thing, but there's lots of things in the community for free, getting out to museums in Manchester and my favourite is the National History Museum. I love going there and that's free, so

there are lots of things out there, but my main message is just be kind to yourself.

No parent's perfect, and sometimes you do have those tricky days and just you start again tomorrow. I'll tell you something else that's always good if you're brave, baking. It's always a good activity to do, or getting them out digging in the garden and things like that.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

It's a good time of year to do it as well isn't it?

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

Yeah, perfect, yeah.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Making Easter cakes or whatever it might be.

Finally, for parents, give us an idea as to what's going on here during the Easter break. Obviously, there's been some directive days and there's the INSET Day to come as well, so I imagine lots of things going on.

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

Everyone, especially my friends and family, like, oh yeah, you get two weeks off, I don't, actually, and there's a lot of work going on: two directive days, carrying on with recruitment. We have the governor's meeting straight back after the holidays.

I've got an INSET Day to prepare for, so the first Monday back, we've got a guest speaker for all the staff looking at the sensory curriculum, Jordan Garrett, so if you're on social media, it's worth looking and so all the staff will be having training around that. There's a lot of preparation ready for next term, so even though in inverted commas, it's a holiday, a lot of us are still working and there's still things that come up in the holiday for us to address and deal with.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, there's a lot of preparation for the year and I suppose a real opportunity to actually get ahead and get things working before you start.

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

Well, my mum was a teacher and the best piece of advice she said to me was, you will always have the things to-do list and

you'll never get to the end of it so after all these years, I've come to terms with, that, I always used to work really, really hard in the holidays trying to get ahead and it never worked, so I will be taking some rest. Well, I say rest, I'm moving house.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Sounds restful!

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

Yeah, but it is important just to take a few days with your family and rest, but yeah, there's still lots going on in the background as well.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Amazing. Thanks so much for joining me, Catherine, really appreciate that insight.

Catherine Donnelly, Acting Executive Headteacher

Thank you. Lovely to speak to you again.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, really great to chat to Catherine, who always brings such

honesty and energy to our conversations. You'll be hearing much more from her as time goes on.

Now, you'll remember in episode two, I spoke to our Chair of Governors, Andrea Lloyd. We'll have more of our interview very, very shortly as she reflects on being identified as neurodivergent later in life.

But first, I want to throw to home of Dylan the tortoise, Kershaw Wood, Manchester, which is our focus this month. Head of School Mike Smith has transformed the lives of students who, up until recently, hadn't been in school very much. I caught up with him with just one week left of the spring term.

Mike Smith, Head of School, Kershaw Wood Manchester

It's been a fantastic first term here at Kershaw Manchester. It's great to see all the students flourishing and thriving, getting into lesson routines. I think the biggest win here at Kershaw Manchester, for me, is that social gathering, building relationships between each other, not just for the students but for the staff as well, seeing students outside, some of the equipment we've been able to purchase, that's made that a lot easier and accessible for

our students, so yeah, it's been a really, really exciting and good term.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

You were telling me last week that it's a lot of young people's first experience of being in school for a while.

How surprised are you by how well it's gone in terms of their mood and their, I suppose, regulation and just how well they seem to be adapting to this environment?

Mike Smith, Head of School, Kershaw Wood Manchester

The transition, considering the students who have not attended school for some time, has just been absolutely amazing. Like I say, that social gathering aspect has helped. The small setting has definitely helped, especially around the learning environment, so small class sizes, it works. It helps that we've got access to different environments across the school.

Honestly, it's just been mind-blowing, and more importantly as well, across the team, the staffing team and also with the parents and, all being on the same page, I think that works, especially if building that trust to come into a new school, that transition aspect is really important but it's really, really

positive and the feedback we're getting from the parents is just phenomenal.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I imagine so much has happened since you started or since this place opened in January. What would you say have been some of the highlights or some of the moments that stand out to you that you've been up to with the students?

Mike Smith, Head of School, Kershaw Wood Manchester

I'm going to say the word respect. Seeing students from year one upwards using 'please', 'thank you'. The communication skills have improved massively amongst all students, that rapport with the staff has been absolutely phenomenal as well. I'd say they were the biggest highlights. If you can build that respect from the beginning and embed that from the beginning, it's only going to improve further down the line.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And in terms of the Easter break, two weeks off, a bit more than that actually, isn't it, in reality? Give me some of your thoughts and advice for parents, they might see it as quite a long

break and your advice to them in terms of how they can support their children.

Mike Smith, Head of School, Kershaw Wood Manchester

I think it's really important during that Easter break to let the children get out, let them explore. It could be that they go and visit a local library, which is something we want to do here at First Steps Together, get outside. Go to some science museums, using the local transport buses, if parents are not able to drive, doing some like craft projects, farm visits.

Here at Kershaw Manchester, we send just some work for the children to be doing, keeping busy. If they've got too much time on their hands, it's about mindset and that's something else we've been working on here, movement breaks, keeping that body moving, look online for some community events, they're key as well, cost effective.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Well, looking forward to the summer term. Give us an idea of going forward.

Mike Smith, Head of School, Kershaw Wood Manchester

For the outside provision, the actual change in the last two weeks has just been absolutely amazing with the support from the team above, the senior leadership team. I'm very grateful for that.

It's gone from very minimal to outside gym equipment, snakes and ladders mats, mud kitchens, creative tough trays with different designs for the students to put their own student ideas on. We're going to have a storage area, we're going to have probably more scooters, more bikes.

The children are learning safety aspects around using equipment which is really, really good and staff are modelling this. Playground markings is going to be key. I can cook up thousands of ideas around playground markings and then staff as well leading on various games outside and we're going to link him with a full timetable around this.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Amazing. And just finally, what's it been like for you personally, the ambition of the students and the respect you were mentioning earlier on? And I know you're a big fan of early years and starting out, I guess, in education, but what's it been like for you and your experience?

Mike Smith, Head of School, Kershaw Wood Manchester

Mind-blowing. Just because I'm a happy person as it is, but these students have just made me honestly on top of the world.

I'm going home every evening, I thoroughly love my job, It's the child at the centre. Every child in their own ways, unique in their own way, and seeing these wins day in, day out is just what we want here at First Steps and Kershaw Manchester.

Respect, the usage of equipment, the learning environment upstairs here at Kershaw Manchester, doing learning walks, liaising with the executive head teacher and my line manager, the wins and the progress the students are making, that's enough to make any head of school pleased.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Well, happy Easter and thanks for joining me.

Mike Smith, Head of School, Kershaw Wood Manchester

I'm feeling egg-cellent. Thank you.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Well, Mike is just fantastic and was actually awarded a special prize and certificate from CEO Matthew Higham before the end of

the term, alongside Tame Bank teacher Michael Pearson and Learning Support Mentor from Kershaw Wood Glossop Carriann Hayward.

Now, if you caught episode two, you'll already know that our new Chair of Governors, Andrea Lloyd, is a real force for change here in Tameside. She spoke about her son's journey with EHC plans, the peer support community she's built and her passion for making specialist education fairer.

Today, we're exploring her personal story, including being diagnosed as autistic in her 40s, and the pressures and purpose behind supporting hundreds of families every week.

We started by discussing her diagnosis, where she found out she was autistic.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Just before we went into lockdown, ironically, it was very good timing, I was diagnosed autistic the Friday before we all went into lockdown on the Monday.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Wow.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

So I locked my front door and the whole world just stopped. So I always knew, but it was kind of just having it validated, it's always been a running joke. My friends, my family, oh, here she goes again. The 'tisms' are coming and I don't be offended by that, so that's kind of where it come from, and then just by research as well, seeing what I needed to give my son to make sure he wasn't failed because there was no neurodiversity when I was a child. Clearly there was. But as society, we didn't have it in your day. So I knew I had to fight to make sure that I didn't set my son up to fail in a world that's not always ready for us.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Mm. Going into lockdown, I imagine, then, you're given so much time to think this all through. I mean...

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Obviously I'm not going to ask for your age, but...

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

I'm 51.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

When you're in lockdown and you've got that diagnosis, what is going through your head at that point where you're like, 'gosh, this is my whole life unveiled?'

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

If I'm honest, I think it was a sigh of relief and a bit of a better understanding why things may not have worked the way I wanted them to or my life panned out the way I wanted it to. There was always a reason, and I think when you're medically told that it's depression and anxiety, you just go along with it, and it was actually my son's paediatrician who asked did I have a diagnosis, and I said, "no" but I think I am." and she said, "yeah, so do I" and that's how the journey started for me to have a diagnosis, and I am also on the pathway for my ADHD diagnosis.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Wow, that is an amazing story, and from my own diagnosis of ADHD last year and being autistic at 20, yeah, I can only imagine what it was like for you where you get this incredible realisation, don't you, an incredible perspective and almost a slight excitement, but a slight sadness and a slight sort of validation. It's so many feelings, isn't it?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Absolutely. Yeah, it's kind of like winning the lottery, not winning the lottery, having a couple of numbers short, so many mixed emotions and I think then it's just trying to figure out your mental side of it, the capacity of that, and try and put that into place, and then I'm quite open and a lot of my childhood friends, when I've seen them since, and I say, "oh, God, yeah, I got an autism diagnosis" and "oh, I'm going for ADHD" and they're like, "did you not know?" so everybody else knew but me.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

It's incredible, isn't it? And the number of times, obviously I've worked in this area for about 5 years and obviously working on the Chris Packham documentary, heard so many stories and it's such

a classic story, isn't it? Parents getting diagnosed after their kids, it just kind of happens so much.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I bet you see a lot of that with parents as well.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah, absolutely. On our support group, I've got 715 members on there that I can support at any one time, 364 and a half days (the half a day is Christmas Day) supporting so my phone is there, because I think a lot of parents are [neurodivergent].

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I suppose people are often looking for that validation...

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Absolutely.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

... but also support and I imagine that must leave, you know, I know for somebody living with ADHD, everyone's experience is obviously so different, but you can feel emotions so intensely and 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. It's really difficult. 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, only had a part-time timetable for three years, so he's had three years of a part-time education 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 myself, you know, it's just one of those things, it's probably autism. It's that

injustice, isn't it? We can't, 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

It's a lot, isn't it? And I imagine you're in an interesting position now where I guess you have capacity to make change within a school and I guess are also dealing with local authorities so have got to be that diplomatic voice. I suppose that's something that we learn as neurodivergent people, isn't it, is how to be diplomatic and see both sides and we are quite empathetic generally, I think.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yes.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Obviously I know there's a lot of kind of confusion around that, but how do you deal with respecting what the country's doing around SEN, but then also pushing for change?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

It is a really tough one to try and balance because when you get those kind of emails, your first initial instinct is, 'oh my God, that's my child they're talking about' and then the reality hits. Actually, it's those 715 on the group, there's those thousands of other Tameside families that I support, I've then got to go and tell these families "this is what's maybe to come and stuff" so it is really hard when the change, because we don't know. We've been given a white paper. Some things I like, some things, you know, I'm a bit, 'oh, that's a bit too much' but it's just really difficult for parents at the moment with uncertain times ahead.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I was going to ask you about that. It is all change and there's lots of speculation and of course we've got to let the facts play out. I suppose it's difficult not to be so invested because it's talk of change isn't it and people are frustrated.

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.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

That's the reality, isn't it? It's a very emotional subject and so you can see why people are so passionate about it.

But from your perspective and those of parents, what do you feel is the priority that parents want? Is it provision or is it inclusion? Because they kind of clash those words.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah, I think the two kind of run hand in hand. They just run a very fine line between each other because yes, we want our children to be included. Yes, I have a mantra that if we make change for the majority, then the minority can become part of the majority. Because when we look at it on a bigger picture, the majority don't actually notice change. It means nothing to them really. If it doesn't really impact them in their walks, in their life, in their steps, then they're not going to mind that it's to help neurodiverse children / SEND. I just think it's really difficult because we just want our children educated.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Mm. Parents experience a lot of time with their child at home and perhaps, they're not in school or there's issues with school and it's understanding and a sense of routine. I guess that's what everyone craves.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Absolutely. Absolutely. We've got parents that are separating, families are losing their family home because the stress that's being put on families. People are losing their jobs because they can't go, because school can't educate their children. Their children have a difference.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

As we've discussed, if you're neurodivergent, things are going to be naturally tougher, and it's been interesting for me. I've always been kind of that person that's like, I can barely look after myself, let alone have any kids, but particularly if you don't know that you're neurodivergent and you end up having children, you're then still working yourself out and then you're trying to look after the children. It's a lot, isn't it?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

To contend with all that and also get the best for your child is incredibly overwhelming, so I guess that element of not hearing from school every single day might be great?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Absolutely. Environment is everything. That is underestimated because environment and sensory can make classrooms inclusive.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Mm. But environments don't necessarily mean funding, it is just an inclusive environment?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

It can literally be small, cost-free changes. It could be just as simple as turning the lights off. It could be having a class understanding [that] while you're sitting at your desk learning, take your shoes off, allow them to stand up. There's so many different ways of learning that I think our educators, especially in

mainstream, need to look about the outside rather than, “yep, that's the way we go.” That's the trajectory of education, but what about these little people that are dropping off because they don't fit in that stream, so.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I suppose it's that classic balance between, obviously having boundaries as a school and giving people a sense of structure and this is how the world works, but then also being inclusive and being accessible and being, you know, understanding of people's differences and I think we've gone through a conversation a lot about disability and, you know, how we deal with those situations and how we can be more accessible, but also neurological diversity is not quite there.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

No.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

... and it's interesting that we still haven't quite got to that point of neurological difference and I think it's a classic saying, isn't it, “everyone thinks everyone else thinks the same”?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah, absolutely. I actually think autistic people, I think they are very similar because we've all got the same traits. That's what gives us our diagnosis but we all have different levels of what we can all handle.

I have real problems with sensory for my ears and smells, whereas my son, he might be visual, "I don't like the look of that" so we're all different. There's just so much. If we could maybe have more education in sensory, because sensory covers so much.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I have a spot on my tongue at the moment, which is really annoying me and like, I'm always quite sensitive to stuff in my nose, so it's quite a big part of the autistic experience. In a school, if you can't handle that, then that regulation is over, isn't it?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah, there is nowhere to go because there's no level of understanding. It's really ironic that if you've got an autistic child, you'll go having a look on the internet and speaking to professionals and peer supports, but we don't seem to do this in

education or in the workplace. They just kind of ignore that sensory, environment side of things that we need to be able to navigate.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

There's a lot of conversations happening around inclusive buildings, aren't there? But I suppose it takes time for people to be able to get into that.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah, I've just done a sensory audit running PINS projects, Partnership in Neurodiversity in schools. We've done a sensory audit with the children and it was amazing, the work in both schools, what they've come with. Also being able to look at that through the autism lens of myself, I'm able, then, to put it down on paper for them and we've worked now at giving them sensory circuits and sensory engagement sessions.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

[It's] pointless as adults just saying "this is how it should be done" or "this is what it was like when I was a kid." The world is evolving at such a rate that the next generation, you want them to be taking the ownership.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Absolutely. I really like engaging with young people and getting their voices because, as my [Denton Autism ADHD Family Support] parents will tell you, our children just seem to love me, we seem to have a really good relationship, probably because they see I'm just like them. They don't have to mask, just be yourself, because I need to be myself, so if we're our authentic self, we can best support each other, capturing voices, feeding it back to people that make these decisions, because ultimately it's our children living with it.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Mm. It's really interesting, particularly now that we're getting so many more openly neurodivergent adults and being able to be that role model for the next generation saying, look, this is what I've experienced growing up and I've got a friend who works as a teaching assistant up in the North East, who was actually on the Chris Packham documentary, and he's done incredibly well, and then for me, as somebody who's like, gosh, working with children are just so unpredictable.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

I've never liked children. I, you know, I didn't really want them. I'm not a maternal thing, but when I started doing this, something just kind of...

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

It's the injustice again, isn't it?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah, I suppose it is. And egos have nowhere in SEND or ND. They have no place because if somebody's made a framework and it doesn't fit, it's not working, we need to just go back to the drawing board. Don't throw years of money at it when it didn't work. Get real consultation.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

That's a big thing, isn't it? It's flexibility and efficiency is what we like as neurodivergent people, but that challenge with young people is particularly because, I suppose, of the unpredictability and perhaps the sensory side, but actually, in reality, we're just fighting for fairness, for equal access and opportunity. I think that's what we've lacked, isn't it, to some degree? Mm.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Just a good education where they learn and able to have the same opportunities as neurotypical children and neurotypical families. We just want to be given the opportunity. Our opportunities might not look the same as a neurotypical person, but you'll get the same results, if not better.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

It's interesting at the moment, there's a lot of conversation out there about people who aren't in work...

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

... and employment stats and the economy and all these kind of things. How important do you think specialist education is and accessibility within schools and education as a whole, I guess, to improving the cultural attitude of the country to people who are different, diversity, and actually making the country more, I mean, we talk about productivity, but making everyone happier and healthier and more successful, I guess?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

We have to go through our children. It's got to come from the education setting and let the children lead the way so that there's a path being laid for those that come behind them and I also think... I forgot.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

(laughs) That's classic ADHD.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

We might leave that in because I do that all the time.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah. I do it all the time in meetings and I'm like, "yeah, I've got a great idea, wait a minute, I forgot it, yeah. Sorry, ADHD."

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, normally we'd cut this out but we'll keep that in.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Let me ask you then about First Steps. You've been asked to be Chair of Governors.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

I have.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And just so people get a sense of what a Chair of Governors does, give me a bit of 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 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, which was amazing, so yeah, it's about getting into the schools and seeing, because those are First Steps Together. We're sat here in head office. Obviously we need this space to 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, maybe.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And also, as a parent, maybe taking your sort of Chair of Governor's hat off for a second, how do you see the setup of transport and care and educational being interlinked? We talk about wraparound care here a lot. That sounds more efficient, doesn't it, I think

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

.. on paper. What do you feel as a parent?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

The current transport that we use as a family for my son to get to Peak Forest. It's a normal taxi, but they have no training in autism or ADHD, any around that area, so it's really difficult. Sometimes there's a language barrier.

It's really difficult to get them to understand their actions impacts the children, maybe meeting needs on that transition, so for me, I think it's really important that it's kind of all one. We shouldn't have children being given specialist provision, then having to wait months for transport. That's a waste of education.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I suppose that the more joined up everything is...

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

... the better.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Just in terms of sort of Denton and Tameside, and obviously

you've grown up around here, what does this area, obviously a lot of change recently, what does this area mean to you and how would you define the sort of spirit and identity of Denton and Tameside?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Originally, I'm from Mottram [in Longdendale] and Hattersley up that side, so I moved to Denton when Devon was like 2, so he's 11 now, so been here for 9 years, and even though I'm not from here, I want to make a difference. I just believe there's no point in living in an area and you have that expert by experience voice.

I just want to try and make Tameside a good place for our children, for our families and to be inclusive.

We've got a problem in Tameside, as a whole, because a lot of our schools will not offer support for our children because they've got no budget so our parents are then forced to fight for an ECHP.

There's [initially] not enough evidence because the schools haven't provided any evidence and they don't see little Johnny stimming or struggling in certain areas, need any support, so I think that's the kind of bit that I like about the white paper,

school can't say that anymore: "We've got no funding. Sorry, we can't help".

From the voices that I hear, there's a lack of trust because it's not a level playing field. Everything is all dependent on who picks up your case, so parents just feel that we've kind of been forgotten about in Tameside for a long time.

There is changes coming, for the better, I hope, and I'm sure it is because, we've all played our part in carrying those voices back to the local authorities and further afield.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Obviously, it's Easter. Give me a bit of an insight into what breaks, what children not being in school represents to you and I suppose what parents and young people can be doing at this time of year?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

For us, we love it because that demand that we need to do Disappears, so in my house it's really good. We keep it very low key because in the summer holidays, we'll go camping and stuff in our caravan.

There is always things going on around the school holidays, so if you have a look at the Tameside Umbrella Parent Carer Forum page, there will be links to what's going on, in and around Tameside.

Also on [Denton Autism ADHD Family Support]'s Facebook page, you will find shared events on there too. [Denton Autism ADHD Family Support]'s, eventually, will start doing events during the holidays for parents.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Because yeah, I imagine the lack of structure and lack of routine is such a challenge, isn't it? And then to have two weeks off and Easter and all this supposed fun and games can be quite a pressurising thing really.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah, and I think you just about get there, and then you've got to start preparing children to go back to school, so how...

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

It's like a double change, isn't it?

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah, yeah. It's when you're just getting right, it's time to go back.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I suppose it's enjoying it, trying to be kind to yourself...

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

... not putting too much pressure on yourself.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Yeah, and I think as well, don't follow society like, "oh yeah, I must take the children here, I must do this with them." No, do YOU.

Whatever works for your family, just do you. It doesn't really matter whether it's a little tent up in the garden, rather than going out to the park for a picnic, just whatever. I would actually ask your child, what would you like to do?

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Make it a collaborative thing, yeah, exactly.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

And see, can you figure it out?

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Well, Andrea, thank you so much and enjoy the rest of your Easter break.

Andrea Lloyd, Chair of Governors

Thank you very much and happy Easter to you.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

A really fantastic, uplifting conversation from Andrea and a huge thank you to her, Catherine and Mike for taking the time to speak to me for this month's episode of *Footsteps*.

Footsteps will return before the next half term and you can catch up on all of our episodes so far via our website,

firststepseducation.uk or via Apple Podcasts and Spotify.

Just a reminder that Monday 13 April is an INSET Day, so we'll be welcoming all students back on Tuesday 14 April. For now, enjoy the rest of the Easter break. We'll see you soon, goodbye.