

Kent SENCo Conference 23rd March 2023

Opening address by Cllr Rory Love OBE BA(Hons), Cabinet Member for Education and Skills at Kent County Council.

Thank you for your invitation to open this Conference. I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to stay for the full conference because I have to be in County Hall for our full County Council meeting in less than 40 minutes time.

But before my Council meeting, I wanted to be here because it's a real privilege for me, as Kent County Council's Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, to look out on a conference filled with 500 of the most important people that children and young people with Special Educational Needs will ever meet in their school life.

I'll say more about that shortly, but before I do, I want to acknowledge that we at the County Council have not always got it right. In the recent past, we've let people down. We've let down some of the children we should be serving. We've let down some of their parents, and in all probability, we've let you down as well. And for that, I'm sorry. We need to do better, and we, as a County Council, will do that only if we, as the wider Kent Area of practitioners and partners, work together.

The first reason I wanted to be here, is to say "Thank you" for the amazing work that you do. I know that sometimes, that work can put you in a place where you feel under pressure, with your professional judgement being questioned. It may be questioned by other professionals, perhaps even people who are highly regarded, such a general practitioners. It may be questioned by parents. It may be questioned, dare I say it, by staff from some parts of the local authority.

I want you to know, that in such cases, where all due process has been undertaken, and you have appropriately applied your experience and judgement, I'm on your side. And I very much hope that the new Leadership Level SENCO National Professional Qualification announced in the Government's SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan last week will help further raise the profile and status of SENCos, and strengthen the ability of your discipline to stand your ground when you are under pressure from others.

The second reason I wanted to be here is to share my view that we have a joint mission to undertake. If we are to provide the appropriate support to children with a diverse range of needs, we need an accurate and analytical focus on precisely what those needs are, because only then can we target the appropriate support to address them. And that means having the confidence to distinguish between what is a complex special educational need for which the solution may involve an Education, Health, and Care plan, at one end of the spectrum, and what is simply an additional need to make up for a gap in learning, at the other end.

There has been too much confusion across a range of needs, and therefore too much confusion across a range of solutions to meet those needs. The over-identification of special educational needs was highlighted by His Majesty's Chief

Inspector of Education in last December's Ofsted Annual Report. This is not a Kent-specific problem, but it is a problem that demands a solution from the Kent area.

I said you were the most important people the children with SEN are likely to meet. I say that because all teachers will impart knowledge and skills, and vitally important those two things are. But you, and the choices you make, and the experience you bring, and the advice you give will shape the lives of children with SEN. You will lift their horizons and raise their aspirations. When others around them see their limitations, and when the children themselves may look inwards and reflect on what they can't do, you will focus on what they can do.

The aspirations you raise will be as diverse as the children and young people who have them. For some it will be going to college to study a course they never dreamt they could do. For others, the aspiration will be more modest. It may be getting on a bus and travelling to school and returning home on their own. Whatever they may be, those aspirations won't just see them through their next examinations. Those are the aspirations that will set them on a pathway to an independent life. And that's why I say you have such an important role. For the student, yes. But also for society.

I look forward to working with you in the months and years ahead, and may I wish you a hugely successful conference.

*** Ends ***