



APPG on Dyslexia and other Specific Learning Difficulties

24 April 2019

Present: Sharon Hodgson MP (Chair), Lord Addington, Paul Masterton MP

Secretariat: British Dyslexia Association

Presenters: Mollie King, Pennie Aston, Jo Crawford, Helen Ross

Apologies: None

Opening remarks from Sharon Hodgson MP

Sharon is the Member of Parliament for Washington & Sunderland West, the Shadow Minister for Public Health, and the Chair of the APPG for Dyslexia and other Specific Learning Difficulties.

Sharon welcomed those present and introduced the line-up of speakers.

Presentation by Mollie King + Q & A

Mollie King is a singer and BBC Radio 1 presenter. Mollie, who is dyslexic and has been a long-time champion for the issue, will be talking about growing up with dyslexia and how it is helped shaped her success.

Mollie King shared her experience of being diagnosed with dyslexia aged ten, and how it affected her career as a singer and BBC Radio One presenter through her difficulty learning lyrics and reading an autocue. Mollie highlighted the importance of early diagnosis in helping people with dyslexia achieve their full potential. Thanks to an early diagnosis, Mollie was able to get the access arrangements she needed for her exams in secondary school and achieved 3As at A-Level.

Sharon Hodgson MP thanked Mollie and shared her own experiences of the education system as a parent who raised a son with dyslexia and reiterated that importance of a diagnosis in providing a comforting label for young people struggling in school with dyslexia.

Q&A session included:

- Question on the level and type of support Mollie's school gave her. Mollie answered that the school and teachers were pro-active in spotting her dyslexia and implementing exam support such as extra time and use of a laptop.
- Question on the level and type of support Mollie has received in the workplace. Mollie explained that it was difficult in the recording studio and she had to work very hard to memorise her lyrics in advance as she struggled to read them first time, but that at Radio 1 her scripts are highlighted in yellow to help her read them. She emphasised the benefit of having supportive co-workers.

- Paul Masterton MP asked for advice for his young constituents with dyslexia who are about to sit their exams. Mollie said it helped her to revise with other people so that you have someone to help you with reading over notes.
- Lord Addington asked if any particular technology had helped. Mollie said being able to type her thoughts and use speech-to-text had been useful.

Presentation by Pennie Aston + Q & A

Pennie Aston is the dyslexic Director and Founder of GroOops Dyslexia Aware Counselling – a registered charity with a vision to create a healthy dyslexia aware world, focussing on strengths, developing resilience building, therapeutic, dyslexia aware approaches and promoting awareness generally of the emotional repercussions of dyslexia.

Sharon Hodgson MP introduced Pennie Aston from GroOops.

Pennie Aston outlined the work that GroOops do in providing therapeutic interventions for people going through the process of a diagnosis as neurodiverse. She shared that all the staff at GroOops are neurodiverse themselves. GroOops is intended to look after the emotional welfare of those with dyslexia. Pennie raised the issue of educational conformity, and the concerns that neurodiverse children are being forced through an education system that emotionally traumatises them. Pennie outlined some major employers who have a supportive attitude to dyslexic staff: GCHQ, Barclays, Hampshire Police, etc.

Sharon Hodgson MP thanked Pennie and shared her experiences

Q&A session included:

- Question regarding dyslexia-friendly workplaces and what they look like. Pennie directed her to examples of dyslexia-friendly employers in the room, including Hampshire Police, and explained how people with dyslexia often find their skillsets and personal strengths aren't maximised in jobs they are in.
- Lord Addington made the point that investing in supporting dyslexic staff will also benefit a company in terms of greater productivity.
- Question about how GroOops is addressing the causes of issues for dyslexic people in education and the workplace, rather than just dealing with the fallout. Pennie explained that the name GroOops comes from the frustration of getting things wrong and that the organisation started off working in schools, but found they were being used as a last resort and saw a lot of the emotions of those with dyslexia not being addressed.

Presentation by Jo Crawford + Q & A

Jo Crawford is 22 years old and an Ambassador for the British Dyslexia Association. She finished her undergraduate degree at the University of Exeter last year and is now studying a Masters in Conflict Security and Development.

Jo Crawford explained her backstory as an ambassador for the British Dyslexia Association; from being diagnosed with dyslexia in Year 2, not passing her 11+ but getting into grammar school on an appeal, to recently graduating from the University of Exeter. She described the struggle of shifting the way she looked at her dyslexia, from a battle between dyslexia and her, to a battle between herself and the school. Jo spoke of accessing external tuition to help her study, and of the difficulty in seeing friends and peers be diagnosed later in life.

Sharon Hodgson MP reiterated the importance of diagnosis in the early stages of the education system and raised the point of dyslexic people being disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system.

Q&A session included:

- The issue of trauma post-diagnosis.

- The need for better training as people with managerial positions aren't well equipped with knowledge on how to support dyslexics.

Presentation by Dr Helen Ross + Q & A

Dr Helen Ross is a fully qualified special needs teacher and former SENCO, currently working in a mainstream school. She specialises in supporting young people with specific learning difficulties; her PhD focussed on how young people with dyslexia, their families and teachers experienced the current SEND policy framework in mainstream education. Helen's research explores stakeholder experiences of SEND provision within the mainstream education sector. She also provides expert advice, tuition and CPD to school, parents and learners, through her own enterprise 'Helen's Place', is an Academy Council Member of Wiltshire primary school and is Chair of the Wiltshire Dyslexia Association.

Helen outlined her experience as a former SENCO now doing a PhD. She highlighted the problem with identification and data on the numbers of dyslexic students.

Q&A session included:

- Advice on whether to send a dyslexic child to a mainstream school or specialist school.
- A discussion on how to access cheaper diagnosis. Helen recommended online assessments. It was raised that GL Assessments are more affordable at £6.25 per person. The importance of proper assessments was also raised. The possibility of free assessments with Helen Arkell was mentioned.
- Question on accountability in the education system. Helen explained that Ofsted make some reference to SENCOs but base their evaluation on linear progress.

General comments from the audience

Attendees were reminded that the BDA report was being released the Monday after the meeting. (This can be accessed here:

[https://cdn.bdadyslexia.org.uk/documents/News/May-APPG for Dyslexia and other SpLDs report - Human cost of dyslexia final.pdf?mtime=20190507112230](https://cdn.bdadyslexia.org.uk/documents/News/May-APPG%20for%20Dyslexia%20and%20other%20SpLDs%20report%20-%20Human%20cost%20of%20dyslexia%20final.pdf?mtime=20190507112230))

Closing remarks from Sharon Hodgson MP

Sharon Hodgson MP thanked speakers for attending. Meeting closed at 19.02.

The British Dyslexia Association provides the secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Dyslexia and other SpLDs

<https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/about/appg-dyslexia-and-spld-all-party-parliamentary-group>

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