

## **PE1704/O**

EIS submission of 2 November 2018

### **Summary**

The EIS welcomes the opportunity to comment on petition PE1704, which is calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that an agenda of real and meaningful change for autistic people is pursued by ensuring various changes by 2021.

We are commenting from the perspective of teachers (over 80% of teachers in Scotland are members of the EIS), and therefore have most interest in the recommendation that *“children with autism in mainstream schools will have their assessed needs for classroom support met by an ASL assistant with a recognised autism qualification as part of a mandatory registration process for ASL professionals.”* Our remarks about this aspect of the petition are on page 2.

We have no specific remarks about the recommendation that every person in Scotland going through an autism diagnostic procedure should be assessed within a calendar year, although clearly early diagnosis is helpful, and the current lengthy delays between referral, diagnosis and receipt of post-diagnostic support are unhelpful to the child or young person, their family, and those in their learning establishment.

In term of whether young adults with autism should have a statutory right to specialist support from their local authority up to the age of 25, we have no specific policy on this. However, we do recognise that it is important for young adults to be supported at transition stages in their lives, for example, as they move to further or higher education.

In terms of whether an Autism Act is needed to enshrine specific rights and services for autistic people in our legal system, we have no position in formal policy on this, but would tend to take the view that there is currently significant legislative and policy architecture to protect rights, and that what is needed is in fact improved implementation and appropriate resourcing of existing provisions.

The existing Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended), GIRFEC, the Equality Act 2010 and the UNCRC all provide a strong foundation for meeting the needs of people with autism during their education. Regrettably, however, sustained under-resourcing of the education system, and specifically of additional support for learning provision, has meant the promise of policy not being fully delivered.

### **Meeting the needs of children with autism in mainstream schools**

The petitioners recommend that children with autism in mainstream schools should have their assessed needs for classroom support met by an ASL assistant with a recognised autism qualification as part of a mandatory registration process for ASL professionals.

There are several aspects to this recommendation:

- children with autism being in mainstream schools
- such children having their 'assessed needs' for classroom support met
- those needs being met by an ASL assistant
- that assistant having a recognised autism qualification
- ASL professionals being part of a mandatory registration process.

We have comments to make on each of these aspects, as follows.

### **Mainstreaming**

Whilst we support inclusive education in principle, and believe that children, schools and learning communities derive many benefits individually and collectively from having diverse learning populations, the current approach to mainstreaming is not working. Our members have described it as 'mainstreaming on the cheap' and 'inclusion without resources'. This is a fundamental issue which must be addressed. An added challenge is that there is a range of need across the autism spectrum; the support/environment one pupil requires can be quite different to the needs of another with an ASD diagnosis.

It is also important to recognise that for some children, even with good resourcing, mainstream schools are not the most suitable learning environment. Schools can be noisy, brightly-lit environments, which can be overwhelming for children with sensory issues, and especially in a context of growing school rolls/declining teacher numbers, which leads to large class sizes. Some children with autism simply cannot cope in these environments, and their behaviour is so challenging as to be dangerous to them, their peers and to staff.

Our members working with children with additional support needs, including autism, report that their daily work can be very rewarding, but it is also difficult and stressful, and they can experience serious violence and disruption from pupils, including being bitten, spat on, scratched, slapped and grabbed. Many colleagues report behaviour management concerns as their biggest difficulty, and don't feel safe at work. This is especially true in mainstream schools.

It is vital, therefore, that special schools, with appropriate teacher-pupil ratios, continue to exist and to be valued. The presumption of mainstreaming does not preclude some children with autism being educated in special schools where that would better meet their needs and be less disruptive to other learners.

### **Children having their needs for classroom support assessed**

We are aware of serious issues with the assessment process across many local authorities at present. Our members report that the children with the most serious and complex learning difficulties are getting priority, and others who can by and large manage in school are not being assessed quickly enough or with enough external inputs.

There are far too few Educational Psychologists, which hinders the assessment of needs. The number of EPs practising in Scotland fell by a tenth in the three years from 2012 to 2015. There were 370 trained EPs practising in Scottish local

authorities in 2015 - 10% fewer than the 411 practising in 2012. We would link this to the 2012 Scottish Government decision to remove bursary funding from the course.

Despite a recent announcement of new investment, the only university in Scotland due to offer educational psychology training next year has said it will not be running the course, meaning that there may be no new entrants to the profession in 2021.

### **Children having their needs met by an ASL assistant**

This ask, while worthy in its intentions, overlooks the role of classroom and ASL teachers, who, when well supported in an environment that is properly resourced, play a vitally important role in meeting the needs of children with autism. Schools should have enough teachers to enable them to meet the needs of all children; provision should also be augmented with assistants who are appropriately skilled in addressing the diversity of additional support needs, including autistic children's needs. Learning provision needs to be a partnership between teachers and specialist assistants, but with teachers, as the most highly qualified professionals in the classroom, leading young people's learning.

Our members regret the continuing depletion of ASL assistants across the education service. Some schools no longer have any one-to-one support for pupils with additional support needs, or have no specialist services, and members report that this has presented significant challenge.

We believe that an issue which requires further attention is the undervaluing of the roles of both ASL Teachers and ASL Assistants, which in part we would suggest is linked to a societal undervaluing of work which is predominantly carried out by women, often (wrongly) perceived as something that 'anyone could do', where the skills involved are not fully understood or respected.

We have anecdotal evidence that ASN teaching staff in schools are often used as supply, especially as the cover crisis worsens, and their specialist skills and expertise are therefore not being deployed as they ought to be.

### **ASL assistants having a recognised autism qualification**

It is important for all professionals working with children and young people to have appropriate, recognised qualifications. Regrettably, access to specialist qualifications on ASL has been eroded over the past two decades. At one time, teachers would have had access to funded post-graduate learning, with cover provided by the employer and time provided to enable the course of study to be completed successfully. Such opportunities rarely exist now. Teachers who engage in professional learning about ASL and autism matters often do so in their own time (on top of a huge workload) and at their own expense.

Schools lack funding to cover the cost of supply staff to enable release from the classroom of teachers wishing to undertake relevant professional learning and where funding may be available for cover, the requisite teachers are not.

Beyond recognised qualifications, we are aware that there are some good resources which can bolster teachers' knowledge of autism, e.g. the autism toolbox, although this might now need a refresh. However, teachers lack the time to take part in all the

self-directed personal study that they wish to. They also lack the time to reflect on how to change their practice; and to then make the differentiated curricular resources that are needed to meet the needs of autistic children, especially as autism can present so differently in every child on the spectrum and thus there is not an appropriate 'one size fits all' approach. Personalisation of learning resources requires time that is scarcely available in the current teaching climate. Concerted efforts must be made to address teacher numbers and workload.

### **ASL professionals being part of a mandatory registration process.**

We would note that all teachers are registered in Scotland by the General Teaching Council for Scotland, which helps to uphold the high quality of the teaching profession. We are not opposed to the registration of other professionals in a suitable, separate body. We would reject any attempts to create an overarching 'education workforce council' or similar, as was mooted by the Scottish Government as part of its education reform agenda.

### **Strategies and training already in place**

We note that the Committee is interested to understand what strategies and training are currently in place to enable our members to support young people with autism. We would say these are, in summary, professional learning offered by the EIS; information disseminated to/by our ASN Network; and EIS support for the Professional Update process, including member guidance, which can be a vehicle for enhanced learning on autism.

Our members report a dearth of support and professional learning opportunities from their employers, and difficulties accessing the courses that do exist, due to the ongoing teacher shortage which makes cover difficult to secure. Cuts to CPD budgets have reduced the professional learning offer from employers and members' access to courses supplied by external providers, for which there is a fee.

### **Wider issues**

We wish to raise four wider issues, namely budget cuts and rising need; class sizes; attainment narratives; and intersectionality.

### **A climate of cuts and rising need**

Cuts to school budgets, and to teacher numbers, which despite protection for the past two years have declined quite significantly overall since 2007, are very problematic. So too is the decline in support staff numbers. For example, Behaviour Support Staff in primary have reduced by 72% since 2008, (from 32 posts to 9), and the number of ASN assistants in 2016, while similar now to the 2010 figure, has declined by 730 (FTE) since 2013, when it peaked.

The number of teaching staff in primary schools with a general ASN role has declined from 146 in 2008 to 68 in 2017 – a reduction of 53%. The number of teaching staff in secondary schools with a Behaviour Support role has declined from 127 in 2008 to 71 in 2017 – a reduction of 79%.

The number of teachers with additional support for learning as their main subject fell by 166 between 2007 and 2016, a fall of 5.4%. The reduction since 2009, when the number of such teachers peaked, is starker – a fall of 14.8%. ASN teacher numbers also fell in 16 out of Scotland's 32 local authorities over the period 2007 to 2016. In secondary schools, there are now 374 FTE fewer support posts than in 2011 - a reduction of 20%. (*Sources: Teacher Census and Parliamentary Question S5W-05579*).

Scottish Government data confirms that the number of pupils with ASN has vastly increased. In 2016, 170,329 pupils (24.9% of all pupils) were identified as having ASN; in 2011, the number was 98,523. The increase over those five years was 73%. It is hard to see how it is possible to 'Get it Right for Every Child', including children with autism, when so many now have identified needs, and schools are operating within austerity budgets.

### **Class sizes**

EIS policy is that no class should exceed 20 pupils, while various circumstances will justify smaller groups (e.g. composite classes, classes featuring pupils with ASN). We regret the Scottish Government's failure thus far to meet its target of reducing class sizes; in fact, they continue to edge upwards. Evidence clearly indicates that smaller classes have a significant impact on the quality of the learning experience, the ability of teachers to respond to pupils' needs, and on achievement and attainment. Pupils with autism would benefit from smaller groupings, as much as and perhaps more than all learners would. Quite simply, a smaller number of people in the room would reduce the amount of noise, movement and unpredictable action that many autistic children find distressing, while enabling greater one to one support for individual children, including those with autism.

### **Attainment narratives**

We wish to note that the current debate about attainment in Scottish schools, which has had a focus on achievement of CfE levels, SQA exam results and standardised assessment data, has not visibly taken into account other types of achievement. This narrowing of the discourse around what achievement means is concerning for EIS members. Some children with autism will have very different achievements than those captured by CfE levels and SQA exam data, and that is hugely important and valid. What matters most is children meeting their potential, and the four capacities of the Curriculum for Excellence.

Of concern to EIS members, also, is the impact of SQA decision-making on students with additional support needs, including autism, and the workload of their teachers. The introduction of exams in some subjects at National 5 and Higher, and the lengthening of exams in most subjects, poses particular challenges for autistic young people who find unfamiliar situations, especially those that are strictly governed by rules, a real difficulty. For many autistic young people, sustaining concentration for such prolonged periods of time is an unfair demand. While there is the option to apply for Alternative Assessment Arrangements to support such students, the SQA demands that applications, supported by evidence, which can be very time-consuming to gather, are made on an annual basis, in every subject that the student

is being presented for. The EIS has urged the SQA to adopt a more streamlined, common-sense approach to the application process but this, so far, has fallen on deaf ears.

### **Intersectionality**

We note that not all children with autism are the same - far from it. The so-called 'triad of impairments' can affect all children on the spectrum differently. Like all children, they each have various qualities and characteristics, and some may face extra barriers to learning such as having English as an additional language. It will be important that any strategy which is developed to meet the needs of learners with autism strongly reflects that one size does not fit all; and is realistic about the time required for teachers to learn more about how being on the autism spectrum can manifest in many different ways, particularly when combined with other characteristics.

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