

School Leaders Scotland

Submission to the Hearing of the Education, Children and Young People Committee of the Scottish Parliament on the morning of Wednesday 21 February 2024 regarding their inquiry into Additional Support for Learning.

Theme 1 – Implementation of the presumption of mainstreaming

From the perspective of a members in secondary schools the presumption of mainstreaming has not been entirely successful. The principle of the policy is hard to argue against however the implementation is problematic if not resourced. Unfortunately, it also means that we are held to policy which is, more often than not, unattainable under current resourcing/structures/constraints. Trends in budget cuts exacerbates the problem. There are a number of concerns emerging with the provision available for children with ASN both in the primary and secondary sectors which could be loosed grouped thusly:

- Accessibility of the curriculum and associated workload for mainstream teachers in catering for the increasing range of (diverse) needs in a classroom setting.
- Increasing reports of distressed/distressing behaviour and real issues around behaviour being exhibited in classrooms by learners leading to the disruption of learning for the majority of pupils.
- A lack of consideration around both academic ASN and emotional ASN and how each individual learner will cope within a mainstream setting.
- A continued move to presumption of mainstreaming without sufficient alternative support in place
- The cutting/restriction of access to existing additional provision and reduction in services provided by external agencies and providers to support learners with ASN (in particular SEBD needs).
- The discrepancy between real term cuts in educational funding, the enforced retaining of pupil: teacher ratios (which ensures a greater proportion of available finance has to be allocated to teaching staff) and thus the staffing and finance available to divert towards those learners with ASN.

Whilst many local authorities have seen wide ranging changes to the provision of ASN, the proportion of learners with at least one ASN has risen in recent years (in some schools the number of learners with a recognised ASN – including SEBD and mental health issues alongside categories such as ASD, EAL, ADHD, dyslexia and various medical conditions – has risen by over 50%).

This has greatly changed the experience in mainstream classrooms for both staff and learners. In some schools this has resulted in the introduction of Small Group Settings to widen supports for learners with ASD and complex communication difficulties. However often no clear staff to pupil ratio has been outlined by the authority and it is unclear exactly whether they are seen as alternative provision or a mainstream provision.

While the presumption of mainstream does look to move towards a more inclusive experience for all young people within their own community, it also creates a system whereby a number of young people are not being placed in a setting which currently has the resource to appropriately support for their need/s.

Many mainstream schools are trying to adapt and change in order to ensure that 'mainstream' is actually suitably resourced in order to meet the many needs of our learners.

More recently we have become aware of cluster primary schools across Scotland being asked to support complex/significant needs (inc. medical) with no additional resourcing from their local authorities. Senior Leaders in schools are often left to try and make something work by “being creative”.

In many schools, there have been lots of adaptations and changes to practice happening, but this is often still falling short of what is required to meet the complexities of the needs of the children we have within our schools.

There has been an increasing number of learners entering high school who are working at early/early first level and unable to access the secondary curriculum. At the same time the number of PSWs available is reducing with staffing budgets remaining static as teacher salaries have increased. This reduces in class support availability, typically meaning multiple learners with high levels of ASN being placed in the same class or group to ensure support of some level is in place. Class teachers have reported increasing uncertainty of how to manage having such high numbers of ASN within individual classes.

Linked to these concerns is the very tangible issue around learners for whom, academically, the secondary curriculum is accessible, but the social side of mainstream school is incredibly difficult and anxiety inducing. These learners are not being served/supported by either mainstream or alternative provision and the evidence is there in increasing numbers of learners with ASD/ASN who are currently school refusers and report their inability to enter classrooms and busy school buildings. This is in turn leading to high reported levels of poor mental health among those with ASN.

In this respect the presumption of mainstream has led to poorer experience of learning in school both for learners with ASN and those mainstream pupils whose learning is being disrupted by behaviours that are signifying distress and difficulty in accessing the learning.

Further, many parental expectations of mainstream provision run contrary to professional assessment and recommendation. For example, a young person with severe and complex needs may be in a position to benefit from a school’s well-resourced ASN provision, but the insistence of the parent that their young person goes into mainstream is a significant concern of head teachers.

Where the presumption of mainstreaming has been effective has been increasing awareness of strategies to support learners with ASN and supporting those who are able to manage socially within the bigger setting. However, these needs to be far greater opportunities to allow learners to access alternative provision where this is not possible and more regular review and movement should be possible between establishments to facilitate this.

The presumption of mainstream can also lead to an offering that does not meet entitlements. Mainstream schools are expected to support young people who require 1:1 support of a teacher or support assistant but this often comes with no added resource. As a result, choices have to be made between a more limited timetable with the correct support or less time in school. There is also a lack of agencies and partners to work with to help bolster the experience and those which we do have access to have limited space or are very costly.

When mainstream is not appropriate for a young person, we are also seeing an increase of these young people still being placed within a mainstream school, due to the fact that there are ‘no more spaces’ within the specialist schools and provisions. The evidence from our members is that this it is not a one-off circumstance; there are often children for whom a specialist setting has been deemed as being the correct setting through placement change panels, but the lack of spaces means that those children are then either placed for a period of time within their local mainstream school or, in some cases, indefinitely within a

mainstream setting. Not only is this highly distressing in many cases for the families and young people but it also has an immense impact on mainstream schools and their resources – as these young people often require high levels of resource to be prioritised for them alone.

Looking ahead, we can now see an entire range of learning and physical needs where some of our learners will have the pressures of sitting exams (N5, Higher etc.) whilst at the same time we have young people who transition to us from primary and still do not know their basic phonics. The challenges of this and the impact upon the capability of class teachers to meet the needs of all of these learners is then huge. While teachers are and can be capable of supporting all of these aforementioned learners, they cannot do so without a system of support.

Theme 2: Impact of COVID-19 on additional support for learning

- Increase in need around mental health, non-attendance/school refusal, trauma related need and resultant behaviour challenges to which these lead; increase in need for nurture groups/hubs
- Appears to be an increasing expectation to meet needs alongside annual cuts to funding allocations in ASL (teaching and PSA budgets allocations).
- ASL absorbing the increase in needs **and** attempting to fill the gap of services that no longer exist.
- Growing minority of parents have expectations that are unmanageable.

Theme 3 - The use of remedies as set out in the Act

Policy directs us to consider views of the “team around the child” to make decisions. Parents and carers are involved at regular points in decision making that affects the child (with the initial exception of the professionals meeting at the end of P6 where decisions are taken about transition pathways). Parents/carers are involved in reviewing IEPs (in primary) and learning passports/CSPs (secondary) and in Assessment of Wellbeing Meetings and Child’s Planning Meetings to review progress, identify concerns and plan for next steps.

While there is an assumption that all communication from parents/carers is treated in the same way, often however we are seeing an increase in parents/children receiving support due to the fact they are capable of advocating for their child and themselves. Sometimes parental views are more powerful than education professionals who understand available resourcing team around the child. Often this leads to a re-allocation of resources away from other young people so that the loudest parents are supported despite best efforts to use robust systems to allocate resources equitably.

However, there are reports of third-party representation routinely making recommendations to schools, e.g., asking for additional support / PSAs / resourcing, without a professional understanding of educational need/resources. Such verbal/written representations are frequently used by parents to re-enforce their stance.

Across schools, much is done to be able to engage parents and their views at the earliest level, in order to be able to avoid any disputes or difficulties arising in the first instance.

SLS members have related situations where a school has gone through several levels of investigation (resulting in an upcoming ASN tribunal) because parents have disagreed with

decisions that have been made by professionals. Again, this is likely because schools are unable to meet the policy requirements due to under resourcing and so local authorities find it difficult to defend in an ASN tribunal because policy does not match resourcing.

In relation to this, as well as school staff, QIOs/QIMs/Service leads/etc appear to spend a lot of time dealing with complaints and ASN tribunals. This likely means they have less time and resourcing of their own to be proactive. Consequentially, local authorities are overturning head teachers' decisions and disempowering schools to take forward informed decisions about individual young people.

There is an acknowledgement that there are systems in place for parents/carers to dispute issues and there are supports such as advocacy services but, again, there is still a huge gap in this area in terms of the knowledge of what support is available and also the resource behind this.

One area of potential concern is the weight of documentary evidence required to construct even an Assessment of Wellbeing. Another linked concern is the lack of other responsible agencies not taking the lead in creating this documentation, specifically Social Policy where the concerns are more social/familial rather than directly educational.

In summary:

The policy and principles of inclusion and presumption of mainstreaming are overall a positive aspirational goal and in general we would say this is a value held by colleagues almost universally.

However, policy does not match the level of resourcing on the front line in schools (and it is only going to decrease further under current financial climate). Time, finances and resourcing are placed on developing and managing bureaucratic ways to plan and review interventions. Conversely, resourcing is taken away from those that have the time and money actually to **do** the intervention activities.

The process of remedies is challenging to manage as a result of the above because GIRFEC/Inclusion/Presumption of mainstreaming is a promise that we can't keep due to resourcing levels.

If the presumption of mainstream is to be truly successful, then mainstream schools have to be afforded the time/energy/budgets/resources required to adapt.

We, as an Association, are absolutely committed to inclusion and believe in the underpinning value of presumption of mainstream, however, the resources, environments and constraints that we are expected to deliver this within currently are resulting in poorer outcomes for young people. As ever, schools are doing all in their power to combat this.