

The Empowerment Project - Stronger Voices for Fairer Futures

Note on School Inspections for Equality, Human Rights & Civil Justice Committee

20 February 2026

Key Takeaways

STAND is deeply concerned by the recurring patterns in recent inspection reports that contribute to the stigma and misunderstanding which negatively affects the lives of the neurodivergent children and families we support.

We urge the Committee to consider making specific recommendations in its Inquiry Report to address our concerns.

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Introduction

Dani Cosgrove gave evidence on behalf of STAND to the Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee of the Scottish Parliament as part of the Neurodivergence Inquiry on Tuesday 17 February 2026. During her evidence, she mentioned concerns about school inspections in Scotland.

This note highlights some of our key concerns. We have previously written to the Cabinet Secretary for Education about our concerns, and we have submitted a consultation response as part of [Education Scotland's Consultation on school inspections](#).

Copies of this correspondence (including the response issued on behalf of the Cabinet Secretary) can be found here: www.standuk.co.uk/empowerment/workstreams/school-inspections

Stenton Primary School Report

This issue first came to our attention when we read the inspection report for [Stenton Primary School](#) in East Lothian. We knew of parents at that school who were particularly upset after reading the report, especially given that the school is extremely small and therefore it was clear to certain parents that some of the derogatory comments in the inspection report were likely about their own children.

Blaming ASN children for negative impact on peers

A major concern was the way the report attributed responsibility for the negative impact on the learning of some children to the challenges faced by other children, those children being children who require support to work independently and that find independent tasks challenging.

“Most children work well in groups or pairs however, a minority of children require support to work independently. This minority of children find engaging in class discussion and staying focussed during teaching inputs and independent tasks challenging. Consequently, this is impacting negatively on the learning of their peers.”

The communication style or “challenges” of individual children should never be presented as the reason other children are not receiving an adequate education. It is for the school to raise their expectations of themselves to ensure that they are providing all children with the education they deserve in accordance with the principles of GIRFEC. It is narratives such as this which lead to neurodivergent children and

their families feeling isolated and ostracised by their peers, and causes them to feel embarrassed and guilty when the school's failures are attributed to their neurodevelopmental needs.

Behaviourist approaches

Immediately after the extract copied above, the following was stated:

“Most children feel staff encourage them to do the best they can, however, staff need to now raise their expectations of all children’s behaviour. This should result in a calmer, quieter classroom with increased levels of engagement and less low-level behaviours being seen.”

The supposition that “**staff need to now raise their expectations of all children’s behaviour**” is deeply misplaced, when viewed through a trauma-informed, neuro-inclusive, child- centred lens. To infer this suggestion, without fully addressing, acknowledging and meeting the underlying, fundamental neurodevelopmental (amongst other) needs of every child, will only further victimise the very children that are in need of the highest level of attuned, informed and compassionate support and care.

Eye Contact

The Report then goes on to say:

“Most younger children listen to others well and use eye contact appropriately.”

The idea that a child’s eye contact could be “appropriate” or “inappropriate” is prejudicial towards children with communication differences, and contributes to the stigma and misunderstanding around neurodivergent children.

Expression and Pace of Speech

This is exacerbated by the following comment:

“Most older children read fluently using appropriate expression and pace.”

The use of language such as this demonstrates a lack of commitment to neuro-affirming practice, and is inconsistent with a “needs-based approach” to the care of neurodivergent children.

Other Examples

Unfortunately, this was not an isolated example. We conducted research on other inspection reports from recent years, and found comments such as:

- *“A minority of children display dysregulated behaviour. This has a significantly negative impact on their learning and that of their peers.”*
- *“Senior leaders... need to continue to work... to raise expectations of behaviour and ensure these shared expectations and boundaries are consistently applied.”*
- *“Raising expectations of behaviour” encourages behaviourist responses and masking.*
- *“A few children display low-level or dysregulated behaviour that impacts negatively on the learning of others.”*
- *“Staff need to increase their expectations of all children’s behaviour so that they are respectful and ready to learn.”*
- *“In most classes, the majority of children behave well. In a few classes, a minority of children display low-level disruptive behaviours that impacts on their engagement and the engagement of others in learning.”*
- *“However, a few children continue to display seriously disruptive behaviour at times that affects the wellbeing of others.”*

All these examples imply that the dysregulated children, who clearly have unmet needs, are the “problem”.

Prejudice and Stigma

Inspection reports shape public understanding and professional attitudes. Language that implies neurodivergent children are the “problem” reinforces the stigma faced by these children, and their families, everywhere they turn - whether it be the playground at school drop-off, social media, mainstream media or even bodies such as the EIS¹.

¹ For more info see: www.standuk.co.uk/empowerment/workstreams/restraint-and-seclusion

Example from social media

A recent example from social media is a public comment on a post by a local newspaper in Ayrshire, the Ayrshire Advertiser. The post itself was a news article about behaviour in schools.

The comment was as follows:

“A primary age child I know well reports regular meltdowns - tables tipped over, chairs thrown about, kids being “stabbed” with pencils, foul mouthed abuse of teaching staff. These are common occurrences. The same child all the time.

Is this even remotely appropriate (never mind safe!) learning environment??

Put the child out of the class, contact the parents and start suspending and excluding again. The majority should not have their life prospects ruined by the minority any longer.”

Language such as that in the quotes listed above does nothing to shift public attitudes away from the sentiment expressed in this comment. It is bad enough that the families we support should be subjected to this stigmatised attitude by members of the public; but even worse that these are senior, experienced education professionals which are (whether they mean to or not) compounding the narrative that the cause of the negative impact on other children is the dysregulated behaviour, rather than the failure of the education system to properly support the needs of the dysregulated child”.

Scottish ADHD Coalition

During the Committee’s evidence session on 17 February 2025, Bill Colley from the Scottish ADHD Coalition which really resonated with us:

“If a child had a meltdown in school it was our fault... If a child had a meltdown in a classroom then something had gone wrong during the school day...”

He is, of course, absolutely correct about this. It is always heartening to hear someone with so much experience and knowledge speak so definitively about this issue, thereby contributing to the efforts to dispel such negative attitudes. It is disappointing that HMIE does not have the same approach.

NAIT Guidance

The Committee will be familiar with the NAIT Guidelines, such as the [Key Messages for Primary School Staff](#).

Positively framed language - “behaviour”

Page 6 of this document states:

“We are encouraging professionals to stop using the word ‘behaviour’ and instead to talk about a child’s ‘actions and responses’ and the context in which they arise. Instead of placing the problem within the child, there is shared responsibility for the situation arising, with a need for the adults to adapt and change their actions and responses.... Where distressed actions and responses are occurring regularly, an autism lens on a risk assessment is advised. Positively framed language is crucial.”

It is astonishing to see such a stark disregard of this advice demonstrated within the wording of the inspection reports.

Neuroaffirming approach

Page 9 goes on to say:

“There are many ways that people communicate and interact with others, process information and make sense of the world. It is important that we do not see autistic people as presenting with series of deficits but rather that we live in a neurodiverse world where differences between people are expected and are viewed positively.”

It is clear that some of the examples from the inspection reports noted above are not respecting this advice. The idea that a certain type of “eye contact” could be more or less appropriate than another is in direct contradiction to this advice.

STAND’s Message

We raise this with the Committee because stigma and misunderstanding is an underlying theme that spans across the majority of the challenges that neurodivergent children and their families face within the education system.

If those that actually assess the education system cannot get it right, then it is difficult to have any hope that things will change. Further, given the level of experience in the education system that is required for someone to become an inspector, it would be reasonable to assume that this misunderstanding is systemic.

There does not seem to be any accountability here. We raised this issue with the Cabinet Secretary, and we were advised that our concerns had been passed on to HMIE, however the report still remains publicly available as originally drafted. Our view is that, in order to demonstrate a commitment to changing the culture and attitude within Scotland's education system, HMIE should take accountability for using language which is contrary to NAIT Guidance, and should commit to implementing neuroaffirming practices in future.

We have submitted our response to Education Scotland's consultation on school inspections, but we urge the Committee to consider whether it is worth making specific recommendations in its Inquiry Report to ensure that the points we have made are given due weight and consideration.