

Cross-Party Group on Autism

31st October 2022, 14:00-16:00

Minutes

Attendees:

MSP:

Alexander Burnett, MSP
(Co-Convener)
Annie Wells MSP
(Co-Convener)
Daniel Johnson, MSP
Karen Adam, MSP
Stephanie Callaghan, MSP
Oliver Mundell, MSP

Invited Guests / Speakers:

Catherine Whitley – University of Strathclyde
Fran Foreman – Education Scotland
Laura McConnell
Ryan Cuzen

Secretariat:

Rob Holland – National Autistic Society Scotland
Suzi Martin – National Autistic Society Scotland
Stephen Caulfield – National Autistic Society Scotland
Charlene Tait – Scottish Autism
Mark McDonald – Scottish Autism
Joe Long – Scottish Autism

Non-MSP Group Members:

Ability Shetland	Adrian Lerna	Andrew Muir
Andy Williams	Anna Nicholson	Ben Paechter
Callum McCrosson	Carolyn Kennedy	Catherine Steedman
Cherie Morgan	Clare Kennedy	Clare Macer
David Anderson	David Nicholson	David Taylor
Debbie McColgan	Dominic Craig	Dorothy Barbour
Dorry McLaughlin	Ellen Starkey	Fiona Clarke
Henna Cundill	Jenny Peachey	Joshua Hennessy
Kabie Brook	Kate Monahan	Khiah Strachan
Kirsten Mutch	Laura Bilton	Lavinia Dowling
Leanne McNeill	Lesley Parker	Lorraine Harris
Louise Moth	Lyndsay Macadam	Margaret Smith
Maria Chan	Marie-Clare MacAskill	Maurice Frank
Melissa Bakhsh	Michelle Graham	Patricia Hewitt
Plus Forth Valley	Rachel Birch	Ramon Hutchinson
Richard Ibbotson	Ryan McGregor	Samuel Payne
Sarah Walker	Sean MacAskill	Shirley Moore
Sofia Akbar	Steve Billingham	Susan Chambers
Susan Fullerton	Suzanne Kinross	Tanya Knight
Tom Wightman	William Rae	

Convener's Welcome

Alex Burnett MSP welcomed attendees to the CPG. AB introduced the topic of the meeting: Education.

AB noted the following MSPs and thanked them all for their attendance: Annie Wells, Daniel Johnston, Karen Adam, Oliver Mundell, and Stephanie Callaghan.

AB reminded the CPG membership that there is a 'CPG Guide', outlining the remit and purpose of the Group – particularly relevant for new members.

AB introduced the speakers for the meeting on Education:

- **Fran Foreman**
 - Senior Education Officer for Inclusion, Additional Support Needs (ASN) at Education Scotland
- **Catherine Whitley**
 - Principal Teaching Fellow at the University of Strathclyde
- **Laura McConnell**
 - Autistic Writer, Speaker, Campaigner, Teacher
- **Ryan Cuzen**
 - Autistic Campaigner

Feedback from Accessibility Meeting – 17/10/22

Rob Holland (Director – National Autistic Society Scotland) thanked AB for his commitment, hard work & follow-up over the past year on promoting accessibility.

RH informed the CPG that 17th October was attended by several members, the Secretariat, and the Convener. A range of issues were being examined, including offering pre-meeting chats with new members on their participation, as well as utilising closed captions to assist. A 'Member's Survey' will be sent out in due course, which will seek input on future topics for discussion.

Annual General Meeting (AGM)

AB introduced the AGM, confirming that the Secretariat had received valid nominations in each of the roles required to be voted on:

- *Election of Convener*
- *Election of Deputy Convener*
- *Election of Secretariat*

With respect to the Election of a Convener and Deputy Convener, one valid nomination was received in each: Alexander Burnett MSP and Daniel Johnson MSP, respectively.

This was agreed unanimously by CPG members.

Several Autistic People's Organisations (APOs), already represented in the CPG's membership, made a request that they be represented on the Group's Secretariat for the year ahead, alongside Scottish Autism and the National Autistic Society Scotland.

This request was made specifically by four organisations: ARGH, AMASE, AUS, SEMA.

An individual representing these four organisations will join National Autistic Society Scotland and Scottish Autism on the Secretariat, assisting with the administration of future meetings.

This was agreed unanimously by CPG members.

Supporting Educators

Fran Foreman

*Senior Education Officer for Inclusion and Additional Support Needs
Education Scotland*

FF confirmed that she would share her presentation, for the benefit of members, with the CPG Secretariat after the meeting end.

FF spoke on how she works with a number of partners to support children and young people across school-age education all over Scotland.

FF remarked that Education Scotland's work on Inclusion and ASN is focused on four main themes:

- Supporting Practitioners with Relationships
- Being in Care
- Inclusion and Universal Support
- Rights and Participation

She noted that the Scottish Government have funded a Development Officer, within Education Scotland, for Autism, Inclusive Practice, and Learning Disability for a 23-month period. She has been tasked with driving this program forward. This includes the continued development of the 'Autism Toolbox', with a working group meeting twice per year.

The Toolbox is a free resource, available for educators with a range of different focus areas. Education Scotland continue to promote this nationally & regionally – across 32 local authorities – as well as at events.

FF affirmed that inclusion and additional support should never be an 'add-on'; it must be the foundation of legislation or policy.

Educators of the Future

Catherine Whitley

Principal Teaching Fellow

University of Strathclyde, PGDE

CW shared her presentation and explained that her work is primarily with student teachers on routes into teaching.

CW mentioned that the resources she will speak to were piloted at University of Strathclyde and serve as the baseline to support student teachers' positive engagements with autistic learners and their families.

CW touched on '*Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved*', a 2018 report published by National Autistic Society Scotland and Scottish Autism. She mentioned the importance of addressing many of the issues raised in the report – including the preparedness of new teachers entering the profession.

The key topics addressed within the University's teaching resource are as follows:

- Environment
- Providing Predictability
- Making Learning Meaningful
- Seeking to Understand Distressed Behavior
- Anticipating Adjustment
- Difference Over Deficit

CW clarified that the resources consist of four units, include key messages, links to video clips, and recommended reading.

CW explained some of the statistics around autistic learners in schools. 1.5% of young people are diagnosed autistic, with 86% of autistic children educated in mainstream schools; however, autistics disproportionately experience school exclusion.

Educator's Perspective

Laura McConnell

Autistic Writer, Speaker, Disability Campaigner, Teacher

LM introduced herself as an autistic individual and the parent of an autistic child.

Reflecting on her experience as a teacher, LM spoke to school-age exclusions; specifically, those 'informal' exclusions where young people are having to spend time away from the classroom on an *ad hoc* basis.

LM suggested that lower expectations for autistic pupils were prevalent in schools. This applies not only to the autistic child and their abilities, but also lower expectations of what the education sector can provide for them.

LM asserted that expectations are not adequate to support children with additional needs, despite all the resources that are available. For instance, training courses are not carried out by teachers; rather, they are run by health professionals. She expressed a wish that courses be led by autistic people and involve the education sector to a greater extent.

Young Person's Perspective

Ryan Cuzen

Autistic Campaigner

RC spoke about his participation in the 'Young Learners Project', who have run a series of podcasts on different experiences of transition in education.

RC talked about his own experiences during mainstream primary school. RC does not believe that his autism / additional support needs were recognised or understood during that time.

RC would like to see changes made to how society accommodates needs, to make sure everyone has a fair learning experience. The transition from secondary school to college should be planned beforehand, with college staff being made aware of existing requirements.

RC's own experience of this time was one of uncertainty and fear as he had no professional to turn to for support.

Q&A / Discussion

Question – Do you have any data on what proportion of schools, local authorities, teachers are actively using the autism toolbox?

FF mentioned that the previous platform / autism toolbox wasn't set up to correlate which local authorities were linking in. Anyone could access this free platform.

FF commented that they could consider putting out a survey.

Question – There has been a rise in parents deregistering their children in some areas

due to unmet need. Many have been suffering from anxiety-related school absence due to the lack of staffing, training, or funding. NAIT have great guidance on this toolbox, but schools are hesitant to use it – or will not use it. Why do you think this will be?

FF – We think we need to be very careful about very broad comments. There are schools that are using the NAIT guidance, but there is a lack of consistency.

Question – We have had 5 months of unlawful exclusions and a legal constraint and a lack of understanding of the autism spectrum, which is appalling. There is no accountability whatsoever. What can be done?

AB commented that this would better be taken to a local MSP to follow-up as an individual case.

FF stressed how awful it is when these situations occur. The aim must be to provide better understanding of inclusive practice and appropriate support for autistic learning. This is being driven via the ASL action plan and there will be refreshed information, guidance, and professional learning for all stakeholders.

Question – Is Autism awareness a mandatory unit in the undergraduate teaching degree? Are these autism resources created and delivered by autistic adults? Is it a single immersion day?

CW confirmed that these are mandatory, though once a course is accredited it cannot be altered.

[Note of clarification: in order to receive accreditation, providers of Initial Teacher Education must outline how their programme is designed to promote equality with specific reference to a range of neurodevelopmental differences, including autism]

Question – Are the autism resources created and delivered by the people with autism?

CW explained that whilst they were developed with autistic representation, autistic individuals do not deliver them. The purpose is that staff already in institutions provide these using input from autistic individuals.

Question – How can you distinguish between anxiety and stress?

CW explained that anxiety is different from stress and that this is touched on in the Autism Awareness module.

Question – The resource is helpful, but should this not also be available for qualified teachers as part of the mandatory continuing professional learning?

CW was unsure if the resources are to be encouraged as part of continuing professional learning.

Question – Where is the Curriculum for Excellence benefit for including social skill teaching as a valuable meta skill?

LM clarified that social skills are a key part of the curriculum and are embedded in the use of group learning activities. Whilst the focus is often on how autistic learners can blend in, and on the expectations of a neurotypical-focused society, there is merit in looking into how neurotypical learners can adapt to include autistic learners.

Question – What are the costs of universal design?

LM explained that this could vary from free items to the cost of printing things, up to more expensive items – and that this is often driven by policy decisions. Universal design is the process and there are ways to deliver it without it being too expensive.

Convener's Response

AB reflected on how many others will have had a similar experience to Ryan.

Question for MSP's – how can we ensure that adequate resources are being provided to local authorities?

AB suggested that everyone should get in touch with their local MSPs and Councillors to ensure they have a budget resource. AB indicated that this would be most helpful and would lead into council budgets the following years.

AOB

AB confirmed that there had been a request, from PASDA, to speak to the BBC Disclosure Scotland documentary on delayed discharge and out of area placements.

AB provided a brief synopsis of the content of the film since it is an issue with which he has some familiarity via his constituency casework.

Susan Chambers, of PASDA, shared her thoughts on the documentary. SC expressed concerns that the Minister's comments were less than reassuring.

SC - "...what is the plan for adults with delayed discharge and how will the Scottish Government meet the target of all delayed discharges to be released and moved on by 2024?"

AB thanked SC for her remarks and explained that he has been active on this issue for nearly six years on behalf of constituents. He is raising many of her points with the Minister and continues to press for a satisfactory answer.

AB thanked the Secretariat for preparing the Agenda, and the speakers for their contributions.

Written Contributions Made in the 'Zoom' Chat Function

Each of the entries below are verbatim lifts from the 'chat transcript', as provided by Zoom. Only those contributions marked with a 'C' at the time have been included in these Minutes, in line with what the Secretariat set out in the pre-meet papers.

Consequently, the entries below may not 'flow' as a conversation; however, many are effective as stand-alone remarks.

David Anderson East Ayrshire NASWUT:

Seeking thoughts on the post school ie Further Education and Autism. Do you work with the actual Education within the University ie the Students and lecturers not just in the Teaching Profession. More and more students are entering with ASD

Steve Billingham:

These immersion days are urgently needed for already qualified teachers across the country.

Joshua Hennessy:

'Environment first' - is that a very bug section? It's a small part of the list, but presumably it is a very big part. Question for Catherine

*Ramon Hutchingson:
Is it a single immersion day?*

*David Anderson East Ayrshire NASWUT:
Laura you are spot on*

*Steve Billingham:
A really powerful reality check Laura. Thank you for shining a light on the woefully inadequate support available for autistic learners and the teachers who are (in the main) trying to ensure they thrive.*

*Lyndsay Macadam SWAN:
Extremely important points very well made, thank you Laura, we should not be an add-on to the mainstream, but a part of its variety*

*Joshua Hennessy:
What are the costs of universal design? (For Laura)*

*David Nicholson:
Very powerful presentation Laura. You raised a lot of good points. Made me think a lot about my time in Miami stream school as an autistic pupil. We need to also make sure we sure the Higher Education staff also get better training on autism and how to support autistic students through their time in University. Similar applies to the FE sector too.*

*Daniel Johnson:
Question for all panelists - do we have sufficient clarity on what we are seeking to address? I was in a school today where visual impairment and hearing impairment appeared on a neurodiversity wall. Infact the whole wall just consisted of diagnostic labels. Do we have the right understandings and terminology for teachers and children alike?*

*Ben Paechter:
Question for MSPs - how can we ensure that adequate resources are provided to LAs so that all the great ideas spoken about today can be put into practice ?*

*Maurice Frank:
How well do the speakers think your work is preventing, specifically,*

*Laura Bilton she/her:
One of my concerns is that "autism" is being taken as a standalone issue, whereas every autistic person has a variety of intersectional identities. If we don't consider those, there is a risk that diagnostic overshadowing ignores discrimination at school such as racism, transphobia etc., which may actually be the "problem". An intersectional approach is crucial*

*Andy @A'n'A:
Absolutely Catherine - how can people train for something now that we will understand better tomorrow?*

*Richard:
I hear from parents where teachers are not understanding/accepting what the child needs unless there is a diagnosis. Particularly when there is a difference in how the child is at home compared to school*

*Kabie (ARGH) they/them:
Can the next CPG be on PBS please*

Anna Nicholson:

As Laura McConnell says, social skills shouldn't be taught solely to Autistic children. The idea that Autistic children have a 'deficit' in social skills is a neurotypical-centric idea. Any deficits in communication between Autistic and non-Autistic children rest equally with both parties.

Michelle Graham:

Working on an Enquiry Line, I mostly speak to parents whose children have a PDA Profile of Autism. These enquiries are categorised and monitored. In Scotland the Majority of queries are about unmet need. My query on the anxiety related guidance is based on those numbers

Fiona Clarke:

Anxiety implies a problematic thought process in the individual. Stress is the impact of an aversive environment over time. The training materials should address this.

Charlene Tait Scottish Autism:

Would very much support a focus on these issues

Charlene Tait Scottish Autism:

There are some other suggestions in the chat

Kabie (ARGH) they/them:

PBS for next topic please

ENDS.