

Cross Party Group on Children and Young People

Education Reform

Tuesday 29th October 2024 14:00 – 15:30

Minutes

Chair: Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP

Present MSPs: Meghan Gallacher

Invited guests

Nicola Killean, The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

Dr Alma Harris, facilitator of the National Discussion and Honorary Professor at the School of Education, University of Glasgow

Dr Carol Campbell, facilitator of the National Discussion and Professor of Education at the University of Glasgow

Suzanne Martin, External Affairs Manager at The National Autistic Society

Martin Summers, Senior Youth Development Worker, Shetland Islands Council

Abbie-Rose Kerr, member of Changing Our World

Non-MSP Group Members

Parisa Shirazi, Children in Scotland

Abbey Stone, Children in Scotland

Sarah Paterson, YouthLink Scotland

Amy Calder, YouthLink Scotland

Beth Davidson, Feeling Strong

Gemma Orr, MyBnk

Sarah Ferries, MyBnk

Kirsty-Louise Hunt, Barnardos

Kate Mackinnon, CELCIS

Michael Bettencourt, CELCIS

Garvin Sealy, Intercultural Youth

Cathy McCulloch, Children's Parliament

Lara Balkwill, Rock Trust

Roisin Laing, Children in Scotland

Virginina Radcliffe, Lickety Spit
Arran Goodfellow, Parenting Across Scotland
Kirsteen Steven, University of Edinburgh
Joanna Courtney, University of Edinburgh
Megan Farr, CYCPS
Meg Thomas, Forces Children Scotland
Robyn Pattison, Forces Children Scotland
Lisa Weylandt, Includem
Chloe Robertson, Aberlour
Mairéad Murray, Impact Arts
David Ashford, The Old Police Station
Vikki Carpenter, CLD Standards Council Scotland
Robert Porter, ADR UK

Welcome from chair

Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP members to the CPG on Children and Young People for the new parliamentary term. Pam informed members that the meeting served as the AGM for the group, and that we needed to conduct this business at the start of the meeting before moving on to discuss the progress made so far in Education Reform.

Pam informed members that Education in Scotland had undergone significant review and reform over recent years. She provided a quick reminder of the various parts of this process:

1. **The Muir Review (2022)** – This review recommended replacing the SQA with a new Qualifications Scotland and establishing an independent Inspectorate. These recommendations were initially accepted by the Scottish Government.
2. **The Hayward Review (2023)** – This review focused on qualifications and assessments in the Senior Phase. It proposed the Scottish Diploma of Achievement as a new approach, emphasising collaborative planning and partnership among learners, teachers, and policymakers.
3. **The National Discussion (2023)** – The report titled ‘All Learners in Scotland Matter’ called for equitable access to high-quality, flexible learning pathways. It highlighted the need for sustained funding, curriculum reviews, and the inclusion of specialist support, particularly for those with Additional Support Needs.
4. **The Morgan Review (2019)** – This review emphasised the importance of listening to young people and integrating their needs, especially in policy decisions affecting those with Additional Support Needs.

Pam informed members that additional reviews, such as the OECD’s examination of the Curriculum for Excellence, the Independent Review of Community Learning and Development, and the Skills Review, had also been carried out.

Pam informed members that the legislative reform, specifically the Education (Scotland) Bill, which was currently at Stage 1, aimed to bring the Muir Review recommendations into law. Proposed changes included replacing the SQA with

Qualifications Scotland and appointing His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education for independent oversight.

She then posed the question of where they stood with these reforms. The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland had cautioned that current education reform plans fell short of addressing the key recommendations from recent major reviews. They pointed out limited progress since the 2021 OECD review of the Curriculum for Excellence and Professor Louise Hayward's June 2023 review on qualifications and assessment. Many responses to the government's consultation echoed these criticisms, highlighting a recurring message in committee discussions.

Pam concluded by stating that they would be asking whether the proposed reforms met expectations and if this process would ultimately provide the education reform that young people needed. She indicated that they would turn to their first panel in a few minutes but would first go through some housekeeping and the AGM.

Pam also reminded everyone:

- When speaking, please press the 'speak' button on the microphone so that those joining on Zoom can hear.
- Reminder of where the fire exits in case of a fire.
- For those on Teams, please mute yourself when others are speaking.
- Use the hands-up function on Teams if you wish to speak in the main group.
- Please avoid jargon where possible, as we aim to make these meetings as accessible as possible for everyone.

CPG Business and AGM

a. Convenors

Pam informed the members that Meghan Gallacher MSP and Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP were happy to continue in their convening roles for the group. She requested a proposer and a seconder for both.

For Meghan Gallagher

Proposer: Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP

Secunder: Abbey Stone, Children in Scotland

For Pam Duncan-Glancy

Proposer: Meghan Gallagher MSP

Secunder- Cathy McCulloch, Children's Parliament

Please note that Karen Adam MSP is also a co-convenor for the CPG.

b. Members of the group

The current 3 MSPs who are members of the group have expressed their willingness to continue in their role. These are:

Jeremy Balfour MSP

Fulton MacGregor MSP

Colin Beattie MSP

Proposer: Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP

Seconder: Meghan Gallagher MSP

c. Secretariat

Children in Scotland stated they were happy to continue in their role as the Secretariat for the Cross Party Group.

Proposer: Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP

Seconder: Meghan Gallagher MSP

d. Treasurer

YouthLink Scotland were happy to continue in their role as the Treasurer for the Cross Party Group.

Proposer: Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP

Seconder: Virginia Radcliffe, Lickety Spit

Pam passed over to Parisa Shirazi from Children in Scotland to discuss previous minutes and new members wanting to join.

a. Minutes

Parisa stated the secretariat had shared the previous minutes with members of the group. No issues were raised in relation to the minutes, and members were asked to confirm if they were happy to take the previous minutes as read.

This was approved by membership and the minutes were ratified.

e. New members of the group

The following organisations asked to join the CPG:

- The Space
- Kirsteen Steven
- Joanna Courtney

All members agreed for the above-mentioned organisations to join the group.

Proposer: Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP

Seconder: Meghan Gallagher MSP

Parisa then passed back to Pam who briefly introduced and handed over to the speakers to share their experiences of working on Education Reform.

Nicola Killean, The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

Nicola asked whether the education reform was delivering for Scotland's children. Her response was that it was not. She strongly supported the previous work from all reviews, stating that they provided a comprehensive overview of the system needed to take Scotland's education into the future. However, four years on, children and young people were not seeing the change. She expressed concern that time passing was critical in children's lives and worried that the recommendations had been taken apart, watered down, and many had been delayed.

Nicola stated that the UNCRC was integrated into Scottish law with limitations. It was emphasised that practices must be rights-based, and work was ongoing with young advisors on this issue. It was noted that decisions to change laws, policies, and practices must also be rights-based.

Nicola's team have been analysing feedback from children and young people relayed some key quotes. These included:

- "Education must be limitless for all children."
- "Adults are turning education into a competition. Sleep goes to fit everything in. My sister is in S1 and is already feeling the stress. When I needed help, I felt like I couldn't ask for it."

Nicola stated that the UNCRC is clear that the purpose of education should be focused on the development of a child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. She expressed concern that children and young people (CYP) consistently described negative impacts on their health and wellbeing due to the pressures placed on them by the education system.

Children and young people faced daily pressures as they continued to recover from the pandemic, while being aware of global concerns such as the cost of living and climate change. The education system had the potential to be a systemic protective factor for children and young people. However, they felt that the purpose of education was skewed towards the attainment of qualifications rather than their right to develop their personality, talents, and abilities.

Nicola emphasised that the Scottish Government must update its vision for education in Scotland. Adults in educational settings must maintain the highest standards of conduct towards all children. Children's participation must be embedded at local, regional, and national levels, with particular attention to those who are furthest away from their rights. To support these children, youth work, allied health professionals, and the third sector should be embedded into action planning and delivery.

She also stated that the Scottish and local governments needed to urgently address the unmet needs of disabled children and children with Additional Support Needs. Exams and qualifications must be addressed, and pressure must be reduced. The recommendations of the Hayward review should be implemented in full.

Dr Harris, facilitator of the National Discussion and Honorary Professor at the School of Education, University of Glasgow

Dr Harris stated that the national discussion remains of national significance; few countries engaged in such a discussion on such a scale. It is unique and special, and Scotland should be proud of it. It was different from other reviews because it was an open debate and placed children and young people at the centre. Some of the discussions held with children and young people were distressing and difficult but very important to hear. Although the national discussion was different from other reviews, it confirmed what other reviews had said. There is a consensus for change and a mandate for educational reform in Scotland. However, the change has been limited, which is a missed opportunity for Scottish education and Scottish learners. She stated that if all learners truly matter, then we need to move beyond rhetoric to the reality of educational change and respect and reflect the voices that were heard in the national discussion.

Dr Carol Campbell, facilitator of the National Discussion and Professor of Education at the University of Glasgow

Dr Campbell thanked Nicola for sharing her insights, as they provided a wonderful premise for her planned remarks. Building on the Muir Review, the number one recommendation was that it was time for a national debate about the future of Scottish education, which should be as inclusive as possible, particularly of children and young people's voices. Dr Campbell and Dr Harris began this work in summer 2022, posing the big questions: What kind of education will be needed for children and young people in the future, and how do we make that a reality?

They engaged with over 38,000 people, marking the largest discussion of education in Scottish history, with over 26,000 of those being children and young people. They expressed a commitment to the voices they heard. The final report, published in May 2023, outlined the value of the Scottish education system as being ambitious, inclusive, and supportive. It addressed the overall learning system, the importance of valuing the people who work in education, curricular change, assessment and

qualifications, and the rise of digital qualifications. Ultimately, education needs to be human-centred.

Dr Campbell noted that 18 months ago, there was a parliamentary debate on the national discussion, which received cross-party support. However, the aim was to move from discussion to action and change. They questioned how to support children and young people as they moved through school. The vision from the national discussion has been adapted into the national improvement framework, and calls to action are currently being considered within the government. They expressed a desire to see the pace of change and explicit reflections from the voices heard, drawing on this evidence. Many organisations beyond the government are utilising this in their work and advocacy. Their view is that this is a resource that should be acted upon.

Dr Louise Hayward, facilitator of the Hayward Review and Professor of Education at the University of Glasgow

Dr Hayward noted that the Scottish education system was not getting it right for every learner. Learners reported that their experiences in the senior phase were formulaic and put them off learning. Some schools had three sets of prelims a year, and much of the work focused not on deepening understanding but on passing exams. As part of the review, they put forward a proposal for two courses and having teacher assessment in S4. She spoke of the fact that twenty per cent of young people left school without one National 5 qualification, despite it being one of the benchmarks of achievement. Benchmarks were deemed incorrect and did not recognise how much young people achieved. Questions were raised about how to ensure that qualifications and assessments supported the vision for education. This led to the idea of the Scottish Diploma of Achievement, to develop knowledge, understanding and skills. A working group chaired by secondary teachers was also established, and a digital profile for young people was proposed to gather all achievements online. The response from the Cabinet Secretary was cautious, but there was talk of less emphasis on high-stakes exams and the Scottish Diploma of Achievement is also a shared longer-term goal.

Dr Hayward also stated there was a danger of moving too quickly, though there was considerable support for the ideas that are being developed but also recognised there is a danger of moving too slow as well. She felt the world was changing rapidly, with young people interacting with AI and said this should be considered. She concluded by emphasising that all young people need to thrive, and there were many who agreed with these ideas and were keen to take them forward. She encouraged us to work together to bring forward change.

Suzi Martin, External Affairs Manager at The National Autistic Society

Suzi shared a video from Nuala, who described her experiences of school assessment as an autistic person. Nuala expressed her aspiration to attend university to study engineering, but she felt this might not be a reality due to her struggles to perform well in exam conditions. She noted that exams do not test the same things for everyone, stating that, for her, it was not a test of knowledge but of perseverance. She often had to overcome numerous obstacles before being able to answer exam questions.

Nuala remarked that, while learning, she had to focus on how to answer in an exam rather than developing a deeper understanding of the subject. She also mentioned that the wording of exam questions can be challenging for neurodivergent learners, creating barriers to answering questions effectively.

Suzi thanked Nuala for her contribution and stated that it was crucial for the qualification system to be inclusive, a view supported by the National Autistic Society in the Hayward review. Many autistic individuals faced exclusion due to perceived bad or challenging behaviour, which included both external and internal exclusions, being educated outside the classroom, part-time timetables, and parents being called to collect them.

There was also a persistent issue of long-term absence, with many autistic individuals having left school and potentially never returning. Suzanne noted that the national discussion indicated that ASN (Additional Support Needs) provision is now urgent, and she agreed wholeheartedly. She advocated for an environment-first approach, emphasising that the learning environment should be inclusive of everyone.

She questioned how learners could receive an education if they could not attend school in the first place. Suzanne highlighted the need for training, particularly for teachers, to ensure they feel confident and equipped to support autistic children and young people. Young people expressed a desire for their peers to be educated on neurodivergence.

She also noted a decrease in the number of speech and language therapists and occupational therapists, as well as additional support for learning teachers, indicating that we are moving in the wrong direction.

Martin Summers, Senior Youth Development Worker, Shetland Islands Council

Martin shared that he supported a team of staff in providing youth work to schools and the wider community. He emphasised that youth work makes significant contributions to education and changes lives, playing a vital role in transforming good practice and informal community learning approaches. They help to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

Progress had been made at local levels, with a range of programmes developed to tailor to the needs of each school or individual. They were key partners in children's service directorates, supporting effective collaborative approaches across education.

Nationally, between 2021 and 2024, the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) worked in partnership with the SQA advisory group sessions. Their final meeting took place in August 2024, where young people spoke about three main topics: pathways, disability, and qualifications and assessment. While this was a positive step, Martin expressed concern that it did not go far enough. He noted that there had been a missed opportunity to bring youth work from the margins to the centre and to deliver the ambitions for Scottish education. The Scottish Government's response so far had mostly focused on teachers and formal education, despite evidence that youth work has a place.

As they continued into the decade ahead, Martin stated that the directorates must remain bold. He believed that investing in young people meant investing in the future of Scotland. Youth work was improving attendance and attainment among young people, and he stressed the need to turn words into actions. The pace of change must be considered, as many individuals would be out of education by the time any new measures were implemented.

Abbie-Rose Kerr, member of Changing Our World

Abbie-Rose thanked everyone for having her and for the experience. She shared that in November 2022, she first learned about the UNCRC through her mum and not in school. She approached the head of house to ask why articles were not being highlighted in school. She went on to chair the Rights Respecting School committee in her school and noted that in 2023, her school finally won a silver award, and she saw teachers become more comfortable discussing rights.

Now she is in S4 in 2024, she reflected on how far they had come in two years but wondered why it had taken so long. She expressed her appreciation for the UNCRC being incorporated into Scottish law.

Although she had never experienced exams, she acknowledged that they seemed very intimidating. She mentioned learning multiple formulas for history exams instead of focusing on the subject itself, which detracted from her love of learning about the past.

Abbie-Rose also recalled hearing one neurodivergent student describe school as a sensory overload. She said that she used to view school as a second home, but that perception had changed; she now recognised the importance of considering lights and sensory inputs in the school environment.

Group Discussion Summary

Following the discussion, members were invited to reflect on what they had heard. This was facilitated by the secretariat. Questions discussed were as follows:

1. What are your impressions of the education reform process so far?
2. Are your priorities reflected in the education Scotland bill?
3. Have young people's voices been heard within this process, and how should young people be involved going forward?
4. Are there any opportunities that have been missed within the Education Reform agenda?

The main points raised were as follows:

- There is an overwhelming consensus for change, particularly in moving away from a reward and punishment system towards a rights-based practice that enables children and young people to develop meta-skills.

Cultural Change:

- The national discussion highlighted the need for cultural change, much of which involves structural change. Leadership is crucial, and this must come from both parliament and educational stakeholders.
- It is essential to support youth work and all those involved in education.
- Caution must be avoided; radical change has often led to significant cultural shifts in other countries.

Empowerment and Relationships:

- Empowering good relationships and ensuring that resources are available to learn from effective practices are vital.
- The focus should also be on doing things differently and encouraging contributions to this vision.

Pressure on Young People:

- Young people currently face immense pressure, starting school as early as age 6 or 7.
- The importance of youth clubs as safe spaces between home and school was emphasised.
- Communities need to provide spaces where young people can be themselves, and this should extend into schools.

Acknowledging Strengths:

- All children and young people come to school with inherent strengths, and youth work is well-equipped to support this.

- Leadership should be bold and fearless, ensuring that the right measures are taken.
- There is still top-down pressure, raising questions about what is being measured and why.

Educational Reform:

- The Education Reform Bill lacks clarity regarding the role of children and young people in education and in inspections.
- There is a need for systematic embedding of their voices in the educational framework, with support provided by excellent practitioners.

Leadership and Transitions:

- A lack of leadership was noted, with many cautious stakeholders needing direction and clarity on the path forward.
- Transitions into adulthood should be smooth, facilitating movement from education to further education, training, and employment.
- Immediate action is necessary to trigger cultural change, particularly for children who have previously been failed by the system.
- The importance of stabilising funding for initiatives like Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) and "No One Left Behind" was highlighted.

Close

Pam advised that the secretariat would be in touch shortly to inform members of the next meeting date for the CPG but that it would be in early December.

She also expressed her gratitude to all attendees for coming to the session, thanking them for their participation and insights.