Additional Support for Learning: A Review of System Delivery for Learners

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Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

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Foreword

Children and young people are at the heart of Scotland's ambition for inclusive education. Their strengths, needs and experiences guided this review. It has been more than twenty years since the Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act was introduced, and the context in which education is delivered has changed significantly. Since the Morgan Review in 2020, we have also seen the lasting impact of the pandemic and wider pressures on families, communities, and the workforce.

Against this backdrop, I was asked to undertake a short, focused review to bring together the wide range of evidence that already exists about additional support for learning. The intention has been to draw together what we know from national reports, data, and other evidence, and to consider the factors that support delivery, the day-to-day experiences in schools, and how policy is translating into practice. I am grateful to those who gave their time and insight during this review.

There are many examples of success, where children and young people experience support that is timely, well-coordinated and built on strong relationships. Staff show deep commitment and professional expertise. At the same time, the evidence shows pressures and variation that do not always support early, predictable, or sustainable delivery.

The findings set out in this report reflect the realities of a system that is being asked to meet needs that have grown in scale and complexity. They also reflect the need for clearer national expectations, stronger alignment of roles and capacity, and better visibility of learners' needs and progress.

The recommendations set out in this report focus on key areas that need to be strengthened for the system to operate in a more coherent and effective way. They are framed to support future decisions about the scale of change required, while keeping a clear focus on improving how provision works in practice for learners.

Strengthening how additional support for learning is delivered will require the various parts of the system to work closely. Staff, services, national bodies, and partners each play a vital role, but it is how these roles connect that determines whether children and young people experience timely and reliable support. Improving delivery

will depend on clarity, collaboration, and a shared focus on what makes the greatest difference for learners.

Scotland can build on what is already strong and we can help ensure that support is experienced earlier, more consistently and with greater confidence by children, young people, and families.

Janie McManus

Professional Advisor to Scottish Government

Executive Summary

Scotland has a longstanding ambition that every child and young person is supported to learn, participate and make progress. Additional support for learning is a central part of how this is achieved. The ambition is unchanged, but the context has shifted significantly.

More children and young people require additional support. Staff describe increasing demand, pressure on time, capacity, and access to specialist input. Families experience variation in processes, thresholds, and access to support. As a result, support is not always available at the right time or experienced as consistent and predictable.

Wherever a child lives, support should be early, embedded in everyday learning, extended through targeted or specialist input where needed, coordinated across services, and able to adapt as needs change. These expectations reflect the features of practice that work well across Scotland when different parts of the system operate in a coherent and connected way.

This review draws on national datasets, audit evidence, professional insights and previous engagement with children, young people, families, and practitioners. It adopts a system-level perspective, examining how national expectations, local arrangements and day-to-day practice interact and influence decisions and experiences of support. Consistent patterns across sources highlight increasing demand and complexity; variation in local planning arrangements and thresholds; limited visibility of progress beyond recorded processes; pressures on workforce knowledge and capacity; and mixed experiences of multi-agency coordination.

Taken together, these findings show a gap between Scotland's ambition for inclusion and how additional support is experienced. This gap is visible from the early years onwards. It is not a gap in commitment. It reflects a system that has had to adapt to levels and complexity of need that have evolved faster than the infrastructure designed to support them. Support often becomes more reliable only once needs escalate; early intervention is not always protected; and children and young people with similar needs do not always experience similar support.

The review identifies key areas that must be strengthened for additional support for learning to be delivered more consistently and sustainably. A clearer national approach to planning and decision-making is required so that staged intervention operates more reliably in practice. Workforce design must better reflect the realities of mainstream education, with sustained professional learning embedded from initial teacher education onwards. Capacity across education, health and social care must better support early and preventative intervention. A clearer national picture of children and young people's needs, support and progress must inform decision-making and improvement. And a delivery model aligned to current levels of demand is needed so that staged intervention functions as an effective pathway.

Strengthening these areas would help ensure children, young people and families experience support that is earlier, clearer, and more consistent. Emerging needs would be recognised sooner. Decisions would be more predictable. Families would have greater clarity about processes and expectations. Staff would have the knowledge, time and specialist input required to act with confidence. Support would be less dependent on escalation and more focused on prevention. There would be a stronger understanding of children and young people's progress and the impact of additional support.

To support this, the report makes six recommendations focused on national planning and staged intervention; workforce alignment; capacity for early intervention; visibility of need and progress; a coherent delivery model; and embedding additional support for learning within curriculum design, delivery, and assessment. These recommendations require a whole-system response.

Scotland's ambition for inclusion remains clear, and strong practice exists across the country. Strengthening additional support for learning in the ways described in this report offers a practical path towards ensuring that children and young people experience support that is earlier, more consistent, and more reliable.

Introduction

This review examines how additional support for learning is delivered in practice. It was commissioned to understand how well the education system delivers additional support for learning in today's context. It examines how national expectations, local delivery arrangements and day-to-day practice interact to shape children and young people's experiences of support.

This analysis builds on a substantial body of existing work. The aim is not to revisit earlier findings, but to provide a focused assessment of how the system is operating currently, why familiar patterns persist, and what needs to be in place to strengthen delivery.

The report sets out what the evidence shows about the current system, why these patterns matter, and what is required to ensure that additional support for learning is experienced earlier, more consistently and with greater confidence by children, young people, families, and staff.

Why this review was needed now

More children and young people require additional support than at any point since the current legislative framework was established. Their needs are reported as often more complex and sustained, and requiring greater coordination across education, health and social care.

Teachers, support staff, and specialist services work with increasing intensity to meet children and young people's needs, often amid rising demand and pressure, and with capacity that does not always align to current levels of need. In this context, support is not always experienced as early, consistent, or predictable as it should be.

This review starts from the expectation that wherever a child lives in Scotland, they should experience support that:

- is early and not dependent on escalation.

- begins in everyday learning and is strengthened through targeted and specialist input when needed.
- is coordinated, especially when more than one service is involved.
- recognises progress in learning, participation, and development.
- is consistent, with flexibility to respond to individual needs.
- adapts if needs change over time.
- Enables children and young people achieve success.

These expectations reflect what works when the system is aligned and operates in a coherent and connected way.

How the review was conducted

The review is evidence-led and draws on a range of existing sources, including:

- national datasets on additional support needs
- progress reporting on delivery of the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan
- published audit and parliamentary committee evidence
- survey and stakeholder data.
- workforce data and insights
- evidence relating to early learning and childcare
- previous engagement with learners, families, and practitioners

No new large-scale consultation or data collection was undertaken. This was a deliberate decision, reflecting the breadth of existing evidence and avoiding placing additional demands on staff, learners, families, and services.

Patterns across these sources provide a strong basis for understanding how current delivery is operating.

A small number of focused discussions were held. Engagement included a mix of attending existing meetings, short discussions with individuals or small groups, and providing brief updates where appropriate.

The review adopts a system-level perspective. It considers how national expectations, local arrangements and day-to-day practice interact to shape how reliably support is delivered. This includes how decisions are made, how information flows through the wider system, and how schools and services work together to meet children and young people's needs.

Early learning and childcare is included, where appropriate, recognising that many pressures emerge before primary school. Several of the pressures identified in this review, including rising complexity, variation in access to specialist input, and gaps in early identification are already present in early learning and childcare.

The evidence base has some limitations, but these do not affect the overall conclusions. The strength of the review lies in the consistency of the patterns identified across sources.

This report therefore focuses on system conditions rather than individual practice. It sets out what needs to be strengthened so that additional support for learning is experienced earlier, more consistently and with greater confidence by children, young people, families, and staff.

Why this matters now

The context in which additional support for learning is delivered has changed. The scale and complexity of need now shape not only what the system is required to deliver, but how it must operate to do so in a more coherent and dependable way.

Additional support for learning is no longer a marginal part of the system. It is a central feature of teaching, learning and relationships across all stages of education. This requires alignment across workforce capacity, planning, services and curriculum design and assessment.

Expectations of inclusion have strengthened. There is greater recognition of children's rights, the importance of participation, and the need to understand progress in broader ways. Meeting these expectations requires a greater level of precision, coordination, and consistency.

These shifts matter because the current delivery model was developed for an earlier context. Its principles remain sound, but the environment in which it operates is different. The scale, complexity and duration of need now require greater alignment across the system to ensure support can be delivered reliably and sustainably.

Challenges across the system

Many children and young people are well supported across Scotland, and progress reporting on delivery of the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan highlights clear improvements and strengthened partnership working.

Staff across early learning and childcare and schools demonstrate strong, committed practice. However, the system is now carrying a scale of need that exceeds what its current structures were designed to manage. These pressures shape how support is identified, planned, and experienced day to day.

Increasing demand and complexity

Across early learning and childcare, and schools, staff describe a marked increase in the number of children and young people requiring support, alongside a shift in the profile and complexity of needs. Examples reported include neurodivergence, communication needs, dysregulation, and developmental delays at earlier ages. Many learners now require sustained support. Pressures are emerging earlier across services, with staff in early learning and childcare reporting a shift in the number of two and three-year-olds requiring targeted or specialist support.

This shift has implications for how support is organised and delivered. Needs that were once considered “additional” are now a routine part of classroom life, placing greater demands on time, expertise, and coordination. It also places increasing demands on staff knowledge, depth of understanding and confidence in responding to complex and sustained needs within mainstream settings.

Adaptation within stretched systems

In response to these pressures, staff across Scotland demonstrate deep commitment and flexibility. Teachers, practitioners, support staff, and leaders adapt learning, routines and relationships in real time to help children and young people feel safe, understood, and able to participate. Support staff play a central role in providing continuity and supporting children and young people. Evidence from national engagement events and local authority submissions to the Education, Children and Young People Committee Additional Support for Learning inquiry, highlights that staff are absorbing tasks that previously sat with specialist services.

This adaptability is a strength, but it also reflects structures that have not kept pace with current levels of need. In many settings, day-to-day delivery depends heavily on professional judgement and local flexibility. Where access to specialist support is delayed, schools often sustain support while awaiting wider service input.

At the same time, professional learning has not kept up with the breadth, scale and complexity of need now present in mainstream settings, and staff confidence can be stretched as a result. Engagement with pupil support staff also reflects wide variation in induction, access to training and protected time for learning, reinforcing these pressures.

Timing and predictability of support

Staff are often able to identify emerging needs early. However, the timing of support does not always align with this. This is evident from the early years onwards.

Local authorities and staff report significant delays in accessing some specialist support. Families also highlight experiencing the same delays. In many cases, support becomes more structured or reliable only once needs become more pronounced. This is evident where access to specialist services is required, and where thresholds or waiting times influence how quickly support can be put in place.

This affects how early and preventative support is experienced. In some areas, support remains contingent on diagnosis rather than need, despite the values and

principles of *Getting It Right For Every Child*. When support is delayed, needs can escalate, adding pressure to children, young people, families, and staff. Evidence indicates that staged intervention is not always experienced as a preventative model, with support sometimes becoming more dependable at later stages.

These patterns reflect a growing gap between how the system was designed to operate and how support is experienced by children, young people, and families.

Variation in local planning systems

Local authorities have developed a range of different planning approaches, staged intervention models, and thresholds to apply national expectations in their context. Local authority submissions to the Education, Children and Young People Committee Additional Support for Learning inquiry highlight substantial variation in thresholds, documentation, processes, and the degree of multi-agency involvement. Young people also report inconsistent participation in planning processes.

This variation shapes practice. Similar needs may be interpreted and responded to differently across areas, meaning access to support is not always determined by need alone. It also affects national visibility, as differences in planning arrangements and definitions make it harder to build a coherent national picture of need across Scotland.

Limited visibility of progress

Across the evidence, there is stronger visibility of recorded processes such as categorisation than of children and young people's needs, progress, and the impact of support. Many aspects of a child's development, including communication, participation, relationships, and emotional regulation, are well understood by staff but not always visible beyond the local context. Families, staff, and young people emphasise that success is personal, varied and often unrelated to attainment measures, yet national and school-level measures do not fully reflect this.

This limits the ability to understand learner progress clearly and to use information effectively to inform planning and improvement.

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Variation in experience across Scotland

Children and young people with similar needs do not always experience the same level or type of support. While national policy sets out a clear ambition for additional support for learning, the way this is experienced varies depending on local processes and access to support.

Families describe experiences that can differ widely across Scotland. Local authorities report variation in staffing, access to specialist services, physical environments, and available provision. Early learning and childcare settings also highlight differences in operational capacity, resource responsibility, and awareness of support pathways.

For families, this can make the processes difficult to navigate. It can make it harder for families to understand how decisions are made, what support should be available, and what can reasonably be expected. For children and young people, it can mean that support is not always predictable or equitable, and that their views do not always feature.

This can affect confidence in how the system operates, particularly where support is experienced as variable or challenging to navigate.

A gap between ambition and everyday experience

Scotland's ambition for supporting all learners is clear and widely supported. However, the patterns described above indicate that support is not consistently experienced. Evidence shows a rise in applications to the Additional Support Needs Tribunal. Local authorities and national organisations describe increasing escalation, highlighting system-level strain and variation in early intervention pathways.

This reflects a gap between national ambition and everyday experience. Addressing this requires greater clarity, consistency, and alignment in how additional support for learning operates across the system. The following section sets out the requirements to help support be delivered more effectively.

Requirements for reliable delivery

Strengthening additional support for learning is not about new initiatives, but about ensuring that the core requirements for reliable delivery are in place and operating coherently. When these requirements operate well and at an early stage, preventative support is more likely to be sustained. When they are inconsistent, the system becomes more reactive, and support is more likely to be accessed through escalation.

The six requirements below set out what must be in place for Scotland to deliver effective support for children and young people, given the scale and complexity of need now present.

Requirement 1: A shared national approach to planning and decision-making

Planning and decision-making for additional support for learning presently vary across Scotland. Local authorities use different staged intervention models, thresholds, definitions, and planning formats. While these approaches reflect local contexts, they result in similar needs being responded to in different ways.

This means that children and young people do not always experience timely, equitable or predictable support, and families can face uncertainty navigating different processes and expectations.

This requires aligning existing local frameworks to a shared national approach. This includes developing clear national expectations on the application of thresholds, planning processes and statutory mechanisms, so that planning and decision-making operate more consistently while retaining appropriate local flexibility and professional judgement.

A consistent national framework would enable staff to apply professional judgement within a shared structure, reduce avoidable variation, and support children, young people, and families to experience more predictable, timely and coordinated support regardless of where they live. Planning should be proportionate to need, with clear links between universal, targeted and specialist support.

Requirement 2: A workforce model aligned to the scale and complexity of need.

Additional support for learning is a central feature of day-to-day teaching and learning. However, the current workforce model does not yet consistently reflect the level of need present. Staff are working across a wider range of responsibilities, with high expectations for inclusive practice that are not always matched by the time, clarity or specialist input required.

Strengthening the workforce model to meet current demand requires the right mix of roles, expertise, and time for collaboration. Professional learning needs to be sustained, not episodic, and embedded across initial teacher education, ongoing professional development, and leadership pathways. It must build the depth of understanding required and reflect the central role of additional support for learning, ensuring that staff across the workforce have the knowledge and confidence to meet the full range of needs now present in mainstream classrooms.

It also has implications for curriculum design and delivery. Curriculum approaches and the support required to deliver them must reflect the full range of learners' needs. As Scotland takes forward the curriculum improvement cycle and qualifications reform, additional support for learning should be embedded as a core component of curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation, alongside approaches to assessment.

This is not only about overall workforce capacity, but about the mix of roles, access to specialist expertise and time for collaboration, planning, and early intervention. Where this is not in place, support can be harder to sustain.

Without this alignment, the system will continue to operate in ways that make it difficult to deliver early and sustained support for children and young people.

Requirement 3: Capacity to deliver early and sustained support.

Capacity is not yet consistently sufficient or well enough organised to enable early intervention or to respond to emerging needs. This can make it harder to sustain support over time. When capacity is stretched, decisions are shaped by what can be delivered immediately rather than what is most effective over time. This makes early intervention harder to protect and can increase the likelihood that needs escalate before support becomes reliable.

Capacity must be planned, protected, and aligned across education, health social care, and specialist services so that support can be put in place at the earliest opportunity. This includes ensuring access to specialist input when required, helping schools and early learning and childcare settings to sustain support.

Strengthening capacity in this way will support more preventative intervention and improve confidence in how support is accessed and experienced by children, young people, and families.

Requirement 4: Clear and consistent multi-agency coordination

Many children and young people require support that spans education, health, and social care. Effective coordination across these services is therefore central to delivering support when it is needed.

While there are strong examples of collaboration, staff describe variation in the timing, availability, and coordination of multi-agency input. Differences in thresholds, access criteria, and expectations across services can make it more difficult to secure timely specialist involvement. This variability is also evident in early learning and childcare, where families comment on different routes to specialist input and inconsistent access to the coordinated support required to respond as needs first arise.

When multi-agency working is inconsistent, access to specialist support is not always available at the earliest opportunity. This can delay support, contribute to variation in how children and young people experience provision, and place greater

responsibility on schools to manage complex needs without consistent input from wider services.

More reliable multi-agency coordination is therefore required so that services work to clear, shared pathways, roles are clearly understood, and specialist support can be accessed early and in a coordinated way. Universal, targeted and specialist support should operate as a connected pathway, with intervention matched to need at each stage. This would support earlier intervention, reduce reliance on escalation, and improve the consistency of support experienced by children and young people.

Requirement 5: Clear visibility of children and young people's needs, support, and progress

There is currently stronger visibility of recorded processes and the nature of support than of children and young people's needs, progress, and the impact of support. As a result, there is not always a coherent understanding of what progress looks like, or whether support is having the intended impact.

A clearer and more consistent approach is now needed in how information on needs, support and progress is captured and used. This should ensure that information reflects the outcomes that matter for children and young people, supports decision-making, and enables a shared national understanding of how well additional support for learning is improving outcomes across Scotland.

This includes strengthening how progress is evidenced beyond attainment measures and ensuring that data is used not only for reporting and categorisation, but to inform practice, improvement, and resource decisions. Inspection also plays an important role in contributing to this understanding by evaluating how effectively additional support for learning is delivered day-to-day and the difference this is making for children and young people.

Without stronger visibility and use of information, decision-making risks being shaped by what is most easily recorded rather than what most meaningfully reflects children and young people's development and progress.

Requirement 6: A delivery model aligned to current system demand.

For additional support for learning to be delivered consistently and effectively, the system requires a clear and coherent delivery model. This should set out how staged intervention, universal, targeted and specialist support, and statutory planning mechanisms operate together.

While national policy sets out expectations for staged intervention and statutory planning, there is not yet a single, shared understanding of how these operate in reality. Local adaptations have enabled delivery to continue, but they have also created variation in how need is identified, interpreted, and responded to.

A delivery model aligned to current demand must ensure that staged intervention acts as a connected pathway, with support built systematically from the point at which needs first arise.

Co-ordinated Support Plans are an important part of the statutory framework, but their use is often associated with higher thresholds and more complex processes. This can mean that support becomes more formalised at a later stage, rather than forming part of a consistent, graduated approach from the outset.

A coherent delivery model also requires strong coordination across policy areas, recognising that additional support for learning is integral to how the education system operates. Without this alignment, services will continue to rely on escalation and local adaptation to manage demand, rather than being supported by a model that enables consistent, preventative, and sustainable support for children and young people.

It is also important to consider whether the current legislative framework continues to provide the clarity and consistency now required. This should include assessing whether existing statutory mechanisms and duties remain fit for purpose in enabling an effective and efficient model of delivery.

What this unlocks for learners, families, and staff

Together, these requirements aim to align the system to deliver support that is timelier and more dependable. They help ensure families can rely on clearer routes, and support staff to act with greater confidence. Without this alignment, delivery cannot be sustained reliably at the scale and complexity now present.

For children and young people, support is more likely to be experienced as timely and meaningful. Emerging needs are recognised earlier, and support is put in place before difficulties escalate. Children and young people's views are heard and influence decisions from the outset. This strengthens participation, belonging and engagement over time.

For families, provision becomes more transparent. There is greater understanding of how decisions are made, what support is available and how it can be accessed. Families are less likely to feel that they must navigate complex processes or escalate concerns to secure support. This builds trust and supports more constructive relationships with schools and services.

For staff, greater clarity and consistency reduce reliance on individual adaptation to manage demand. Decision-making is better supported; expectations are clearer and access to specialist advice is more predictable. Professional learning is aligned to the realities of settings and classrooms, which strengthens confidence. This enables staff to focus on teaching and learning, relationships, and early support.

Overall, support becomes more focused on prevention. This reduces pressure on specialist services and helps to stabilise patterns of demand over time. It also enables resources to be used more effectively.

There is also better visibility of children and young people's progress, with a broader range of outcomes recognised. This provides a more complete picture of how children and young people are developing and supports more informed planning and decision-making at all levels.

Taken together, these changes strengthen confidence in how additional support is delivered. Children, young people, and families experience it as fair and consistent. Staff experience it as structured and sustainable. This creates the conditions for inclusive education to be delivered more reliably in practice.

Conclusion

Scotland's ambition for additional support for learning is clear, longstanding and widely supported. There is strong practice across the country, and many children and young people are well supported to learn, participate, and achieve success. Significant activity has also taken place nationally and locally to strengthen support.

However, the evidence shows that this activity is not yet sufficiently aligned to deliver support consistently in the current context.

This matters because additional support for learning is no longer a discrete part of the system. It is central to how education provision operates day to day.

The requirements set out in this report describe what must be in place. Some changes can be strengthened by building and extending work already underway. Others will require sustained partnership and development.

Overall, they provide a coherent basis for strengthening how the system operates and for reducing reliance on escalation and local adaptation to manage demand.

There is now an opportunity to build on the progress already made and to bring greater coherence across the landscape. This includes aligning existing policy, guidance, and improvement activity, and ensuring that national and local approaches operate more consistently.

Strengthening additional support for learning in this way will improve the experience of children, young people and families, support staff to act with greater clarity and enable inclusive education to be delivered successfully.

Recommendations

Delivering consistent, timely and effective support for children and young people with additional support needs is a whole-system response. No single part of the system can achieve this alone. National and local government, national education bodies, professional bodies, and partners across health and social care must act with shared accountability, clear roles and urgent, aligned effort.

The recommendations set out the actions the system must now take. They reflect what the evidence shows is needed for improved delivery. They emphasise national consistency, cross-system coordination, workforce alignment and earlier, preventative support.

Recommendation 1: National Planning and Staged Intervention

Establish a shared national model for staged intervention and planning, including common expectations, thresholds and supporting tools. This will help reduce avoidable variation, support earlier intervention, and give families a clearer understanding of what they can expect.

Recommendation 2: Workforce Alignment

Align workforce planning so it reflects the scale and complexity of need. This should include a coherent approach to professional learning across the workforce, embedded from initial teacher education or induction through to ongoing development, so staff have the knowledge, confidence, and tools to support children and young people effectively.

Recommendation 3: Early Intervention Capacity

Strengthen system capacity to deliver preventative support, including timely access to specialist services across education, health, and social care, so that support begins early, not once needs escalate.

Recommendation 4: National Visibility of Need, Progress, and Impact

Improve national and local approaches to understanding children and young people's needs, progress, and experiences, including clearer insight into the quality and impact of support in schools, to support more informed decision-making and improved outcomes.

Recommendation 5: Delivery Model

Establish a clearer national delivery model for additional support for learning, aligned to current levels of need, including consistent expectations for staged intervention, multi-agency coordination, and early support. This should include consideration of whether existing legislation and guidance remain fully fit for purpose.

Recommendation 6: Curriculum design, delivery, and assessment.

Ensure that additional support for learning is embedded as a core consideration within curriculum design, delivery, and assessment, so that approaches to learning consistently reflect the full range of learners in mainstream classrooms and support equitable access to learning and assessment.

Appendix 1 Evidence and Engagement

Sources of evidence

This review drew on a broad range of existing national evidence. Evidence sources included:

national datasets and statistics

audit, parliamentary and scrutiny evidence

insights from children, young people, families, and staff

national organisational evidence

national events and workshops

progress reporting on delivery of the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan

Engagement

Engagement for this review was intentionally limited and targeted, reflecting its scope and timescale. Activities included attending existing meetings, short discussions, and providing brief updates where relevant. Groups and individuals engaged with included:

Additional Support for Learning Project Board

Association of Directors of Education in Scotland

Bòrd na Gàidhlig

Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

Dyslexia Scotland

Education and Childcare Assurance Board

Headteachers' Panel

John Wilson, Independent Professional Adviser

Scottish Youth Parliament

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