

# **Autism in Schools – Action Plan**

## **Progress Report to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills**

**December 2021**



**Scottish Government**  
Riaghaltas na h-Alba  
gov.scot

# Autism in Schools – Action Plan

## Progress Report to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

### Background

In 2018, Children in Scotland, Scottish Autism and the National Autistic Society Scotland published the [Not included, not engaged, not involved](#) report. This report highlighted the experiences of autistic children and young people in schools, particularly those missing large parts of their time in school through formal and informal exclusions, part-time timetabling or a lack of appropriate support.

The report identified several areas which could improve the experiences of autistic children and young people as well as their parents and carers. One of the core issues identified through parental surveys in the report was a need for a greater understanding, within schools, of autism itself and how a child's autism affects them, particularly in relation to how they communicate.

Following publication of this report, a roundtable discussion, chaired by the Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, was held with key autism stakeholders in 2019 to discuss and agree next steps. The roundtable group included Scottish Autism, National Autistic Society, AMASE and Children in Scotland. This led to the establishment of an [Autism in Schools Short-Life Working Group](#) to explore the following four key asks from the Deputy First Minister:

- To ensure a common baseline of content on autism during the delivery of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes
- More distillation of inclusive pedagogical work to ensure a deeper understanding within the system
- Wider sharing of quality practice by Education Scotland, local authorities, professional associations, autism organisation and others and evidence of good standards
- How we ensure a continuum of support for ongoing professional practice and development.

To deliver these original asks, the Short-Life Working group developed an [action plan](#) and this was published in December 2020, which included a commitment to report progress to the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills by December 2021.

### Covid-19 Impacts

We must acknowledge the ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people, their families and the professionals who support them. The new priorities that arose as part of the pandemic response and recovery meant that some actions within the Autism Action Plan were delayed and progress in some areas has been slower than expected. Despite these challenging circumstances, we have made good progress. However we acknowledge that there is more we can do to improve the support we offer to autistic children and young people.

The Scottish Government and all our partner stakeholders involved in the [Autism Action Plan](#) remain committed to improving the experiences of all autistic children and young people and we intend to continue work in this area beyond the lifetime of this action plan.

## Who was involved?

The action plan was developed and delivered collaboratively with a range of stakeholders. The following groups were involved. You can find more information about them on their websites.

- [Association of Directors of Education Scotland \(ADES\)](#)
- [Autistic Mutual Aid Society Edinburgh \(AMASE\)](#)
- Centre Stage
- [Children in Scotland \(CiS\)](#)
- [Convention of Scottish Local Authorities \(COSLA\)](#)
- [The Educational Institute of Scotland \(EIS\)](#)
- [Education Scotland](#)
- [General Teaching Council Scotland \(GTCS\)](#)
- [National Autism Implementation Team \(NAIT\)](#)
- [National Autistic Society Scotland \(NAS\)](#)
- [Scottish Autism \(SA\)](#)
- [Scottish Council of Deans of Education \(SCDE\)](#)
- [University of Edinburgh](#)

## What are the themes within the four key asks?

Although there are [four key asks](#), they can be summarised into the following two broad themes:

1. Improving the training given to student teachers, known as Initial Teacher Education, on autism and inclusive practice.
2. Improving the professional learning and development for education professionals.

Taken together, these two themes will improve the understanding of autism among the education profession and help those professionals provide better support to autistic children and young people.

# **1. How are we improving the training given to student teachers on autism?**

## **We created resources to support universities teaching their students about autism and how to support autistic children and young people (Action 1.1 & 1.2)**

An Initial Teacher Education Subgroup was formed in 2019 to progress co-creation of resources to aid greater standardisation of content on autism across all Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. Group membership included: NAIT, Education Scotland, GTCS, COSLA, ADES, Autistic Mutual Aid Society Edinburgh (AMASE), Scottish Autism, National Autistic Society Scotland and the Scottish Council of Deans of Education.

The materials created by the group aimed to support student teachers to be aware of issues for autistic learners and those with related needs, and to understand their role as part of a staged intervention process.

Initial materials were piloted at the University of Strathclyde from 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> February 2020 with over 700 undergraduate and postgraduate students of both Primary and Secondary education attending a full day session (see evaluation below). Presentations were delivered by autistic and neuro-typical professionals from education, health, academia and third sector.

Course content, intended to be part of a 'golden thread of inclusion' woven through Initial Teacher Education course programmes, was developed through a review of evidence informed practice and consultation with the autism community, including autistic people, parents of autistic children and young people and professionals from education, health and third sector.

The group first agreed a set of principles and Key Messages around which all content would be based and a range of draft presentations were created to reflect these.

These key messages are designed to guide planning for autistic children and young people and those with related needs:

1. Environment first: The physical and social environment should be appropriately adapted to meet the needs of all learners.
2. Provide predictability: Predictability helps to reduce anxiety; disrupted expectations increase anxiety.
3. Make learning meaningful: Match activities and expectations to each learner's profile. The biggest reason for distress is the mismatch between expectations and a learner's developmental stage.
4. Seek to understand distressed behaviour: The mind set with which we view distressed behaviour, affects how we respond to it.

5. Ensure adjustments are anticipatory: The Equality Act (2010) requires 'reasonable adjustments' and states that these should be 'anticipatory'.

6. Difference not deficit: 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.

7. We were expecting you!: The Review of Additional Support for Learning (Morgan, 2020) states that 30.9% of Scotland's school population have an Additional Support Need (ASN). As of 14 December 2021, this figure is now 33%. Children and young people with a range of needs and presentations should be expected and welcomed.

The final resource, entitled *We were expecting you!*, was launched at the 'Self-evaluation of Initial Teacher Education' symposium on 8 June 2021. It comprises four progressive units, developed by NAIT, with pre-prepared PowerPoint presentations, Key Messages, reflective questions, links to video clips and related reading references. Scottish Autism created a film on Value, Relationship and Language and Education Scotland prepared a narrated presentation about the Autism Toolbox. A full script and set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are provided to support lecturers.

Each Initial Teacher Education provider can add to the core materials, e.g. by inviting local autistic speakers to talk to students or using film clips of autistic people, as included in the reference list, to support the aim to maintain a strong autistic voice.

The aspiration with this resource is that new teachers start their careers with an enhanced and consistent knowledge of good autism practice, whilst expecting to teach learners with a range of additional support needs.

### **We evaluated how well these resources worked and shared them with ITE providers (Action 1.1 & 1.2)**

The University of Strathclyde piloted these materials during a three day autism immersion event in February 2020. Over 700 of their student teachers attended, covering both primary and secondary students.

The students were asked to evaluate themselves across several areas, including:

- Their knowledge of autism before and after the event
- Whether the event dispelled misconceptions about autism
- Whether they now felt more able to support autistic learners

The results showed that these resources have a positive impact in these areas. Around 50% of students rated their self-understanding of autism, before the event, as either good or very good. After the event, students noted a substantial improvement in their understanding, with around 95% rating their self-understanding as good or very good. On average 68% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the event had dispelled misconceptions about autism.

Most importantly, 87% of students felt they were now better able to support autistic children and young people in their classes, as a result of the event.

This evaluation highlights the value of these resources in promoting knowledge of autism and better equipping teachers to support them in their learning. Students were extremely positive about the event and felt it helped them widen their understanding.

In June 2021, these resources were launched at a Scottish Council of Deans (SCDE) symposium. They have been shared with all providers of ITE and the SCDE and Scottish Universities Inclusion Group (SUIG) are encouraging all ITE providers to use these resources as part of their teaching in this area, with the aim that the materials are in place from academic year 2022/23. The Autism in Schools Implementation group will continue to encourage their use and development, through engagement with the SCDE and SUIG, to ensure a good base-line understanding of autism and how to support autistic learners in schools.

### **We supported the development of updated professional standards for both trainee teachers and qualified teachers (Actions 1.3 & 1.4)**

The General Teaching Council for Scotland sets the professional standards for all teachers in Scotland in addition to accrediting the Scottish Universities who provide initial teacher education (ITE). In September 2019, the GTCS updated their accreditation programme for ITE Programmes to make specific reference to autism alongside other neurodevelopmental differences such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Dyspraxia and Dyslexia. This increases the visibility of these neurodevelopmental differences when teachers are exposed to inclusive practice and Additional Support Needs as a part of their ITE course.

In January 2021, the GTCS published revised Professional Standards for all teachers, which included reference to additional support needs across all five standards, including specific reference to autism. These are the standards that teachers must demonstrate in order to become qualified practitioners. Ensuring that the needs of all learners are met has always been a core part of a teacher's work, but this is now explicitly recognised throughout the standards for full registration.

The GTCS also published a suite of guidance on their [Additional Support Needs hub in November 2020](#). This professional guidance offers practical advice for teachers on supporting learners who require additional support. As part of this, the GTCS created "Meeting the needs of autistic learners" in partnership with NAIT, National Autistic Society Scotland, Scottish Autism and Children in Scotland.

This guidance aligns with the 7 key messages developed as part of the work done creating materials for ITE providers. The guidance offers an overview of autism, how autistic learners may present in classrooms and offers strategies and advice which will help autistic learners feel comfortable in the classroom. It also offers reflective questions for teachers to consider their practice in relation to autistic learners to enhance their professional development and understanding of autism.

## **2. How are we improving professional learning and development for education professionals?**

### **We are working collaboratively to share new research and best practice (Action 2)**

Education Scotland and Scottish Universities Inclusion Group will continue to share and promote research, practical examples and strategies for educational practitioners to improve the support and educational experiences of autistic children and learners in ELC and schools within an inclusive context. These will be available on the [National Improvement Hub](#) and the [Autism Toolbox](#).

### **We created online learning for all education professionals (Actions 3.1, 3.4 & 4.4)**

Education Scotland developed and published two free online modules - 'Inclusion Practice -The CIRCLE Framework: for primary (2021) and Secondary (2019). These sit within the [Education Scotland Platform](#) on the Open University Open Learn create website. Both modules support practitioners to deepen their knowledge and understanding of inclusive practice and improve support for all learners who require additional support – including autistic learners. The modules also support local authorities to develop a “train the trainer” approach to improve practice across their ELC and schools. The original research, practice and resource was shared by City of Edinburgh Council, Queen Margaret University and NHS Lothian.

In 2021 Education Scotland, working with partners, developed and published a free online module 'Introduction to Autism and Inclusive Practice' which is also available [Education Scotland Platform](#) on the Open University Open Learn create website. This module supports educational practitioners to develop an understanding of autism and how to support their autistic learners and families within an inclusive approach.

In early 2021, NAIT produced a suite of CIRCLE Train the Trainer online materials for ELC, Primary and Secondary. These are freely available on the [NAIT website](#).

### **We evaluated how well local authority strategies were working (Action 3.2)**

Education Scotland carried out two audits of strategies, approaches and professional learning used across all 32 local authorities to support autistic children and young people:

#### **1. What are effective Educational Interventions for Autistic Children and Young People?**

This paper considered the research evidence base behind various interventions which aimed to support autistic learners in the classroom. The paper considered the efficacy of these interventions and provided examples of how they could be effectively deployed by education practitioners.

2. An audit of current approaches to professional learning and implementation that support autistic children and young people in Scotland

This paper was a survey of approaches and interventions used by local authorities across Scotland to support autistic children and young people.

We recognise that these papers were developed using a particular methodology and at a particular point in time.

For many years, autism supports and interventions were 'deficit focussed', focussing on a problem or a behaviour in the child or young person which needs to be 'fixed'. Some of the approaches and research evidence here comes into this category. Even where research evidence suggests that an approach or intervention works, it does not follow that the intervention is acceptable or recommended.

We now understand autism as a difference and not a deficit. Whether or not there is a problem, is significantly affected by the physical and social environment and how effectively the people around the child or young person understand, make adaptations and provide opportunities for meaningful participation.

When reviewing approaches going forward, it will be useful to take more of a systematic review approach which takes account of the neurodiversity paradigm and the views of autistic people

Both of these have been published on the [National Improvement Hub](#) and the [Autism Toolbox](#) to support practitioners and local authorities as they continue to improve their planning and implementation of support for their autistic learners, families and their staff

### **We refreshed and updated the Autism Toolbox (Actions 3.3 & 4.5)**

Education Scotland and the Scottish Government established a new Autism Toolbox Working Group to support the development and launch of the Refreshed Autism Toolbox. The refreshed Toolbox was launched in November 2019 and has been updated to reflect the Scottish context for inclusive education for practitioners within ELC, Schools and local authorities. This free website includes opportunities to share practice and to access professional learning, updated information, guidance, and resources set within the Scottish Context.

The Autism in Schools Implementation Group agreed that this resource should be regularly updated to ensure it reflects the latest research and best practice. The Autism Toolbox Working Group will continue to support the ongoing development of the refreshed Autism Toolbox to support ongoing professional learning for practitioners. The working group will evaluate the toolbox each year to consider if it requires updating.



## **We are bringing resources and support together in one place and promoting it (Action 4.1, 4.2, 4.6 & 5)**

Working with partners Education Scotland will develop a framework which will provide a continuum of support for both trainee teachers and already established teaching staff. This will be published on the National Improvement Hub and the Autism Toolbox. Education Scotland will support engagement with educational practitioners at all levels to share the framework and accompanying published resources with establishments, local authority and Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs). Education Scotland will engage with partners to support a consistent approach across ELC, schools, local authorities and Regional Improvement Collaboratives.

The National Improvement Hub and the Autism Toolbox will provide practitioners, ELC, schools and local authorities with up to date information to enable them to support pupils with autism through an inclusive approach.

Inclusion leads within each Regional Improvement Collaborative as well as the Link Officer Network will support the delivery and sharing of the resources and information. They will also support local training needs as part of a national continuum of support.

## **We asked young people with additional support needs what was important to them (Action 4.3)**

As part of our work on the [Additional Support for Learning Action Plan](#), we asked the [Young Ambassadors for Inclusion](#) to create a vision statement for success for children and young people with additional support needs. They said:

- school should help me be the best I can be.
- school is a place where children and young people learn, socialise and become prepared for life beyond school.
- success is different for everyone.
- but it is important that all the adults that children and young people come in to contact with in school get to know them as individuals. They should ask, listen and act, on what the young people say about the support that works best for them

The Autism in Schools Implementation Group wanted to make sure this statement resonated with autistic children and young people and captured their in-school experiences. We are working with National Autistic Society Scotland to take the views of these children and young people and give them the opportunity to develop their own version of the vision statement to better reflect their views, if they feel it doesn't already.

## **How did we keep track of this action plan and how will we keep the working going after the action plan ends? (Action 6.1)**

An implementation group was set up and met in June and September of 2021. The group, chaired by the Scottish Government, comprises members from NAS, Scottish

Autism, Education Scotland, NAIT, Scottish Universities Inclusion Group and autistic teachers from secondary and primary settings.

The group agreed a two stage remit. Initially their role was to confirm progress against completed actions and ensure outstanding actions were underway and progressing in the direction intended by the original action plan. The group was content with the progress made and clarified the intentions behind some of the outstanding actions, such as the continuum of practice.

The second stage of the implementation group's remit is to consider how to continue driving improvements and change in the support offered to autistic learners, beyond the life of the original action plan. The group is considering several areas of focus for future work:

- Further development and refinement of the ITE materials, particularly ensuring that autistic practitioners and children and young people are involved in their development and delivery
- An annual "check in" with the Autism Toolbox to ensure it is current and reflective of current best practice
- Considering how to link up and develop practice with other policy areas which support autistic children and young people such as health, mental health and early learning and childcare. This cross-policy work will take a broad prospective and consider other neurodivergencies, such as ADHD.

The Implementation Group will meet in early 2022 to consider these areas of work, ensuring that the voices of autistic learners and practitioners are central in the development of new work streams. It will also consider how this work can align with other work in this area, including the ASL Action Plan.

The group, and the Scottish Government, are committed to continuing this work and further improving the support offered to autistic children and young people.

## **Conclusion**

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic some actions within the Autism Action Plan have been delayed and progress in some areas has been slower than expected. Despite these challenging circumstances, we have made good progress. Several of the actions, such as the development of professional learning resources like the Autism Toolbox, are intended to be ongoing, to reflect best practice and current research in this area. We will continue to work in partnership to refine these resources to ensure they meet the needs of both practitioners and learners.

However we acknowledge that there is more we can do to improve the support we offer to autistic children and young people. As outlined above, we will work with the Implementation Group and the wider autistic community to consider and develop new areas of work to improve the support on offer to these children and young people.



Scottish Government  
Riaghaltas na h-Alba  
gov.scot

© Crown copyright 2021

**OGL**

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit [nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3](https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3) or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at [www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot)

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at

The Scottish Government  
St Andrew's House  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-80201-885-1 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, December 2021

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA  
PPDAS992206 (12/21)

W W W . g o v . s c o t