

National Discussion on Scottish Education: Consultation Analysis



CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

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List of abbreviations

ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

ASN – Additional Support Needs

BGE - Broad General Education (early learning until the end of S3)

BSL - British Sign Language

CAMHS - Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services

CfE – Curriculum for Excellence

CLD – Community Learning and Development

CPD – Continuous Professional Development

CPL – Continuous Professional Learning

DYW – Developing the Young Workforce

EAL – English as an Additional Language

EMA – Education Maintenance Allowance

EME – English Medium Education

GIRFEC – Getting It Right For Every Child

GME – Gaelic Medium Education

ITE – Initial Teacher Education

LGBTI - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex

PE – Physical Education

PEF – Pupil Equity Funding

PSE – Personal and Social Education

QTVI - Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment

RME – Religious and Moral Education

RRSA – Rights Respecting School Award

RSHP – Relationship, Sexual Health and Parenthood Education

SQA – Scottish Qualifications Authority

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths

ToD – Teacher of Deaf

UNCRC – UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Executive Summary

A National Discussion on Education (the National Discussion) is being conducted by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA), co-facilitated by Professor Carol Campbell and Professor Alma Harris. The listening phase of the National Discussion took place between September and December 2022 and received 5,671 responses representing the views of at least 12,323 people. Learners, parents, teaching staff and many other stakeholders with detailed knowledge shared their views about Scotland's future education system.

Overarching priorities

Comments on curriculum structure and content was the most common theme across responses to the National Discussion. Participants expressed clear support for a broad curriculum focusing on literacy and numeracy, but many felt Curriculum for Excellence should be streamlined and decluttered.

There were repeated calls to recruit and retain more teachers and pupil support staff, and for better teacher training. Many felt these improvements would drive greater capacity, stability and quality in education and underpin better learner experiences and outcomes.

Participants advocated for the focus on health and wellbeing in schools to continue as a core feature of Curriculum for Excellence. It was widely felt that schools should provide a safe and secure environment, have a positive and supportive ethos, build positive relationships between teachers and pupils, and deliver support through pastoral care teams, counsellors, mentors and youth work. The most prevalent theme in comments on mental health was for funding and better access to specialist or professional mental health support in schools.

Multiple participants highlighted the value of alternative teaching and learning approaches, advocating for outdoor learning, out-of-classroom learning and extra-curricular activities, play-based learning and fun, creative and innovative approaches.

Comments on inclusion and supporting children and young people with Additional Support Needs in mainstream schools centred on three areas. Several participants called for training and improved knowledge and understanding of a range of support needs. Several others recommended adaptations to teaching styles or environments for pupils with disabilities or long-term conditions and for neurodiverse young people. Some, however, raised concerns about inclusion, stating it does not meet the requirements of young people with additional support needs or the rest of their class.

Calls to adequately fund these and other priorities was another prevalent theme.

Recurring themes

The value of engaging with parents and families was raised in responses to most questions, with participants calling for better communication with parents and

assistance for families who need more support. Other recurring themes included the importance of collaborating with external stakeholders to safeguard young people and the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship between schools and local communities.

Participants often advocated for the education system to offer young people clear, flexible and practical learning pathways depending on their needs, abilities and interests. They argued a one-size-fits-all approach and focus on academic success is no longer appropriate. Instead, participants suggested that children should be provided with a range of academic, practical and vocational routes, including work-based learning, with parity of esteem for all learning options. Participants often argued that the education system should teach life skills; financial education, household management, digital literacy and skills for work were frequently mentioned.

Another recurring theme was for education to meet each young person's needs by responding to learners' passions and interests, offering tailored choices, letting young people develop at their own pace, and adapting teaching and learning to their abilities. Some highlighted the value of positive pupil/teacher relationships, and some advocated for a rights-based education which embeds and prioritises young peoples' rights and needs.

Some participants commented on equity, inclusion and diversity, stressing the need for the education system to have sufficient funding and staff to support all young people to learn and succeed, including those from different backgrounds and marginalised groups. Other themes included calls for the education system to reflect and promote the diversity of Scotland's population in the workforce and curriculum, to accept and celebrate different perspectives, to remove financial barriers, and to deliver equitable funding and opportunities regardless of geography.

There was little consensus on the future role of exams, testing and assessment. While some expressed support for exams and assessment, several participants want Scotland to reduce or end exams and standardised testing. They described other types of assessment they believed would produce a fairer and more effective qualification system.

As well as a recurring call to listen to teaching staff, participants argued that teaching staff should feel empowered in their job, have a more manageable workload and be rewarded at a level that reflects the profession's value.

Less commonly mentioned themes

Other overarching issues highlighted by a small proportion of participants at multiple questions, from most to least frequently mentioned, included: fostering creative and critical thinking; work-based learning; developing confident young people and citizens and an education system which adapts to the modern world; the quality of school infrastructure; physical health and the importance of PE; the value of early years education and the introduction of a kindergarten stage; tackling poor discipline and bullying; the structure of the school day; school meals; effective

transitions; opportunities to learn from other countries; and the need for strong leadership in schools.

Equalities considerations

Several participants noted that education should be respectful and equitable for people with protected characteristics. They highlighted ways to embed equality through a diverse workforce, improved teacher training, and whole-school approaches to gender equality, LGBTI+ inclusive education and anti-racism, which challenge stereotypes and prevent prejudice and discrimination based on protected characteristics.

1. Introduction

Background to the National Discussion on Education

A National Discussion on Education, co-facilitated by Professor Carol Campbell and Professor Alma Harris will produce:

- a vision for the future of Scottish Education that is coherent, aligned and meets the needs of all Scottish learners
- a 'Call To Action' with priorities for the future of Scottish education that engages learners and meets their needs

The listening phase of the National Discussion took place between September and December 2022. This was an opportunity for children and young people, parents and carers, and educators to share views about what the education system should look like for the next 20 years. There were multiple ways to participate in the listening phase, including a national consultation hosted on Citizen Space; events and discussions led by schools, community groups and third-sector organisations; online assemblies and online public events; and social media activity under the hashtag #TalkScottishEducation.

Structured around ten questions, the National Discussion asked what kind of education will be needed in Scotland in the future and how that could become a reality. Most responses were submitted via the Citizen Space portal, and some participants shared feedback gathered in discussion groups or through social media, using different formats including photographs, mind maps and drawings.

Participant profile

The National Discussion received 5,671 unique responses, representing the views of at least 12,323 people¹. In addition, approximately 26,000 people participated in National Discussion Live Assemblies coordinated by Education Scotland. Therefore, a total of at least 38,323 people were reached in the National Discussion.

The analysis in this report is drawn from the following:

- over 45,000 answers from 5,380 survey participants, including 400 organisations and stakeholders and many schools
- of the 4,980 individual participants, half (49%) were parents, 15% teachers, and 10% learners, with the remainder being support staff, education practitioners and unclassified individuals

¹ When entering the findings from their group discussion, participants were asked to indicate how many people were in their group. Across the 232 responses we know came from group discussions, 6,884 were noted as taking part. Along with the 5,439 participants who did not leave a number, this means at least 12,323 people were represented by a response to the National Discussion. See Appendix A for more details.

- outputs from 232 group discussions facilitated by schools, organisations and the National Discussion team with children and young people, parents and families and teaching staff
- a further 59 non-standard responses which were received outside of Citizen Space

In addition, over 1,300 original Tweets with the hashtag #TalkScottishEducation were reviewed as part of a social media analysis. A breakdown of the respondent profile is available in Appendix B.

Analysis approach

The Lines Between was commissioned to provide a robust, independent analysis of the responses to the National Discussion. Public consultation of this kind means anyone can express their views but individuals and organisations who are interested in the topic are more likely to respond than others. This self-selection means the views of participants do not necessarily represent the views of the entire population. The main purpose of consultation analysis is not to identify how many people held particular views but to understand the full range of views expressed. For this reason, the analysis is qualitative, and this report outlines the key themes in responses to the Discussion.

The analyst team analysed responses using a coding framework, which was developed in three stages. Firstly, we identified themes through a review of a sample of responses, then tested the draft framework in a pilot exercise with another sample of data before the full analysis began. Finally, through an iterative coding process, new codes were created if additional themes emerged as we processed the full data set. The final framework included around 80 common codes, which spanned questions, and a further 10-20 specific codes for each question. More detail on the methodology is provided in Appendix A.

Where appropriate, quotes from a range of participants are included to illustrate key points and provide useful examples, insights and contextual information². Reflecting the large number of people who took part in the Discussion, it is not possible to detail every response in this report; some participants shared lengthy submissions which reflect their specific area of interest or expertise. Full responses to the consultation, where permission for publication was granted, can be found on the [Scottish Government's website](#).

Report structure

This report focuses on presenting the most prevalent themes in the National Discussion to clearly inform the vision and Call to Action.

- Chapter 2 presents the most prevalent themes in responses to the Discussion

² Quotes from individuals are labelled with the classification they selected from a list provided in the consultation survey i.e. learner, parent, teacher, education practitioner, or school support staff. Those who did not answer are labelled as Individual.

- Chapter 3 outlines other recurring themes which were evident throughout
- Chapter 4 details less common themes which were typically raised by some participants at a few questions, or a small number at all or most questions
- Chapter 5 covers equalities and responses about education in relation to people with the protected characteristics set out in the 2011 Equalities Act
- Chapter 6 presents an analysis of how views differ between learners, parents and teaching staff and highlight the views expressed by young learners aged 3-7
- Chapter 7 sets out the conclusions

We highlight a significant overlap in the themes which emerged across responses to each question. The same themes were often evident across multiple questions. Chapters 2 to 4 provide an overview of each overarching theme.

Appendices A and B provide detailed overviews of the analysis approach and the profile of participants in the National Discussion.

Appendices C to L (see supporting documents) present a full question-by-question analysis. For each of the ten discussion questions, we present an overview of the themes identified. All themes, including those mentioned by a very small number of participants, have been included. We also highlight any differences in prevalence or additional themes arising from group discussions. However, these aligned very closely with the themes in the main sample. This is followed by a detailed sub-group analysis. A small number of other questions were included in the facilitator guides for group discussions. A review of the themes arising from responses to each of these questions is also included.

Appendix M (see supporting documents) presents an analysis of social media contributions to the discussion.

Throughout this report, the themes identified in responses are listed from most to least commonly mentioned. Qualitative analysis of open-ended questions does not permit the quantification of results; an insightful view expressed by a very small number of participants is not given less weight than more general comments shared by a majority. However, to assist the reader in interpreting the findings, a framework is used to convey the most to least commonly identified themes in responses to each question:

- ‘many participants’ is used to denote a prevalent theme mentioned by more than one in five participants
- ‘several participants’; a recurring theme raised by between one in 10 and one in five
- ‘some participants’; another theme mentioned by fewer than one in 10
- ‘a few / a small number’; fewer than one in 20, a less commonly mentioned

2. Overarching priorities

This chapter presents the prevalent themes in responses to the National Discussion; views, ideas, experiences or suggestions typically mentioned by several participants at many or most questions. These themes, and the various strands of discussion within each, are presented from most to least frequently mentioned. Most common were comments about the curriculum, followed by calls for more teachers and the importance of pastoral care and wellbeing. Different approaches to learning, workforce development, and better support for children and young people with additional support needs were also highlighted. Participants repeatedly called for funding and resources to achieve these priorities.

The curriculum

Comments on Scotland's curriculum was the most common theme across responses to the National Discussion. Within this strand, various views were evident, and many aspects of the curriculum were considered. Some supported Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) and a Broad General Education (BGE), while others called for a more thorough review or overhaul of the curriculum. As well as focusing on literacy and numeracy, several participants recommended subjects to include within the curriculum to make future success a reality for Scotland's children and young people.

Literacy and numeracy

There were frequent calls for a sustained focus on literacy and numeracy, particularly in primary schools. Reading, writing, spelling and maths were described as fundamental for learners' success during and after formal education. A small number advocated for keeping access to libraries, physical books and paper-based activities to support literacy.

“English lessons can make you more prepared for your future career because most jobs include writing emails, being on the phone and reading out menus or prices to the elderly.” – Learner

“English and Maths. These are core skills, in particular an emphasis on communicating, debating, presenting. Students should be able to articulate their position. Scotland needs confidence and that comes from the ground up.” - Parent

Other subject-specific suggestions

A need to maintain or prioritise specific subjects was frequently mentioned, and this was often the focus of learners' comments. However, there was no consensus that any subjects were more important than others, with most noting overall support or opposition for a subject, with little detail about why they held this view.

Arts and music, including drama and craft-related subjects, were commonly mentioned. The value of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM subjects) was also highlighted, and there were specific calls for the practical

aspects of STEM learning, such as laboratory work, to be maintained. A few participants highlighted the need to keep languages, but there was no consistent view on the most useful language, and there were comments both for and against teaching Gaelic. Other subjects commonly stressed as important included: history and social subjects, including a comprehensive and contextualised approach to history; home economics; Personal and Social Education (PSE); and Religious and Moral Education (RME). Views on RME were more mixed, with some learners keen to stop studying RME. A small number either advocated for or against sex education.

Many suggested prioritising skills-based learning, spanning life skills, practical skills and hands-on learning, and skills for life-long learning, as addressed in the life skills section.

Support for a broad and flexible curriculum

Participants often expressed support for maintaining a broad curriculum, emphasising the value of access to a wide variety of subjects during the BGE phase and then a depth of learning through specialising in chosen subjects in the senior years of high school. Many called for teachers and schools to have the flexibility to adapt the curriculum to meet pupils' needs and offer the curriculum through varied learning pathways.

Reform of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)

Requests to change, overhaul or end CfE were commonly mentioned. Some participants argued the curriculum is too full, cluttered, crowded or congested, particularly in primary, and should be reduced or streamlined and clearer, more focused, easier to follow and more realistic to teach. A small number felt the number of Experiences and Outcomes was excessive, asking for more standardisation and direction, standard resources, and consistency in the curriculum. While some felt CfE should be dismantled, others wanted the Scottish Government to create a curriculum and stick with it, and support and empower teachers and schools to create resources for its successful implementation.

“A much more structured curriculum. Curriculum for Excellence was well meaning in its desire to hand back professional judgement to the teaching profession but was vague and open to a huge degree of interpretation by practitioners about what the outcomes actually mean.” – Teacher

“Teachers across the country spend so much time reinventing the wheel. One consistent programme for literacy, numeracy, reading and writing would save so much time - giving teachers more energy and motivation to meet their children's individual needs” – Teacher

Other mixed views on curriculum structure were expressed. Some preferred a more traditional approach that builds on established educational models, while others advocated an innovative, contemporary education that responds to future needs. There was also support for a joined-up approach between different educational phases and smoother transitions throughout the learner journey. Group discussions

echoed these themes and also considered the role of interdisciplinary learning and cross-curricular design.

Some participants noted a specific interest in the curriculum review process, calling for further research, expert involvement, and support for implementing the recommendations of previous reports, such as the Muir Report and the OECD reports.

“Decluttered curriculum with children prepared for life, children having wider experiences and an understanding of their interconnectedness in the world.” – Teacher group

“Whilst the four capacities of the Curriculum for Excellence are still relevant and provide a good skeletal framework for teaching, it needs to be updated in line with recent advances in the field of learning and education in the digital age.” – Kirkhill Primary School Parent Council (Parents group)

There were advocates for CfE and its four capacities, particularly at Q4: What should stay? These were seen as positive foundations for education, providing structure and offering teachers flexibility and autonomy.

“The four capacities capture the intention of realising the human right to education and preparing young people for democratic citizenship. It is critical that these are retained, but with the added clarity that the capacities co-exist in equal measure to one another.” – EIS

More teachers, support staff and specialist teachers

The second most frequently recurring theme across responses to the National Discussion was for more teachers. Common arguments were that more teachers would lead to reduced class sizes and provide capacity for more one-to-one time with pupils.

Participants also frequently highlighted the need for more pupil support staff. Participants expressed a clear view that more classroom assistants, learning assistants and pupil support staff are required to help with many aspects of the daily running of the classroom.

While typically mentioned by a small proportion, there were also recurring calls for more specialist teachers. These included specialist art and music teachers in primary schools and specialist PE teachers and sports coaches in both primary and secondary.

“More staff so we have time to sit and chat and get to know children better so that we can guide them in the best way we can.” - Teacher

“Increase staffing from teaching staff, support staff and curricular experts e.g. art specialist needs to come back along with other areas of specialism to ensure pupils are getting the input they need.” – Parent

“We need a radical overhaul of the way we recruit, treat and train Pupil Support Assistance. They do the core business with the children; schools rely on them, they’re struggling day to day. This could be sorted with sustained investment. This PSA problem has been in the system for a long time and is deeply troubling.” – Children’s Parliament, as part of children’s organisations focus group

Pastoral care and wellbeing

A wide range of both general points and specific suggestions on how education could support pastoral care and wellbeing, particularly in relation to mental health, were raised throughout responses. Participants broadly supported a focus on health and wellbeing in schools and for it to continue to be one of the core areas of CfE. A few noted how this aligns with children’s rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC).

Pastoral care

Many of the comments on wellbeing covered various points about pastoral care in school. These included the need to: offer a safe and secure learning environment; have a positive and supportive ethos; build positive relationships between teachers and pupils; provide support through more and better pastoral care teams and guidance teachers, as well as counsellors and mentors; and involve youth work. Nurture³ was mentioned repeatedly, with advocates for whole-school approaches to nurture, nurture bases and nurture groups to ensure schools are safe, caring and compassionate environments.

“An emphasis on wellbeing and a nurture approach that isn’t wishy washy. A nurture approach that is instilled with rights, responsibility, love, boundaries, consequences, understanding, opportunities. Children’s cultural capital should be considered and understood.” – Individual

“Specialist support for wellbeing in EVERY school. Someone known by the children who is available in school at all times who the children feel comfortable enough to go to at any time.” – Education practitioner

“Ask a parent what you want for their child, they’ll say “to do well”. But of course “to do well” doesn’t often mean pass exams. It’s about a wellbeing, a wholeness, an ability to make relationships and your ability to find a place within the class and to have your gifts nurtured. It’s not always about academic success. It’s about forming your relationships and to find your niche.” – Church of Scotland, as part of children’s organisations focus group

³ A nurturing approach recognises that positive relationships are central to both learning and wellbeing and that all staff have a role to play in establishing the positive relationships that are required to promote healthy social and emotional development and that these relationships should be reliable, predictable, and consistent where possible. (Source: [Education Scotland](#))

Mental health and wellbeing

Comments about mental health and wellbeing were made in responses to several questions and across group discussions, usually by a small proportion of participants. The most prevalent theme was for more funding and better access to specialist or professional mental health support in schools. Participants raised several options, including mental health nurses; counsellors and therapists; educational psychologists; mental health first aiders or ambassadors; support groups and support hubs with trained and dedicated staff.

“Have someone within the local authority who can be based within schools that children can talk to and bounce off, almost like a live-in counsellor” – Teacher

“Have a school counsellor to help with students’ problems” – Learner

“More access to confidential, drop-in style advice and support from trained professionals.” – Parent

“Nurture clubs, Worry box, Destress zone, A point in the day for mindfulness colouring and calm music just to relax, Therapy animals” - P6/7 Currie Primary (Young people group)

Reducing stress

Some argued for a reduction in the stress and pressure experienced by young people. Their suggestions included: fewer tests and exams; helping young people be adequately prepared for the experience of exams; less focus on academic attainment; not rushing children through learning; maintaining a healthy school and home life balance with less or no homework; and reducing feelings of pressure or overload.

Alternative teaching and learning approaches

There were multiple comments on teaching and learning methods, spanning outdoor learning, out-of-classroom learning and extra-curricular activities, play-based learning and the need for fun, creative and innovative approaches.

“Make the vision more than just about education being in school. If not, you will already lose young people to education.” - Muirhouse Youth Development Group

Outdoor learning opportunities

Participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of outdoor learning opportunities. Being outside and exploring nature was felt to help young people have a better understanding of their world, improve health and wellbeing, and to help with skills such as assessing risk.

“Access to outdoor education opportunities for all children needs not only to be maintained but expanded on. Outdoor education activities foster problem solving, individual resilience and team building – the key transferrable skills we require in our young people as they face the future.” – Shawlands Academy

“Children all thought there should be a bigger focus on outdoor learning and less time spent in a classroom. They felt that schools in the future should take into account different ways to learn and not put such a heavy emphasis on writing in jotters. Learning should be more about doing.” – Anonymous children and young people group

Out-of-classroom learning and extra-curricular activities

Separate from responses about outdoor learning, most questions generated comments about learning outside of the classroom. These included extra-curricular clubs, such as breakfast clubs, after-school clubs or sporting activities, and trips to either explore the local community or to visit museums, galleries or other venues. Alternative settings were felt to support learning about the wider world. Equalities considerations were also raised, with repeated calls to ensure that these opportunities are available to all at no additional cost.

“Have more fun activities rather than sitting in the same place every day doing the same work over and over again.” – Learner

“Aspirations for CfE was about learning where it happens. Increasingly we have been focussed on the school building. We’ve become fixated on teachers being the only people to deliver learning. Can we look at where learners can learn, other locations etc. Who else can build an enhanced richness to the learning?” – Anonymous group

Play-based learning

Various comments advocated for play-based learning. In these, participants noted that play is vital to early years education, arguing that play should continue at least into primary school and sometimes throughout formal education. It was felt that the fun and creative approaches at the heart of play-based learning are effective because they encourage children to express themselves, learn through discovery and investigation, develop their imagination, encourage socialisation and develop at their own pace. Opposition to play-based learning was expressed by a small proportion of participants who typically favoured traditional, formal teaching approaches.

Creative, innovative and flexible approaches

The need for creative, active, engaging, challenging and fun methods of teaching and to think outside the box was highlighted by some participants. They highlighted the value of methods such as group work, topic work and larger projects, as well as outcome-orientated approaches, such as learning through mistakes or storytelling, to build empathy. Some described the need for greater flexibility in teaching methods, allowing adaptations to ensure children are taught and learn in ways that

suit them. There were also calls for varied teaching methods to allow neurodiverse children to learn in their preferred way.

“More creativity in the curriculum, more space for creative expression, an emphasis on problem-solving, team working. Learning skills but also not being precious about a 'right' or 'wrong' way of doing things but valuing curiosity and process over results.” – Parent

Teacher training, standards, recruitment and retention

Workforce development was another overarching theme in the National Discussion. This centred on three main areas: teacher training, high teaching standards, and recruitment and retention. While most comments were about teachers, the same issues were raised in relation to pupil support and early years staff.

Training

Several participants called for more and better training of teaching staff at all levels to ensure high standards of education. Participants felt teachers should be skilled, well-educated, qualified, experienced, and have time for ongoing training and professional development. Various suggestions were shared about training methods and topics. These covered improved Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and probationary periods, ongoing staff training with more online training, and class cover or protected time for Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Participants in group discussions also noted the value of sharing good practices and the need for subject-specific professional learning, particularly in sciences.

Calls for further training about pupil support and wellbeing were common, including greater awareness and understanding of neurodiversity, dyslexia, disabilities and additional support needs; being able to identify mental health or behavioural issues early and use preventative approaches; training in trauma-informed approaches; being more able to make young people feel at ease, comfortable and willing to share their feelings; ensuring there is equal focus on physical and mental health; and more training in outdoor learning. Participants called for teachers to have sufficient real-world experience, be well-trained and knowledgeable about world issues and current affairs and have guidance about how to discuss sensitive subjects with pupils. Suggested topics for training include: sustainability, social media and LGBTI+ issues. There were also calls to set time aside for training through CPD or sabbaticals.

“Teachers need considerable support if they are to change their practice. Currently, Scotland's teachers have some of the highest contact hours in the world - there is no space for professional development, curriculum innovation and greater internal assessment.” - Education practitioner

“A teaching profession is needed with outstanding [Career Long Professional Learning] programmes that share their good practice both within specialist areas and across sectors. Student teachers need an outstanding experience of [Initial Teacher Education], perhaps within identified training schools.” – Science Department, Kingussie High School

Standards

The need for high-quality, motivated, enthusiastic, creative, engaging and inspiring teachers was noted. Within these comments, some participants stressed the passion, dedication and commitment evident among existing teaching staff. A small number felt that more rigid teaching standards could improve the quality of teaching, arguing for higher minimum teacher qualifications such as post-graduate degrees, regular reviews and assessments, and enforced retirements.

“Employ the right people for the right job. The teachers for the future of our children need to interact, connect, inspire, be a role model and engage with children.” – Parent

“Teachers who excel in their role should be recognised, their skills identified and shared, we all know particular teachers who have an ability to capture the attention and engage with pupils who in another class doesn't, use these teachers as the gold standard and try to determine how we encourage all staff to achieve this.” - Anonymous parents group

Recruitment and retention

Some participants noted the importance of consistent teaching staff in improving student outcomes. They described a need for clear career paths, flexible training options, better salaries and benefits, and reduced administrative responsibilities to improve teacher recruitment. While acknowledging the value of the current workforce, some suggested that more is required to maintain their enthusiasm and encourage them to stay in the profession. Proposed methods to enhance staff retention included offering more permanent contracts and better pay. A small number of participants called for less reliance on probationary teachers and the recruitment of a more diverse teaching workforce.

“Invest in training quality staff. Stop filling gaps with freshly trained teachers - provide permanent jobs and a career path to make teaching the vocation it once was.” – Parent

“Keep the good teachers! There is so much talent in education, and it is so sad to see great teachers worn down by poor pay, poor conditions, insecure and short-term posts (why do Highland council only offer 1 year contracts? This is madness!!).” – Parent

Resources and funding

Calls for more funding, investment and resources were common. While some participants simply stated that more funding is required, comments usually described specific gaps to address, particularly staffing and resources.

“Funding constraints should not stop a pupil from studying the subject they want to or need to study, it should not stop them from having the experience they would benefit from, it should not get in the way of providing an environment conducive to learning for all pupils at all levels.”
– The Royal Scottish Geographical Society

“It is all down to more staff and more money. This is where everything is falling down at the moment. I cannot stress the word resources enough.”
– Parent

“Need for participatory budgeting with informed decision-making. You cannot have a champagne service with an Irn Bru budget.” - Breakout Room Discussions from the GTCS hosted event

Additional Support Needs (ASN) and Inclusion

Inclusion and the requirements of children and young people with ASN in mainstream schools were prevalent themes in responses to the National Discussion. These comments centred on three areas: ensuring a greater understanding of the range of additional support needs, suggesting how those needs can be met, and the challenges of delivering inclusive approaches and ensuring education in Scotland works for all young people.

Understanding Additional Support Needs

Several participants called for greater training in and improved knowledge and understanding of a wide range of support needs. Most prevalent were comments about understanding autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and other forms of neurodiversity. There were also comments about needs such as dyslexia and physical disabilities, particularly hearing impairment.

More, better or specialist support

Several participants made requests for improved ASN support in mainstream schools. They called for support or adaptations to teaching styles or environments for pupils with disabilities or long-term conditions, for neurodiverse young people or pupils with dyslexia or other learning difficulties. Respondents suggested that better trained teachers could deliver this support or specialist staff.

A need for better assessments was mentioned by some, who suggested children should be regularly assessed from a young age to ensure any additional support needs are identified. These participants felt this approach would allow early intervention and create better outcomes, with adaptations or support for learning being implemented sooner.

A small proportion of participants advocated for alternative provisions for pupils with ASN. This included calls for specialised ASN units within mainstream settings or separate specialist schools which are better equipped and staffed to meet support needs.

“In my class of 30, 4 have ASD (one also has ADHD and depression), 3 have long-standing separation anxiety difficulties (CCH/CAMHS involved), one has been adopted, one has a difficult home life and experiencing a form of trauma, one is a young carer, 2 others have severe learning difficulties (not including the 8 with 'normal' behind-track difficulties). There is only one of me - I can't give those 12 children enough of my attention to support their wellbeing, never mind their and

the other 18 children's learning needs... We have got to have smaller class sizes to have a hope of meeting the children's basic rights/needs and to then also help them to progress in their learning. I know exactly what support each child needs but can't split myself 30 ways to give them the individual attention they all need to be able to thrive.” – Individual

“Primary schools should focus on finding methods to support individuals with learning difficulty and anyone who needs support, so they don't have to spend a lot of the first half of secondary finding out what support you need.” – Learner

Ensuring inclusion works for all

While several participants suggested ways to make inclusion work effectively, some raised concerns about inclusion, usually expressing one of two arguments. Inclusion was viewed, by some, as failing those with ASN as it does not provide sufficient additional support for full integration into mainstream settings and successful learning. Conversely, some felt the social and behavioural needs of those with ASN can negatively impact other children. They suggested that learning for children without ASN can be hindered if teachers spend a disproportionate amount of time supporting those with ASN or, in some cases, dealing with disruptive or dangerous behaviour. A few suggested there should be alternatives to mainstream education in some instances to provide better support to those who need it.

Related to both inclusion and equity, a less common theme was that Scottish education should encourage and support all young people to fulfil their potential. These comments argued that schools must not only assist those who need additional support, but also provide academic opportunities to challenge high achievers, and appropriate pathways to stretch those in the middle who might otherwise go unnoticed.

“Inclusion must be discussed and looked at for the future of our children and teachers. Inclusion seems to exclude more than it includes at the moment. Inclusion for one child is NOT a 32 person classroom at National 5 as not all learners flourish in this environment... This is not GIRFEC. Specialist provisions should remain and be celebrated.” - Breakout Room Discussions from the GTCS hosted event

“Making sure every child is included not just the top achievers or those with challenging behaviours, all children and young people deserve this from us” – Parent

“Make sure their voices are heard in ways that are meaningful. There are many hard-working, motivated young people whose voices are lost in schools and classrooms because of behaviour that takes away time that could be spent on them. These pupils aren't getting enough attention.” - Teacher

3. Recurring themes

The themes in this chapter were recurring but less frequently identified in responses to the National Discussion. Many comments focused on ensuring children and young people have a voice in their education, with access to opportunities that meet their needs, such as flexible and inclusive learning pathways, listening to children and young people, equity in provision and opportunities; and treating young people as individuals. Other recurring topics included: engaging with parents and families; life skills; exams and assessments; technology and digital skills; working with external agencies and local communities; and understanding and addressing the challenges faced by the teaching profession.

Working with parents and families

The importance of engaging with parents and families was raised in responses to most questions, and the discussion usually fell into at least one of two strands – for better communication with parents; and assistance for families who need more support. Some, however, stressed the importance of parental responsibility.

Better communication

There were frequent calls for schools to improve the level and quality of communication with parents, with effective two-way communication between home and school. Participants felt this would bring teaching staff more awareness and understanding of young people's needs and help parents to support learning at home, underpinned by knowledge of the learning strategies, the curriculum and qualifications, and what is being taught on a day-to-day basis. Some valued the use of apps such as SeeSaw for parent/teacher communication, but there were frequent calls for more feedback on pupil performance and more parents' evenings.

Ensuring schools listen to, and act on any concerns raised by families about their children was also seen as important, particularly in relation to their wellbeing or any additional support needs. Participants noted that understanding a young person involves getting to know their family and listening to any thoughts or concerns about their child's needs.

More generally, the need to engage and listen to the views of parents was emphasised. Several argued that parents' views should be gathered and considered through parent councils, for example. Other suggestions included giving parents a greater choice over school placements, involving families in both in-school and extra-curricular activities, and the value of more intergenerational learning involving older family members.

“Make use of parental ability to oversee their children's education via proper engagement. Getting buy in from parents via engagement is key to how kids will progress alongside the method and content of delivery and the enthusiasm of the teachers.” – Parent

“By making sure that schools maintain deeper relationships with families, and not have the only point of access for a family just at parents evening once a year. Invest time in listening to parents and children to build deeper relationships and to bring actual change. This must come from the leadership of each school.” - Midlothian Third Sector Children's Services Network (Practitioners group)

A point raised in social media activity but not in any other areas of the National Discussion was a repeated call from charity Give Them Time for parents to be able to hold local authorities to account for how they implement national guidance about education, to communicate and engage with parents about decisions made in education committee meetings, and to publish accurate education data in a timely manner.

Offering support

Another strand of comments focused on providing more support to families, enabling them to better help their children's educational progress and wellbeing. Suggestions included: encouraging positive parenting and offering parenting education workshops and classes, particularly for those who are struggling due to poverty, ill health or lack of confidence in their parenting skills; teaching parents how to support mental health at home; and being able to have open and honest conversations with parents. It was noted that this support might have to be delivered in partnership with external agencies.

Parental responsibility

A small number of participants stressed that a young person's development should not just be seen as the school or teacher's responsibility. Most felt parents should be either solely or at least partly responsible for ensuring their children's health and wellbeing and supporting them to fulfil their potential. In teaching young people about the changing world, some participants felt this was the sole responsibility of parents; others felt that parents should be supported to feel empowered to have relevant conversations with children and have real-world experiences outside school. Others felt parents should be open to hearing young people's views and could be included in learning as they may have their own experiences to share or prejudices to dispel.

Flexible and inclusive learning pathways

Participants often advocated for the education system to offer young people a range of clear, flexible and effective learning pathways depending on their needs, abilities and interests. They argued that a one-size-fits-all approach and focus on academic success is no longer appropriate and that children should be able to choose options and opportunities, ranging from existing academic routes to practical and vocational alternatives. It was also stressed that action is needed to ensure schools, parents, tertiary education, employers, and wider society view all pathways as equally valuable, with support for all types of learning and career options. The need to offer parity between accredited vocational training opportunities and academic qualifications was noted.

“We should make sure that everybody's voices are heard, and there are more vocational courses in schools” - Learner

“One size does not fit all... I have a son with suspected dyspraxia. He is very bright, loves to read and learn but currently struggles with the "core" subjects... I fear in high school he will get lost, but I know he would thrive in a practical environment, doing trade style courses, cooking, first aid. I just hope his high school can see his potential, even if not in core subjects and be able to provide him with what he needs.” – Parent

“We have to provide those opportunities. Our curriculum is too focused on traditional academic subjects. Apprenticeships and training courses in vocational skills should be offered from S3 onwards.” – Teacher

“There needs to be more learning streams, each of the streams and styles need to be valued in their own right. Scotland recognises individuals learning styles and we can provide a stream so you can reach the estuary.” - Individual

“I wonder if there should be more choice about pathways earlier on. With everyone getting basic level of education by 16 but some being able to move at faster pace than others whilst others have more opportunity to find their passion and love in non-academic arenas.” – Parent

“Bringing together the different elements of the educational landscape that young people experience to work in partnership to deliver effective learning, choice, and support. This recognises education as a shared responsibility. Harness the skills and expertise of youth work, and indeed of employers, alongside that of schools in supporting young people's learning, ensuring that the outcomes and achievements that young people gain through their totality of learning experiences are captured and celebrated.” – Awards Network

Listening to children and young people

Involving young people in conversations and decisions about their education and wider changes to the system was raised in responses to most questions. Participants highlighted the importance of asking and listening to children to guide their learning and to understand any improvements to their schooling. Suggestions for how this could be done included pupil councils, apps and digital communication. A small number noted challenges around equity and access, specifically ensuring those from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds are supported to express their views and that discussions do not prioritise the loudest voices or high achievers.

Listening covered many aspects of the National Discussion, from initiative conversations about mental health to asking about what aspects of our changing world young people want to know more about. More specifically, listening to young people was often linked to the importance of focusing on rights, children's rights and rights-based approaches. A few specifically highlighted UNICEF's Rights

Respecting Schools Award and Article 12 of the UNCRC, which calls for respect for the views of the child.

“Listen!! Come into schools and talk to young people” – Learner

“Children should speak up if they do not feel properly supported and should be checked in with regularly to make sure they are getting support tailored to their needs.” – Learner

“Ask them. Let everyone have a voice and let them say what they need to about Scottish education as everyone has their own beliefs / opinions. Let students have their say! You ask them what they want.” – Inverness High School (Children and young people group)

“We should be able to choose what we want to do so that we have a say in the things that we enjoy instead of being forced to do something that you do not enjoy.” – Learner

“Teachers listen to our ideas and let us contribute to the learning and planning for the classroom and school. Pupil council - means that we have a voice and can give our opinions on important things in the school and community. Achieving our RRSA [Rights Respecting School Award] helps us make sure we know and receive all our children's rights every day.” – Crosshill Primary Pupil Council (Children and young person group)

Skills for Life

Participants often championed the teaching of life skills in schools. Many of these calls were non-specific, but some identified key areas of focus. Financial education, covering bank accounts, interest rates, mortgages and budgeting, was frequently mentioned. Home economics was also commonly mentioned to ensure young people can cook and have a good diet and develop household management skills such as making and repairing clothes, living sustainably, and cleaning. Another core focus was skills for the world of work, including interview skills and social skills such as team working.

“[Education] needs to get our children ready for the world. I am 26. Left school with 5 Highers, all As & Bs. But I can't understand interest rates on my mortgage or understand my utility bill. School should equip you with life skills.” – Parent

“There should be more opportunities to learn things like cooking, martial arts, art, social skills, and other different things that could be jobs in the future.” – Learner

“More lessons on things that will affect us in the real world so we will be ready.” – Learner

“Teachers should only teach us stuff that we need to know not stuff that isn’t relevant” – Learner

“Subjects taught/curriculum choices need updated; some are still relevant, but some are irrelevant and much more life skills and technology is needed... more life skills-based focus on learning and assessments... money / life skills focussed.” - All Saint's RC Secondary School Council

Equity and inclusion

Throughout the Discussion, some participants shared varied comments about the importance of ensuring education in Scotland is free, equitable and inclusive. General comments around equity, inclusion and diversity included the need for education to be accessible to all, including those from different backgrounds or protected characteristics, marginalised groups and those with additional support needs, and for education to reflect and promote the diversity of Scotland’s population in the workforce and curriculum, and to accept and celebrate different perspectives. Participants stressed the need for the system to support all young people and give them the opportunity to learn and succeed and to have the funding and staff in place to support this.

“Every child in Scotland deserves the right to access a safe, well-informed and holistic education system by suitably trained and experienced teachers. The framework must allow for every child to begin their education on the ‘same footing’ but also has the ability to support pupils of all abilities: those who benefit from additional support and encouragement and those who develop at a faster rate than their peers. Essentially, the system must be equal, agile and ultimately aspirational. World leading! - Parent

“Maintain focus on equity but rather than simply about everyone being the same and achieving the same, focus on opportunities for all.” – Falkirk High School

“An important value is equity (for everyone to have equal access to education). To achieve this we will need to build schools where there are lifts so schools are accessible buildings to meet all learners and schools should have more staff to help the needs of kids with disabilities like dyslexia, autism or down syndrome.” - Baljaffray Primary School (Children and young people group)

“Pupils with learning needs should be given more chances to show what they know and can do by having specialized exams for them.” – Children and young people group

Closing the attainment gap

Some participants described challenges around poverty and equity in education. There were calls for equity in support for all schools, regardless of whether they are in deprived or affluent areas. A range of suggestions for how this could be achieved

included: further investment in schools in deprived areas, including requests to maintain Pupil Equity Funding (PEF); to ensure poverty-aware policies and practices are in place at all levels and that the education workforce has adequate resourcing and time to support children and young people on low incomes; for equitable provision of technology, digital devices and digital learning options in schools; and placing more value on school partnerships with agencies in the community, Community Learning and Development (CLD) and the third sector, including ensuring staffing such as home link workers are resourced and consistently available in all schools to support and address children's individual needs. However, a few participants noted that poverty is a wider issue that schools cannot fix.

Removing financial barriers to education and providing opportunities for all was also mentioned. Participants argued education should have no upfront, hidden, additional or voluntary costs and that families should not have to fund any aspect of education which their children have a right to access; otherwise, those from lower-income households will miss out on opportunities. As well as calls to continue free school meals, participants advocated for free trips and extra-curricular activities, free transport, and funding to overcome any access barriers, for example, to cover access to expressive arts, music tuition, sports coaching or swimming lessons. It was also noted that financial support should be provided in a non-stigmatising manner and that more could be done to tackle stigma by normalising conversations about food poverty, fuel poverty and uniform poverty.

“Poverty in the community needs to be tackled - it can't all be the school's responsibility. There are teachers in our children's schools who are buying dinner, Christmas presents, Christmas jumpers etc for young people, parents who are desperately asking for help. This isn't okay.” –
Currie Cluster parents (parents group)

Only a very small number of comments were made about private schools, with mixed views expressed; a few called for private schools to be abolished, whereas others suggested state school pupils should be offered the same opportunities as those in private schools, such as a half day access to organised sporting activities.

Equity regardless of geography

Comments about equity across Scotland took two forms. One strand centred on ensuring equity in funding and resources and consistency in approach within and across local authorities and between urban and rural areas. This includes well-resourced schools in all areas, equitable provision of technology, staffing and new school buildings, and consistent course availability, teaching standards and use of resources across Scotland.

Another strand of comments highlighted the differences and challenges faced by rural, remote and island schools. A desire to ensure all young people across Scotland have the same opportunities to thrive, including being offered a wide range of subjects and courses, vocational opportunities, work or college placements, and access to university, was commonly mentioned. Technology was described as beneficial in enabling equitable opportunities in rural areas. There

were also calls for investment in infrastructure to ensure equal access to technology in rural schools to support online learning.

A lack of investment and higher turnover of staff in rural and island schools was also noted, with participants suggesting that teachers in these areas need to be valued more and consideration given to providing accommodation for teachers and staff, and housing and island allowances

Other comments included: ensuring policies and approaches apply outside the central belt and to small rural schools; conversely, reviewing whether GIRFEC is implemented with greater success in smaller schools and, if so, how this can be scaled up to larger schools; providing support for rural schools with trips, transport, expert visitors and equipment; and young people in rural areas being disadvantaged when accessing mental health services.

“Don't just think about large schools with large staff teams. What is possible in a larger school is not always possible in a small school with only one teacher.” – Teacher

“Scotland is a very diverse country. The vision for the future of Scottish Education should promote empowerment at all levels within the system. There is not a one size fits all as the geography of Scotland includes urban, rural and island communities. It is important that this is recognised and there is trust and confidence within a clear framework of collective accountability taking into account the unique context of each community and setting.” – Shetland Islands Council Children's Services Directorate

More specifically, there were calls to keep small rural schools open and allow and support them to develop and keep their own unique identity, to help keep rural areas populated and support community development. Suggestions for how rural and island primary schools could help sustain their local areas included: tailoring education to the needs of the community and potential career prospects, for example, crofting, tourism or renewables; for the curriculum to support pupils to become entrepreneurs, given the greater prevalence of small businesses on islands, enabling those who stay or return to the islands to thrive and earn a living; and incorporating the cultural heritage of the islands to be incorporated within the curriculum, to provide a sense of place. One specific challenge was reconciling a young person's right to education and their right to family life if children from islands must board on the mainland for schooling.

"Digital offers in secondary schools should not depend in the size of the school or its location... Physical networking is not always possible or practical, we all have access to the digital paraphernalia needed since COVID so a child at a small rural school should have the same opportunities as someone in the centre of Glasgow. Scottish Government needs to sort out the connectivity issues outside of the central belt – so many schools want to offer digital courses but cannot due to poor internet.” – Anonymous organisation

“Free ferry travel for young people on islands. Bus travel is good but ferry travel important for us to broaden horizons and access opportunities. Equity of experience regardless of geographical location.” - School Captain and Chair of Pupil Council, Rothesay Academy

Exams and assessment

Various comments were made about the role of exams, testing and assessment, with little consensus on the best approach for the future. While there was some support for exams and assessment, several participants suggested an end to or a move away from focusing on exams and standardised testing. They explained why other types of assessment would be more suitable and called for a fair and transparent system.

Support for exams and assessment

Keeping exams, assessments, and a clear qualification structure was a prevalent theme at ‘Q4: What should stay?’ and was raised by a small proportion of participants at other questions. These participants argued for retaining exams, testing or a balance of exams and continuous assessment to monitor pupils’ progress, maintain or increase standards and measure attainment. Other points noted the need for external moderation of assessments to maintain standards, qualifications which employers and tertiary education know and trust, and academic pathways available for those who want them.

Alternative approaches to assessment

Some respondents called outright for an end to exams, end of year assessments and standardised testing, particularly in primary. Others called for these to be used less frequently alongside other types of assessment. Criticisms of exams included: that there is too much emphasis on results, league tables and academic achievement, which puts unnecessary pressure on young people; concerns that education is too focused on teaching young people to memorise information solely to pass an exam; and that exams do not suit all young people and that it is unfair to determine their future based on how they perform on one day. Some, but not all, suggested a move towards more continuous assessment, project-based work and a broader consideration of other ways to showcase pupils’ abilities and achievements. There was, however, debate about whether continuous assessment should be externally assessed or marked by teachers.

Fairness and transparency

Regardless of how assessment takes place, there were calls to prioritise a fair, transparent and consistent assessment structure. Participants suggested at least some external assessment of coursework to ensure fair and consistent marking and reduce teacher workload. A few noted this was important to ensure tertiary education and employers had confidence in qualifications and that Scottish qualifications would be internationally recognised. Other points included requests to stop changing the exam system, integrate skills into assessment, and have some form of learning assessment through the BGE phase. A small number made

specific suggestions about how they felt National and Higher exams should be changed or improved.

“Make it clear what the new system is. Make sure the people sitting the new exams or system know exactly what they are doing. Make sure teachers know exactly how it works and how marks are gained.” – Learner

“Qualifications that are relevant to industry and are awarded based on the whole learning journey, not just how you perform on a single day. Unit assessments and coursework are a better indication of a learner's knowledge and ability than a highly pressured exam environment.” – Individual

“Different methods of assessment. Pupils agreed there is a need for exams, however they wished they could be assessed throughout the year, similar to a university style system.” - S3 Kirkintilloch High School Learners (Children and young people group)

“SCQF needs to be a common language across education and employers / HE need to be engaged in understanding it. Doing so will help them recognise the overt value of different qualifications.” - The National DYW Leads Network

Focus on the needs of each young person

A recurring theme was that education should be designed to meet the needs of each young person. These comments included multiple sub-themes, which mostly focused on ways to understand needs, listen to young people and build positive relationships.

Most frequently mentioned was how education could meet young people's needs. Participants suggested this involves understanding their passions and interests and tailoring choices around these, letting them develop at their own pace and tailoring teaching and learning to their abilities. A small proportion specifically suggested creating or using personalised learning and support plans for each pupil.

Several participants noted the importance of involving and listening to young people through open discussions, empowering them to make their views heard and enabling them to contribute to decision-making. Some participants highlighted the value of building and maintaining positive pupil/teacher relationships. They argued that a consistent teaching staff creates a sense of stability and allows teachers and pupils to get to know each other and form trusting relationships. A few suggested mentoring could also be useful.

Some advocated for a rights-based education, prioritising and embedding the rights and needs of young people. This included mention that the UNCRC and support for GIRFEC as an effective way to focus on individual young people.

A few participants suggested that while some children need additional support, this should not be to the detriment of high achievers or those in the middle. Providing options which allow academic pupils to excel, as well as challenging and stretching all pupils, was considered important. A very small proportion suggested children should be grouped or streamed in class according to ability or needs, allowing for tailored and targeted teaching.

“I think they should have an extra lesson a week that the pupils can do things that they like and get taught how the skills that they like doing can help them in their future.” - Learner

“Measure what we value as opposed to valuing what we measure. Ideologically we all agree that children should be at the centre - in reality, at times, this feels like a distant dream.” – Teacher

“If a child hasn’t done homework, they shouldn’t be sanctioned. They might not have supportive parents, a dining table, office. The fact they are in schools might be a triumph and they can be celebrated for that.” – UNICEF UK, as part of children’s organisations focus group

Technology and digital skills

Comments on this issue usually fell into two strands. One was calls for better provision of technology in schools, covering Chromebooks, iPads, Wi-Fi and computer labs, for example. Some responses raised the issue of equity and ensuring that all young people have access to technology and consideration of those who do not have access at home. The scope for increased digital or hybrid learning in the future was also raised.

Another strand of the discussion about technology focused on ensuring young people are digitally literate and confident. In relation to health and wellbeing, there were calls for schools to support young people with internet safety, discourage excessive technology and social media use, and increase understanding of the potential harms of social media.

Partnership working with external agencies

Several participants highlighted that schools were not, and should not, be solely responsible for meeting all needs and stressed the importance of collaborating with external stakeholders to safeguard young people. Relevant stakeholders included social work, youth work, Health and Social Care Partnerships, GPs, health visitors and NHS services, Community Learning and Development (CLD) workers, and support services such as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The value of partnerships between education, youth work and the third sector were also stressed.

Within these frequent calls to ensure sufficient access to external support were many suggestions on how to improve partnership working. These included: including external agencies as part of the school community by offering a hub-style provision, removing barriers to making referrals, improving communication, more

effective child protection and child planning meetings, increasing accountability and sharing good practice.

“There is a lot of stress put onto education to meet children's needs - where is the support services to help? A lot of them have been cut. There should be joined up partnership working, not schools in isolations.” – Muirkirk Primary School

“I think there needs to be more youth work support in schools where young people can be heard and also have some advocacy in making sure their needs are recognised by those who make decisions.” - Individual

“GIRFEC needs one step more - it is good that we are working across agencies however other agencies are very stretched and it feels we are treading water in education. Children are families often need immediate attention and help. It is not GIRFEC to make them wait for months and months on end.” – Teacher

“Change the model of partnership working - each Learning Community has a Nurse, Social Worker, Educational Psychologist, Police Officer, ASN support etc - we wish the PEF money had been allocated to this. We would then be able to focus on our core business - Learning & Teaching.” – Anonymous teachers group

Working with local communities

The potential for a mutually beneficial relationship between schools and local communities was noted at multiple questions, with three strands of comments evident.

Most commonly, some participants felt schools should be encouraging and providing opportunities for young people to engage with their community. Examples included: collaboration with youth work organisations and the third sector; volunteering opportunities; participating in local development projects, charity projects and fundraising; bringing in experts and professionals to give talks about topics or issues; and intergenerational learning to hear the lived experience of older people through, for example, visits to care homes. These were all seen as helping young people develop social skills and engage constructively with their community.

Secondly, there were some calls for greater interaction between schools and their local communities, for example schools becoming hubs and focal points for the community and making use of their facilities more widely available.

Thirdly, a few described the need to improve young people's understanding of antisocial, harmful or risky behaviours, for example, gambling, which could be achieved through improved partnership working with social work and health agencies, youth work organisations and the third sector.

“Schools need to be cemented in their community. Visits to care homes, taking responsibility for the appearance of local areas e.g. litter picks,

graffiti clean ups, wall painting. Pride in the community, perhaps through a monthly local activity, could build relationships, trust, understanding and a sense of belonging.” – Individual

Listening to and empowering to teaching staff

Calls to listen to teaching staff were particularly prevalent at ‘Q6: How do we ensure everyone involved in education has a say in future decisions and actions?’ but were also made by a few participants in responses to other questions. Comments typically argued that front line school staff, especially teachers, are best placed to make informed decisions about education. Other staff, including learning assistants, early years staff, and office and janitorial staff were also mentioned by some as being able to provide a holistic view of what might be needed in a school, or to change or improve the curriculum.

“Listen to those delivering the curriculum as much/more than those in offices. Allow secondments for current teachers to write and create curriculum. For a new curriculum to work, teachers need to feel like they’re at the helm and this isn’t another change being done to them with no consultation. Those outwith the classroom are not best placed to make these decisions.” - Teacher

“There needs to be far more dialogue with teachers – as well as utilising their expertise, it’s important for them to have ‘buy in’ to any changes or delivery will be impeded.” - Teacher

Participants also repeatedly expressed a view that teaching staff at all levels, including head teachers, should feel more empowered to do their job. They explained that empowerment would involve greater autonomy and flexibility around what is taught and how, and argued this could improve staff’s motivation. However, some were clear that this would also require less management involvement in day-to-day decision-making about how a class is run or how the curriculum is implemented.

Teaching staff pay and working conditions

The challenges faced by the teaching profession were frequently highlighted, particularly excessive workload, bureaucracy and paperwork. Participants argued that teaching staff need a more manageable workload to reduce stress and pressure and allow them to spend more time teaching. There was also a clear view that teachers and support staff should be better paid and rewarded at a level which reflects the value of the profession.

Related to this, there were repeated calls to improve teacher retention, reduce teacher turnover and ensure pupils have consistency in teaching staff. Most comments highlighted the scope for improved working conditions to encourage teachers to remain in the sector and there were also comments about the need for more permanent teaching contracts.

“Early years education staff need more recognition we do such an important stressful job yet are seriously underpaid and undervalued in comparison to teachers.” – Education Practitioner

“More staff and time throughout the system with a return to dedicated development time. More teachers and PSAs needed - pay and conditions need to be improved to make jobs more attractive, particularly at the lower pay scales.” - Discussion Group 5 Buckie Community High School (Teachers group)

4. Less commonly mentioned themes

Many other overarching issues were highlighted by a small proportion of participants at multiple questions. These topics, from most to least frequently mentioned, included: fostering creative and critical thinking; work-based learning; developing confident young people and citizens and an education system that can adapt to the modern world; facilities; physical health and PE; the value of early years education and the introduction of a kindergarten stage; discipline; the structure of the school day; school meals; transitions; opportunities to learn from other countries; and the need for strong leadership in schools.

Fostering critical and creative thinking

There were varied comments about how the education system should produce creative and critical thinkers, who love learning and have the curiosity to explore, debate and challenge the world around them. Participants frequently highlighted the importance of critical thinking skills, often in relation to the vast amount of information available to learners. They stressed the importance of young people solving problems, having a curiosity and ability to undertake their own research and investigation, form and debate their own opinions, and assess the accuracy of news and social media.

“As well as core skills like maths and literacy, softer skills are also important e.g. learning how to learn, digital skills. Also, given how much information children have access to now, important that they are taught critical thinking and evaluation of the information presented to them as it informs so much of their future views.” – Oxfangs Primary School Parent Council (parents group)

Work-based curriculum and learning

In addition to offering flexible learning pathways, there was a particular strand of comments on the theme of work-based learning, especially at ‘Q5: What are the most important priorities for a future Scottish education system?’. Participants made several suggestions about how to prepare young people for work, work-based learning and vocational positive destinations, including: teaching skills for work; offering vocational opportunities in primary schools; promoting the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) programme; having more partnerships between schools, colleges, universities and businesses; partnering with employers and local businesses to have guest speakers in school, giving young people real examples of future careers; promoting and supporting apprenticeships; and opportunities for professionals from other sectors to move into teaching.

A separate strand of comments reiterated the need for better career advice to allow to help young people understand the skills and attitudes needed for work and the jobs they might like to do, enabling them to make informed subject and pathway choices.

“Skills for the workplace and life. Instead of forcing people to go to uni people should be helped with more vocational skills and qualifications since these are more likely to help them find employment after school.” – Learner

“Skills for work - this isn’t intended to remove creativity or arts from the curriculum; however we do have to be realistic and ensure [our] education system provides young people with meaningful skills that lets them enter the workplace or further education.” – Education Practitioner

Creating confident young people and citizens

There was a desire to ensure young people are aspirational. Participants frequently called for Scotland’s education system to produce well-rounded young people who have the practical and social skills to contribute to the modern world and support their communities. Words used to describe these young people included: happy, confident, resilient, engaged, motivated, ambitious, social, caring, empathetic, reflective and independent. To support this, participants felt schools should celebrate success but also help young people to have a growth mindset and be comfortable with failure.

Another important aspect of this was helping young people develop their emotional literacy and interpersonal skills. This could include listening and communication skills, building positive relationships and friendships, understanding values of kindness, empathy, trust and respect and modelling appropriate values and behaviours.

“Prepare children to make the most of their talents and interests and to be ready to contribute to society (including challenging the status quo and being able to think for themselves).” – Parent

“To stop seeing children as data associated with literacy and numeracy and realise that the aim of our curriculum is to produce well rounded, successful and responsible learners and citizens.” - Teacher

Another common theme, particularly in responses to ‘Q9: How can children and young people be helped to learn about our changing world, so they feel able to positively contribute?’, was helping young people to understand their place in the world and develop a sense of responsibility and citizenship. There were multiple aspects to this:

- helping young people understand they can create change by showing them examples of how they can contribute, in particular where the actions of young people have had an impact
- empowering young people to act and express their views, building confidence and resilience through offering opportunities to take part in activities, encouraging and inspiring them to participate, and developing leadership skills
- role models for young people

“Some of the concepts that young people are being asked to grapple with these days are overwhelming and terrifying, but contextualising them on their personal knowledge then making the road by walking together with them will help them and us positively contribute towards our changing world” – Education Practitioner

Facilities and equipment

Comments about facilities covered several issues. Calls for school buildings to be fit-for-purpose were common as were requests for more outdoor spaces, playgrounds and both indoor and outdoor sports facilities. There were also requests for classrooms to have up-to-date equipment, particularly laboratories and practical spaces, and to ensure pupils have the equipment for learning such as musical instruments.

“Design schools fit to meet the needs of teachers and children. My local new builds have no accessible green spaces, tiny play areas, no quiet spaces or breakout rooms for children with ASN. We need lots of growing spaces.” - Parent

In the context of how facilities can support meeting every child and young person’s individual needs, including modern school buildings, learning spaces, facilities and equipment, there were calls for both larger and smaller spaces, quiet spaces and more comfortable spaces, accessible green space and play areas, and adaptations for disabilities such as ramps. A few called for smaller schools, and fewer ‘super schools’ and open-plan schools, with open-plan classrooms noted as a challenge for deaf learners.

While not directly related to facilities, safe and appropriate learning environments were seen as a priority. As well as ensuring school does not create any stress or harm and that facilities are well-maintained, participants described the need for safe, relaxing, supportive spaces, and a few called for quiet spaces and a ban on mobile phones. Conversely, learners were keen to have more freedom and choice in their learning environments, including keeping their phone and being allowed to go to the toilet when they choose to.

Physical health and Physical Education (PE)

The potential for education to enhance young people’s physical health through PE and physical activity was often raised. Some stressed the importance and benefits of PE, with many noting this should continue throughout school, and in some cases be mandatory, to ensure young people are physically fit. Other observations were more general, highlighting the need to encourage physical activity, Active Schools activities and active travel. In all cases, the importance of physical activity to movement, health and social engagement were noted. Two related themes, each mentioned by a small proportion of participants, were the need for more specialist PE teachers, and better sports facilities. These included: gyms and changing facilities, more PE equipment, playgrounds and outdoor spaces, outdoor fitness equipment, and all-weather pitches.

“Physical sport or education should be mandatory, but only for a period or two a week, and should be more about having fun and keeping fit than anything serious such as an exam or competitiveness.” – Learner

Focus on early years education

The value of early years education, particularly play-based early years, was another recurring but less commonly mentioned theme. As described by respondents, the benefits of play-based learning include that it: promotes nurture, socialisation and the development of meaningful relationships; helps to develop a child’s interests through investigation and discovery; promotes physical development; and develops problem-solving, risk assessment and resilience. A small number called for more staff and greater support for the early years workforce, awareness of the pressures they face, and opportunities to engage in curriculum planning and professional learning, so early years is recognised as a valued career choice. The ‘Realising the Ambition’ national practice guidance was highlighted by a few participants as a particularly positive and valuable document.

A small proportion of participants discussed a later start to primary school and the introduction of a kindergarten stage in Scotland; those who raised this issue were predominantly in favour of introducing this stage. Supporters typically argued that children were not ready to start school until age six or seven, and that Scotland should learn from Scandinavian style model. A minority who mentioned their opposition to this idea noted their children were ready to start P1 and would have been bored if they stayed in nursery and described a preference for the ability to defer entry to P1 to remain.

“Give early years education as much importance as primary school. What children learn, achieve and experience in their early years can determine how well the rest of their education journey will go, as well as the rest of their lives. Give more attention to additional needs in the early years, often nothing is put in place for children with additional needs until they go to school, when so much could be done beforehand to aid their individual development.” – Education Practitioner

“At present, what happens in early years settings is seen by most educators as having little relevance to the educational performance of children and young people later in the system. Politicians and press regard ELC as little more than a child-minding service while parents are at work, and Primary 1/2 children are regarded as schoolchildren who can be expected to crack on with the three Rs. This is in direct contradiction of the growing evidence about the profound significance of early childhood experiences and the beneficial effects of high-quality early childhood care and education.” – Upstart Scotland

Discipline

Though typically mentioned by a very small proportion at each question, discipline was a recurring theme. Participants felt there should be greater action to address poor or dangerous behaviour in schools, clear rules around what is acceptable and

consequences for disruptive behaviour, and more action to tackle bullying, including cyber-bullying.

“Stronger anti-bullying powers. No workplace would stand for the racism, homophobia, physical, mental torture that school children are put through by their peers.” – Parent

Adaptable education for the modern world

Some participants highlighted the wider need for the education system to be adaptable and flexible to changes in the modern world and the challenges facing society.

The most common theme, raised by several participants, was topical relevant issues to be incorporated into the curriculum, put into context in all subjects and taught in a positive, relevant, engaging way. Examples of relevant topics included contemporary politics, citizenship, environmentalism, sustainability, human rights, social issues and sex education. More generally, some participants called for a robust, comprehensive, modern, engaging and inspiring curriculum. They recognised that this may require redesign or reform, with some feeling that the current curriculum is too cluttered.

Some participants mentioned how topical issues could be integrated within specific subjects. Modern Studies was frequently mentioned with some calling for this to be compulsory or treated as a core subject; other social subjects such as history and geography and RME were also mentioned, as was PSE.).

A very small proportion of participants stressed the importance of learning from history to help frame current issues and future action. This included calls to de-colonise the curriculum and reflect on Scotland’s colonial history and its impact on society.

“The world is advancing rapidly in the area of technology. With this advancement, children must be equipped with sufficient science, engineering, technology and mathematical skills. Even the current hot issue of climate change requires scientific knowledge to enable further research to be undertaken in tackling the matter.” - Parent

“The same way they learn about anything... by having teachers who can engage children in their learning by presenting lessons on topical issues such as climate change, energy conservation in an interesting and age appropriate way.” – Parent

“Having lessons that are purely focused on the reality of the world, like modern studies, but not just starting this in senior years of high school, opening them up from a young age as well.” - Learner

Structure of the school day

A small proportion of participants, particularly learners, made varied suggestions about school schedules and timetables at a few questions. However, little consensus was evident. Suggestions included: both longer and shorter days; calls for a four day week or to maintain the five day week or half-day Friday in some areas; more breaks and longer lunches; more free periods and study time; more soft starts or a later start to the school day; flexibility around start and end times to accommodate working parents and those with other responsibilities such as carers; and consistent school holidays across Scotland.

School meals and diet

Continued provision of school meals, especially free school meals, was frequently noted as a priority because: ensuring children are well fed was seen as useful to helping them learn; nutritious meals could help improve some children's diet; and providing free meals was a crucial support for some young people who might not be well fed at home.

“If we want an education system which is underpinned by a commitment to social justice and principles of equality and equity, then further action is also needed to eliminate the poverty-related achievement and attainment gap. The provision of universal free school meals would go some way to ensuring children and young people can concentrate in class and engage more readily in learning, not having to deal with the impact of hunger. Hunger and stigma do not stop at P5.” - Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS)

Concerns around progressive education and social change

Throughout the consultation, a very small proportion of participants opposed young people being exposed to what they described as ‘minority’ or ‘woke’ agendas, typically including trans rights, gender and sexual identity, and issues around sex education.

Effective transition through the learner journey

Transitions were raised by a few who called for children to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to move effectively through their education. Participants not only noted the moves from early year to primary, and primary to secondary, but also ensuring young people are confident and adequately prepared for college, university or the world of work. The importance of successful transitions for young people with disabilities or additional support needs was also noted.

Learning from other countries

While only usually mentioned by a very small proportion of participants, there were repeated references to Scotland looking to and learning from education in other countries. Most comments directed policymakers to Nordic countries, in particular, Finland, which were described as having more effective education systems.

“Programmes such as Germany’s apprenticeship scheme are fantastic ways of ensuring all young people have a positive destination at the end of their educational journey. Many of the issues faced are linked to historic urban deprivation so investment in these communities is vital - children who have role models to follow are more likely to have high aspirations.” – Individual

Strong leadership

Another less common but recurring theme was for more effective leadership and greater control to be given to schools. Some noted the need for better or stronger management in individual schools; conversely, there were also calls for fewer senior management positions and less bureaucracy. Specific requests shared by a few participants included: for better management training to ensure strong leaders in schools; greater accountability over how non-class committed teachers spend their time; and the use of shared head teachers, with a clear preference for one head teacher per school being expressed.

At a wider level, there was criticism of the management of education policy and the politicisation of education, with calls for greater clarity about the roles and influence of local and central government and education bodies over setting policy and strategy.

5. Equalities considerations

The Scottish Government recognises the importance of equalities issues and how people with the protected characteristics set out in the 2011 Equalities Act⁴ may be impacted by changes to education in Scotland. Reflecting this importance, and the level of engagement with equalities and representative groups during the National Discussion, this chapter presents an analysis of comments about learners with protected characteristics.

While many issues were raised by individual participants, several organisations shared detailed responses reflecting their knowledge and expertise of working with or for groups with protected characteristics. Key points from their submissions are included below, but there is not space in this report to detail their full responses; readers can review these in full on the [Scottish Government website](#), where permission for publication has been granted.

General comments on protected characteristics

Several participants' comments on equalities spanned multiple groups or did not specify protected characteristics. These mostly focused on principles, such as the importance of equity and respect for protected groups in education, embedding diversity in education, and having a curriculum that prevents and challenges racism, homophobia, and all other forms of prejudice and discrimination based on protected characteristics.

Participants felt schools have a role in improving knowledge and understanding of protected groups, and a responsibility to create environments where all sexualities, genders, ethnicities and cultures are welcomed. Ensuring the curriculum, teaching and learning addresses stereotyping, racism, gender inequality, disabilities and LGBTI+ rights was also noted, as was the issue of a lack of culturally relevant teaching, excluding some learners from relating to the curriculum. There were multiple calls to consistently and frequently celebrate difference, including events where people from different ethnic groups, religions, origins and orientation gather and learn about each other. However, a few argued it is important to ensure diversity is covered all year, not just during specific periods such as Black History Month, International Women's Day, and Pride month.

Another strand of comments centred on considering how pathways into working in education could be more accessible to those with protected characteristics and calls for a diverse workforce and role models at all levels of education, reflecting race, religion and LBGTI+. Other specific requests included for the Scottish Government to conduct equality and diversity impact analysis on any new education and qualification proposals, and for national support and guidance to ensure a focus on diversity in the curriculum

⁴ The protected characteristics are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

“We need to see and value for their own purposes the diverse children and families who are in our schools. Too often LGBTQ+ visibility is ignored in schools, race is seen as a tick box exercise, disability as the child's problem.” – Individual

“It is vital that not only is the teaching profession in schools from a diverse background but so are the institutions that hold the power in the system. There needs to exist a diversity of lived experiences and perspectives across all our institutions such as the GTCS, Education Scotland, SQA and any future inspection bodies. This will help to ensure that the aims of providing an education system that is truly inclusive, striving for equality and social justice can actually become a reality at all levels.” - Diversity in the Teaching Profession & Education Workforce subgroup

“Needs to be more education on minorities in schools e.g. gender, so everyone understands and accepts people for who they are. This will inevitably prevent bullying. Learn about other ways of communicating such as sign language, braille etc as options alongside languages - again to be more inclusive and improve communication for all.” - i-Sgoil - S4,5,6 students' responses

“Students learn who matters as they witness which racial, ethnic, religious and gendered groups are normalised in the curriculum, so the curriculum needs to represent the contributions of a broad range of groups, recognise oppression, and celebrate movements against racial, gender and other oppression.” - On behalf of the Race Equality and Anti-Racism in Education: Curriculum Reform Sub-Group

Disability and long-term conditions

Children and young people with disabilities and long-term conditions were one of the most commonly mentioned groups with protected characteristics. As well as calls for more support, participants described a need to raise awareness of various disabilities and suggested how to improve inclusion and accessibility.

Engagement and awareness raising

Suggestions for how to raise awareness of disabilities and conditions included dedicating class time to discuss disabilities so that children can learn about what to do to support children with disabilities and having disability awareness events in school, including fundraising and befriending opportunities. Diversity in staff hiring to include disabilities, long-term conditions and neurodiversity was also seen as important, as was giving teachers training, access to information and time to develop knowledge of conditions.

The importance of engaging directly with young people with disabilities or long-term conditions, deaf or hearing impaired young people, or neurodiverse young people was highlighted, with participants stressing the need to involve them in decision-making and listen to their views. The value of engaging with parents and ensuring parents are fully aware of what support is available was also stressed, as was the

need for information about rights and access to support to be given easily and openly to families. Working with charities and services that understand neurodiversity and disability was also suggested.

Support for young people with disabilities

A variety of points were raised about supporting young people with a range of disabilities.

Calls for greater support for deaf young people⁵ were raised repeatedly by a small number of organisations with expertise in this field. They noted the particular relevance to deaf learners of UNCRC Article 23 (rights of disabled children to get the support they need, including in education) and Article 30 (minority language rights, including in education), and highlighted many ways in which accessibility for deaf people could be improved by encouraging the use of British Sign Language (BSL) which in turn would ensure BSL is seen and valued in society allowing deaf users to positively contribute to society.

Suggestions included: to deliver and rapidly extend the initiatives highlighted in the first BSL National Plan (British Sign Language (BSL): National Plan 2017 to 2023; BSL tutors to develop BSL across local authorities; a call for BSL qualifications; having BSL or Makaton as a language learned and used in every school, and increasing deaf awareness in the classroom; for deaf adults to be trained and employed to develop BSL skills in schools; to have BSL trained staff and resources available for deaf children; and for deaf people to be supported in fulfilling their potential by offering all opportunities and learning consistently in BSL, for example BSL interpreters for interviews, alternative assessment options in BSL, and ensuring the SQA (Scottish Qualifications Authority) can be flexible in supporting adaptations such as private rooms, additional time or use of a scribe in exams.

The importance of support staff was also noted, particularly access to qualified Teacher of Deaf (ToD). There were requests for: local authorities to commit to returning the number of ToD to 2011 levels over the next ten years; ToD to have the status of Principal Teacher or similar to attract high quality teachers; to futureproof training of ToD and Educational Audiologists; and to listen to ToD in the design of schools and performance standards.

It was noted that deaf children are twice as likely to leave school without qualifications; one participant expressed a view that deaf children are failed by the senior phase of high school with its focus on exams, compared to BGE phase where the focus is on developing them as individuals. Suggestions for more support for deaf learners at all stages included:

- encouraging a deaf friendly ethos and environment in school, including teaching about the deaf community's culture and heritage as part of the curriculum

⁵ Like many participants, we use the term deaf to cover all types of hearing impairments.

- providing opportunities to regularly meet other deaf children and young people and regular access to deaf role models
- conducting acoustic checks on mainstream settings used by deaf learners and on all new school buildings
- acknowledging the greater incidence of mental health issues among deaf people and offering support such as deaf CAMHS support to deaf learners and parents

In relation to visually impaired young people, suggestions included having: less cluttered classrooms; appropriate adaptations to exams and overcoming a preference for written exams compared to continuous assessment; better transitions to secondary school; a statutory requirement to have a curriculum for visually impaired young people in CfE; better career paths for Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVI); and teaching independent living skills for children and young people with visual impairment was noted.

Providing access to, and funding for, a range of professionals to support young people with disabilities or conditions was another theme. This could include speech therapists, education specialists who can advise parents who are involved in the education of children with disabilities, more multi-agency working and collaboration between education and healthcare authorities, and careers advisors working alongside health professionals to inform and support students with additional support needs to plan for their future.

In line with the overarching theme of focusing on the individual, there were calls for learners to have appropriate individualised plans to be in place which are up-to-date and followed by the staff they encounter throughout their learning journey. Specifically, another suggestion was for all children with a long-term condition, such as epilepsy, to have an individual healthcare plan which outlines the support they need to be safe and included, including key information about support and emergency contacts. Other suggestions included: noting the potential therapeutic value of art, music and outdoor learning; recognising that trips to specialist centres supporting young people with additional needs can be long and tiring in rural areas; and a call for more sex education in additional support or special needs schools.

Inclusion and accessibility

The importance of inclusion and providing appropriate education settings to support young people with disabilities, long-term conditions and neurodiverse young people was also noted. One strand of comments focused on inclusivity, for example recognising the potential for disabled and neurodiverse young people to have a lot to contribute, or inclusivity for children with hidden disabilities or undiagnosed disabilities. Another strand of comments centred on adaptations for those with physical disabilities or additional support needs, for example, ensuring wheelchair access, rooms on ground floors, appropriate playground equipment, and also ensuring play-based learning is inclusive and not ableist focused. This is in addition to calls for safe, nurture or wellbeing spaces noted earlier. There was a suggestion that disabled adults could advise on how to make settings more accessible.

Other suggestions included: having more placement opportunities for teachers to have a better understanding of ASN; considering how placing requests for children with additional support needs are handled, for example ensuring children are placed in the same school as siblings who can offer support, if this is appropriate; reviewing how mainstream schools can learn from the elements of specialist schools that children and parents often prefer to state schools; and for equitable opportunities in post school destinations, to ensure those with learning challenges and disabilities have positive options on leaving education.

“Embrace diversity including neurodevelopmental differences such as autism and ADHD. Don’t send those kids away. They can be creative, inventive and an asset to your school if provided the right support. This goes for all flavours of diversity.” - Parent

Race or ethnicity

Race and ethnicity was another commonly mentioned protected characteristic. Participants raised varied points about education to address the issues facing minority ethnic learners, teachers, families and those in the wider school community. Descriptions of an anti-racist education model included:

- a diverse and racially literate teaching workforce
- anti-racism and representation of different ethnicities in the curriculum
- improved racial literacy and creating a supportive and safe learning environment where ethnic minority pupils and parents have a voice, talk about race and racism, and influence decision-making
- sustainable approaches to tackling racist incidents and bullying
- support for implementing policies that support anti-racism in the education sector

Diverse and racially literate workforce

Having wider representation in the teaching profession was seen as beneficial to learners by providing teachers who can act as role models, share cultural or religious traditions they can identify with, and break down stereotypes about minority groups. It was also noted that a diverse workforce could help young people feel comfortable approaching teachers they thought had the racial literacy or cultural competency needed to deal with racism. There was also a suggestion for employing more teachers from different backgrounds who speak different languages. Participants noted that achieving this would require removing barriers to entry and career progression for ethnic minority teachers, including prejudice in recruitment, promotion, and staff retention.

There were also calls for more opportunities for educators to develop their racial literacy, including ensuring there is resource and time for high quality, meaningful and mandatory anti-racist professional learning and providing schools, teachers and school leadership with training on racial literacy, racial equality and anti-racism.

“There is a wealth of research showing that Black teachers and other workers with protected characteristics face greater barriers and discrimination in gaining promotion and pay progression than the generality of workers, and that both overt and covert instances of racism are a daily reality in workplaces... systemic organisational change is required in the education service to challenge these injustices.” – NASUWT

“Parents participating in the focus groups also raised concerns over their children’s achievement and successes at school. They discussed that teachers do not see the additional barriers, both in terms of cultural and linguistic challenges their children face. They argue that some teachers hold negative stereotypes about their children’s abilities and so therefore use this to judge ability groupings... All teachers/educators need to challenge their underlying assumptions and stereotypes and hold higher expectations of BME children.” – SAMEE

“There also needs to be more diversity in the hiring of more BAME teachers. Representation is so important. Young people need to see more "people like them" in professional roles to believe they can achieve and reach their potential.” – Teacher

An anti-racist curriculum

A few participants highlighted issues with Scotland’s existing curriculum, including:

- the lived experiences of ethnic minority children and their families are not reflected in the subjects and topics taught in school or experiences in early years
- a lack of diverse teaching resources, some of which reinforce negative stereotypes, means ethnic minority children cannot see themselves in the curriculum, struggle to find a sense of belonging in the classroom and feel disconnected from their learning
- that it makes Scotland appear mono-cultural, with outside perspectives regarded as an add-on
- that while some issues around racism and Black history are covered, this can be a negative experience for Black and ethnic minority young people if not done well
- celebrating diversity can often rely on stereotypes and stress differences rather than commonality
- that CfE’s language on equality and inclusion is not sufficient to encourage teachers to choose to build anti-racist approaches into the curriculum

Given this, some participants outlined how the curriculum, particularly history and RME, could be improved. Most common were calls to decolonise the curriculum by teaching black and ethnic minority history which reflects the experiences of ethnic minority individuals, their influence on Scotland, and Scotland’s role in the slave

trade and colonisation. It was also suggested that the curriculum should help young people to develop a positive sense of racial identity.

Other points included ensuring the curriculum avoids re-traumatisation, introducing different teaching approaches to address linguistic and cultural diversity, ensuring advice provided through pastoral care and guidance is culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of ethnic minority young people, and working with stakeholders such as museums or groups representing ethnic minorities to involve young people with lived experience or who have experienced racism to help develop resources. There were also a few calls to embed anti-racist principles in assessment, recognise the power dynamics involved, and for careers guidance and vocational learning which breaks down stereotypes.

“We’re at a turning point where the views/prejudices of my parents’ generation can be leapfrogged, so they don’t exist. Where I had to unlearn lots of things or learn new things about racism etc hopefully [diversity] will just be the norm for our children.” – Parent

“Children need to be exposed to a wide range of stories and cultures, so that they build empathy. It’s important to encourage reading stories about/written by people of different ethnicities, of different social backgrounds, of different levels of ability, different genders and gender identities etc.” – Parent

Improved racial literacy and open discussion

There were a small number of calls to improve racial literacy among young people and among society more generally. In relation to school, participants highlighted: the need for open discussion in class about racism; acknowledging the different cultures in a class and different languages being spoken to increase respect and tolerance for others; and ensuring everyone in education is aware of the institutionalised and systemic racism that people from ethnic minority backgrounds have been or are subjected to, and its impact on individuals as members of Scottish society.

More broadly, a few advocated for parents, families and communities to be engaged to develop and support racial and cultural literacy in education settings to create a strong sense of belonging in the school community and mechanisms to address racism. More education for parents from areas that are not ethnically diverse was also suggested.

“It was striking to note that every parent who participated in the focus groups raised the lack of engagement from schools. Parents stated clearly that there were not encouraged to support school trips or come into the schools to support learning or any other events. It is argued that children achieve more when they see their parents actively involved in the life of the school. This further disadvantages BME children’s achievement.” – SAMEE

Tackling racist bullying

Better practice on tackling racially motivated bullying in schools was requested by a few participants, given the impact of racism on health and wellbeing. This could include: engaging relevant stakeholders; providing advice and advocacy for young people who experience racism; and improved processes for recording and reporting data on prejudice-based bullying or incidents, possibly on a mandatory national database.

Wider support for anti-racist education

There was a feeling among a small number of participants that due to structural problems with the curriculum and competing priorities, anti-racist initiatives have been difficult to embed and are often limited to optional lunchtime clubs or optional subjects. There were therefore calls for: a stronger commitment to active anti-racist leadership to ensure educators are supported to implement innovative anti-racist actions that will have positive outcomes for learners across Scotland; and enhanced priority and resources to ensure the Scottish Government's commitment to anti-racism in education is sustainable and creates genuine, lasting change. There was a suggestion that the Welsh Government's work to implement and embed anti-racist initiatives in schools should be reviewed as an example.

Other themes

A small number of participants considered the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. There were calls for: interpreters to be used to support new arrivals to Scotland; English lessons to be provided as needed; support, information and guidance to families arriving in Scotland to help them understand how the system works and who they can go to with questions; consideration to be given to education needs when making arrangements for refugees; for staff training on challenges faced by refugees and asylum seeker communities, with suggestions for developing programmes in collaboration with the third sector and those with lived experience; and to employ more skilled adult refugees in education settings and benefit from their perspectives. Concerns were raised that there is more support for European migrants and Ukrainian refugees than for those from elsewhere, and that allocation of funding and support for refugee and asylum seeker children may be affected by institutional discrimination and racism.

Better provision for those with English as an Additional Language (EAL), regardless of where in Scotland they live, including the use of translators, was also mentioned by a few. Other points included more support for lesser-taught languages such as Mandarin, Arabic, Polish, and BSL to help schools ensure the diversity of their language provision, and the potential role for language teachers in helping teach children about the wider world. It was also suggested that teachers make negative assumptions about a child's abilities when English is their second language, whereas being multilingual has cognitive benefits.

Other points related to race and ethnicity included: for education to be affordable for all ethnicities; considering the promotion of cultural food in the canteen and add more food options that might appeal to children from other countries or cultures; prioritising the impacts of COVID-19 on missed education, learning, and mental

health of vulnerable groups such as young people from underprivileged BME communities; and a note that exclusion is a key issue from a race perspective, with Gypsy/Traveller pupils excluded at a higher rate as well as Black and Caribbean young people.

Sex

Comments related to sex as a protected characteristic covered multiple themes, which combined call for a whole system approach to embedding gender equality into everyday practice in schools. Particularly prevalent were calls for a curriculum which counters gender stereotypes, and where young people learn about healthy relationships and to challenge attitudes which result in sexism, misogyny and violence against women and girls. The impact of sexism in education on wider society was also noted.

Gender equality

One of the most common themes about gender equality was for equal opportunities for boys and girls throughout education, including sports and extra-curricular activities. In particular, participants noted the need to discuss and challenge behaviour and attitudes which reinforce gender stereotypes. This would ensure that young people are allowed to develop their own sense of self, pursue their aspirations, and are not given stereotypical or outdated advice about potential study or career paths. For example, encouraging girls to choose subjects like maths or coding and to pursue STEM careers, with boys encouraged to consider careers in childcare or the creative arts. Another suggestion was for more balanced opportunities such as courses in hairdressing and barbering, or for unisex sports teams or teams for boys and girls to be offered in all sports.

A few participants called for all children's views to be included when building a gender-equal education system; there was a concern that young women are less frequently consulted, and that schools are structured around traditional views, particularly about discipline and obedience, rather than empowerment and collaboration.

Other points related to gender equality included: for education to encourage the full participation of girls and young women; increase their confidence and address a decline in girls' attendance at secondary school; for educators to be trained in gender and identity issues; for more varied opportunities for physical activity for girls and having separate boy and girl P.E. time in primary school to encourage girls to continue with sport; and a concern that the current education system is denying girls female-only spaces. There were also a small number of comments calling for more male role models in schools and focused recruitment on males, and to support teenage boys who are unsure what they want to do when leaving school and may then fall through the net.

Healthy relationships, sexism and misogyny

PSE lessons were highlighted as valuable in helping young people learn about sex education, consent and other issues affecting them in the wider world. There were calls for these lessons to be more engaging and supportive, and for dedicated time

for sex education, with boys and girls taught together so that everyone has the same information. It was felt this could help sexual health education be LGBTI+ inclusive and remove stigma associated with women-centred health such as periods and menopause. Ensuring sex and relationship education is not just delivered from a male perspective was also noted.

More specifically, a few argued that education should eradicate stereotypes which endanger women and that every school should have a prevention approach which teaches children about reducing sexual assault and violence against women and girls. Suggestions for how to achieve this included: having a zero tolerance approach to misogyny in schools; that boys should be included in assemblies and events which focus on the rights of women and girls, as their exclusion suggests they do not have a role to play in reducing sexism and misogyny; more education for boys about consent, pornography, and the challenges of social media contributing to misogynistic behaviour; and complementing this education with approaches such as the Equally Safe at School whole-school approach and Mentors in Violence Prevention peer education programme. One organisation noted that, in the context of sexual and gender-based violence, individual-level supports must be trauma-informed, survivor-centred and avoid victim blaming messages.

Education, sexism and society

Comments about the impact of sexism in education on wider society included:

- providing strong wraparound childcare as women are still disproportionately impacted by the structure of the school day
- schools require a better understanding of modern families and should stop treating women as if they should be at home and available at any time they are needed, or should understand that grandparents may be responsible while parents work
- that most teaching staff are women who are struggling to meet the demands of a constantly changing workplace; aspects of the gender pay gap could be addressed by placing a higher pay value on the emotional labour contribution of teaching staff (predominantly women) to raise their pay in line with senior management staff (predominantly men)
- improving gender representation in traditionally male-dominated and higher-earning STEM roles could have positive indirect effects on reducing the gender pay gap
- for social subjects to encompass issues of gender inequality and teach young people about the importance of political engagement, as well as the UK voting systems, encouraging them to vote in the future; this is linked to helping young women understand the power of their vote
- prevention of violence against women and girls creates better wellbeing outcomes, as fewer children are exposed to the trauma of witnessing violence

Other comments

Other comments in relation to sex as a protected characteristic included:

- addressing a link between gender and additional support needs, for example, autistic girls are far less likely to be identified due to diagnosis being based on autistic traits typically displayed by boys
- for continued work on gender equality by teams such as the Improving Gender Balance and Equality group, and equalities teams within Education Scotland and the SQA and/or the recommendations of the Gender Equality Taskforce in Education and Learning to be integrated into educational reform
- addressing period poverty and covering time lost due to periods with Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)
- understanding intersectionality between gender and sexual orientation and gender reassignment, experience and impact on ethnic minority women of racism and discrimination from staff and other pupils, and between gender and poverty, with young women who live within areas of high deprivation having less opportunity at school to take part in certain subjects or extra-curricular activity
- consider gender influences on mental health stigma and discrimination

Religion or belief

Comments on religion or belief were less frequent and covered four main strands: to promote a greater understanding of all faiths, and none; to recognise the contribution of different faiths to society and education; to allow religious schools to teach within their worldview; and conversely to end any association between schools and religion.

Participants made various suggestions to improve knowledge and help young people be informed and respectful of other beliefs. These included: for Religious and Moral Education (RME) to teach about all religions, and none, rather than being delivered from a Christian viewpoint; trips to faith buildings and diverse faith organisations; having diverse events and festivals to learn about other cultures and religions; and assemblies where leaders of places of worship can come into school and speak and build connections.

The role of Church of Scotland representatives on local authority education committees was highlighted as a bridge between councils and schools, as was their role in wider community support and support for delivering parts of the curriculum. Similarly, work by school chaplains and parish priests was also noted as integral to Catholic schools in helping to support the development and wellbeing of children.

Some comments, typically from Catholic schools, advocated the continued provision of Catholic schools and education built on the values of the Catholic church so that children's spiritual needs are not neglected. These participants argued that Catholic values help support all areas of a young person's development and will help them navigate a changing world. Participants also noted that wellbeing within Catholicism is not separate physical and mental wellbeing, but a holistic

approach to caring for all aspects of the body, including spiritual, emotional and intellectual, and that young people can be supported in prioritising and nurturing relationships by actively listening and keeping Christ at the centre of their relationships. It was also suggested, however, that if denominational schools remain that they should be open and welcoming e.g. a Catholic school, not a school for Catholics.

Conversely, others felt there should be less or no link between religion and education. Some stated that a religious education or a focus on religion is not helpful and called for an end to the dominance of church and Christianity in schools. Specifically, there was a call for a non-religious character to be applied to all schools. It was noted that the rights of the child to withdraw from collective worship without parental permission are not recognised or empowered in Scotland and while parents have a right to withdraw their children from RME, this is not always respected in practice, and some parents are unaware of their rights.

A few suggested that lessons on relationships and sex education should have input from parents to ensure they reflect individual cultures and religions.

Gender reassignment and sexual orientation

Most of the small number of comments related to this protected characteristic called for LGBTI+ inclusive education. This would involve schools being LGBTI+ friendly, LGBTI+ awareness training, covering Pride and sexualities and what they mean, for LGBTI+ issues to be included in the curriculum, and training for staff in LGBTI+ education so they have confidence to teach it. A few concerns were noted such as LGBTI+ young people feeling supported by their peers but finding their preferred identities dismissed by teaching staff, and a perceived disconnect between outward shows of support e.g. flying the Pride flag, compared to hearing derogatory remarks which go unchallenged in school.

Other suggestions included: having age appropriate relationship, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education reflecting diversity and LGBTI+ issues; that PSE should be taught by specialist, trained teachers or third sector organisations so that young people can be well informed about sexuality, gender and consent; having support groups run by people who are knowledgeable in their area such as LGBTI+ groups to give people a wider range of opportunities; and creating a dedicated fund for initiatives to educate, prevent and address LGBTI+ bullying and discrimination in schools.

While there were a few calls to educate children at a young age about LGBTI+ issues and different types of families, as noted earlier there were also comments from some participants calling for discussion of LGBTI+ issues to be excluded from the curriculum.

Age

Within the main analysis, participants generally recognised the importance of early years education and believed that play is a fundamental part of learning that should continue beyond early years. Beyond this, there were few comments directly

related to age as a protected characteristic and little consistency across the points raised. These included:

- having mixed age classes to develop a wider school community
- ensuring young people have adequate time to experience STEM subjects
- adaptations for teenagers whose brains are reconfiguring at a difficult phase
- engagement must ensure that the views of the youngest children are heard, including non-verbal babies and infants in early years settings
- early introduction of health and wellbeing in early years or primary education
- piloting flexible age for entry into and departure from education to help those who develop and learn at different speeds, especially those born prematurely
- supporting children and young people with physical disabilities, mental health difficulties and/or addiction with employability and education up until the age of 25 to avoid a cliff edge of support ending at 18
- the need for national arrangements that support local authorities in providing school places for those beyond statutory school age (this was raised in a group in the context of families who foster children from diverse ethnic backgrounds)
- that there should be access to a formal education system throughout a person's life, to adhere to the principles of social justice
- on the issue of transitions during the learning journey, a few noted that the cohort of young people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic might need particular support

Other equalities issues

Intersectionality

Understanding the intersectionality of protected characteristics was noted by a few participants. They highlighted that certain individuals will have needs linked to multiple and intersecting inequalities or circumstances, such as those with additional support needs, care experienced children and young people, those with insecure immigration status, those who speak English as a second language, those living in poverty, and those with experience of the criminal justice system. Participants therefore advocated for a holistic approach to ensure students get the right support at the right time. Greater mental health risks and stigma and barriers to accessing support was noted in relation to these groups.

Care experienced young people

Comments about the needs of care experienced young people, including those in kinship care, considered how any reform can help the implementation and realisation of The Promise and policies and guidance which support a desire for higher aspirations for care experienced young people. Suggestions included: adopting whole-school approaches that ensure all young people learn about care experience in an age-appropriate way, ensuring care experience and corporate

parenting are mandatory parts of teacher training, and consultation with groups representing kinship carers.

Calls for more support for this group focused on creating trauma-informed teaching staff and mental health professionals with a better understanding of the impact of early childhood trauma and its associated conditions, such as Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) and hypervigilance. It was suggested that therapeutic education could benefit all children, not just those who have experienced trauma or who are living in traumatic environments. Given the challenges faced by this group, it was felt that any review should focus on changing the support offered to this group, rather than changing the expectations of what care experienced young people can achieve.

Gaelic speakers and Gaelic Medium Education (GME)

The discussion included comments for and against Gaelic and Gaelic Medium Education. Those against felt funding for Gaelic schools could be better used elsewhere. Supporters felt Gaelic is part of the equalities agenda and that a rights-based approach would embed GME and ensure it has status and resources equal to English Medium Education (EME).

A few participants provided detailed responses about how Scotland could make further progress in GME. A key theme was workforce development, including: the need for greater staffing in GME schools; better, nationwide teacher recruitment and training in GME, including comprehensive ITE and subsequent CLPL and mentoring; and increasing skills in immersion strategies. Another theme was ensuring the curriculum allows exploration of Gaelic language and culture, with learning resources and support available in Gaelic and, ideally, originating in Gaelic and not just translated from EME.

More generally, there were calls for more Gaelic in schools, including: every child having the right to GME in early years education; for more progress to be made on teaching Gaelic as a modern language in EME; for immersion in Gaelic through Gaelic extra-curricular provision; incentives for taking exams in Gaelic; and improving certification in Gaelic. It was suggested that more exposure to Gaelic would create a virtuous circle of greater awareness, leading to more interest in GME as a profession. Other comments included ensuring Gaelic representation at all levels of education and education agencies, as well as many of the overarching themes seen through the lens of GME, for example, the need for more ASN support in GME, listening to young people in GME and what they want to learn, increased access to digital technology, and resourcing.

6. Sub-group analysis

This chapter outlines where the views expressed in the National Discussion varied by respondent type. The first section focuses on differences between three core audiences – learners, parents and teaching staff. The second section details young learners' views.

Differences between learners, parents and teaching staff

While there was a large degree of consistency in the themes raised by learners, parents and teaching staff, some themes were of more importance to one audience than others. The most notable differences are summarised below and detailed sub-group analysis for each question is available in Appendices C to L (see supporting documents).

Learners

Comments about specific subjects were typically more likely to be made by learners. As well as being more likely to advocate both for and against specific subjects, learners were more likely to suggest physical activity and PE, and literacy and numeracy should remain key parts of education. When considering future learning needs, a prevalent theme was for help to develop their digital literacy, followed by skills to help prepare for work. There were also calls to improve their understanding of further education and career options. In relation to learning about the changing world, the most common theme among learners was to be given opportunities to gain information and knowledge, followed by teaching topical issues as part of the curriculum.

The structure of the school day and week was another common theme for learners. As noted earlier, this included a range of views about breaks and play time, the current length of the school day and week, study leave and holidays. Freedom of choice was important, from choosing subjects to being allowed a phone in school and going to the toilet at a time of their choosing. In relation to wellbeing, comments about pastoral care, access to mental health support in school, being taught mental health tools and strategies, and the need for an appropriate and safe learning environment were more commonly mentioned by this audience.

Listening to young people's views and involving them in decision-making was a prevalent theme for learners, who were also slightly more likely to note the importance of positive relationships with teachers. Despite this, learners were often less likely to call for a focus on individual young people and to have flexible learning pathways. Learners were also more likely than parents or teachers to mention keeping exams, particularly prelims.

“Lunches and break are a vital activity that needs to stay in the education system as even teachers enjoy a lunch break after working hard and educating the future” – Learner

“I think people should still be able to have prelims as an opportunity to see what exams would be like.” – Learner

“Exams and tests to show that everyday hard-work will pay off when tested on knowledge.” - Learner

Parents

As the largest audience in the sample, the views of parents usually aligned with the prevalent themes in the Discussion. However, a few areas of greater importance were noted; parents were more likely than learners or teachers to comment negatively about the state of education and the scale of improvement required.

Calls to listen to parents and have better communication between schools and families were more prevalent among this audience. This was often alongside acknowledging the need to listen to young people, with parents keen to see education focus on the needs of individual young people, to create confident and well-rounded young people, and more likely to comment on the importance of flexible learning pathways and ASN support.

Comments about specific subjects and curriculum content were also common among parents, particularly the importance of literacy and numeracy, financial life skills and pastoral care and wellbeing.

Teaching staff

Across the discussion, teaching staff were more likely than parents and learners to raise a variety of issues related to the profession. As well as calls for more funding, this covered both working conditions and specific features of the education system and learning approaches. Staff were more likely to call for more teachers, support staff and specialist teachers, for better pay and working conditions, and for more and better training and guidance. Calls for more ASN support were prevalent among teachers who also frequently highlighted the challenges of making inclusion work in practice. Teachers commonly argued that their views should be sought, listened to and acted on, but were also more likely than other groups to note the importance of speaking to other school staff.

Teaching staff were also more likely to highlight the importance of early years education, flexible learning pathways, and pastoral care and wellbeing. While more likely than learners or parents to mention fostering creative and critical thinking and skills-based learning, they were less likely to specifically mention life skills than learners or parents.

Other themes frequently raised more by teachers than other groups included working with parents and families, access to external mental health support, and more partnership working with other external agencies. However, at a few questions teachers were notably less likely than learners or parents to mention the need to listen to young people.

Young children’s (aged 3 to 7) views on learning

Many group discussions covered engagements with younger children aged three to seven. Conversations with this cohort were guided by a bespoke set of simple, direct questions which were specifically designed to facilitate discussions with this

age range. The questions invited younger children to share their views on what they should be learning, and where, how and with whom they should be learning. This section presents the analysis of each of the four questions. Many of the themes evident in responses aligned closely with the rest of the National Discussion. While young people were asked to give reasons for their answer, many did not elaborate.

Q1. What should children be learning - and why?

Most responses focused on subjects that children were most interested in. These included, from most to least mentioned: maths and English, spelling and handwriting, as these skills are needed for jobs; science and science topics including space, robots, germs and dinosaurs; languages as they will help speak to other people when on holiday; skills for life and work, including cooking, money, gardening and survival skills; nature and animals; fitness and sport to be strong and healthy; social skills, such as patience, honesty, kindness and caring for others; world issues, to help the environment and save the planet; arts; technology, including computers and coding; health and wellbeing, to help understand and control emotions and ask for help; history, geography and RME; safety, particularly road, cycling, swimming and internet safety; and a very small number of comments about having choice in learning, as well as outdoor learning and having fun.

“Science and maths because if you want to be an astronaut you will need these subjects” – Anonymous childrens group

“I think we should learn maths so you know how to count. It is important when I grow up and want to be a doctor. I will need to count my patients so I know how many I need to see in a day or the amount of medicine to give to help people feel better...” - Peel Primary School, Health and Wellbeing Mini Champs

Q2. Where are the best places children can learn - and why?

The three most prevalent themes in responses to Q2 were at school, outside and at home. Most of these groups stated that school or in the classroom was one of the best places to learn. Young people felt being in the classroom means they learn more, teachers can help, there are toys and books to have fun with, and it is a safe space. Learning outside was also commonly mentioned. Only a few specifically mentioned outdoor education settings; most comments described learning in parks, playgrounds, forests and the beach. Outdoor learning was seen as exciting and adventurous, allowing children to explore and discover things, as well as relaxing and letting them get fresh air.

Home was also seen as a good place to learn, because children feel comfortable and have parents and family on hand to help. Experiential learning was also mentioned. Children described museums, science centres, the zoo and nature reserves, visiting other cities and countries and visiting places like the Coastguard station, building sites and farms. Other ways to learn included playing sports and attending clubs, online and at church and in the library, as having a quiet space to concentrate was mentioned by a few children, though not all thought this needed to be a library.

“I like to learn outside because I get a good breeze like learning at the park with my friends / I like learning at the park with my friends / I like to learn outside. We can learn and play / I like learning at the pond, we can count and learn about the creatures there / I like learning outside because there are lots of fun activities to do / I like learning in the woods because it's fun / I like to learn outside because it's busy / I like learning at the community garden.” – Anonymous childrens group

Q3. How (in which ways) should children be learning and why?

Various ways to learn were suggested by the groups of three to seven year olds. These included, from most to least mentioned: using computer and iPads, and apps and websites which can provide information; through creative games and activities which are fun and get children moving; using books, including paper worksheets and jotter work; with a partner or in groups to learn together and learn from others; with teachers or other adults who can help; through play, to help learn how things work; learning outside, including trips; practical activities like experiments, building things, and gardening; independent learning to help think for yourself and not rely on others; and using resources like number lines.

A variety of ways to learn were mentioned including: listening and watching, having things explained to you, taking notes, asking questions, sharing learning and through homework and projects. A few mentioned learning in other languages, including Sign Language.

“One girl came up with the idea of mix and match learning that she explained to the class. "It's like doing some things in jotters and then making things and then going outside so that we get to do lots of different things each day".” - Port Ellen Primary School P3

“I prefer to learn by doing practical things. Using real objects makes things stick in my memory for longer. I love Science because it's very practical and fun.” – Anonymous childrens group

Q4. Who do children learn best with - and why?

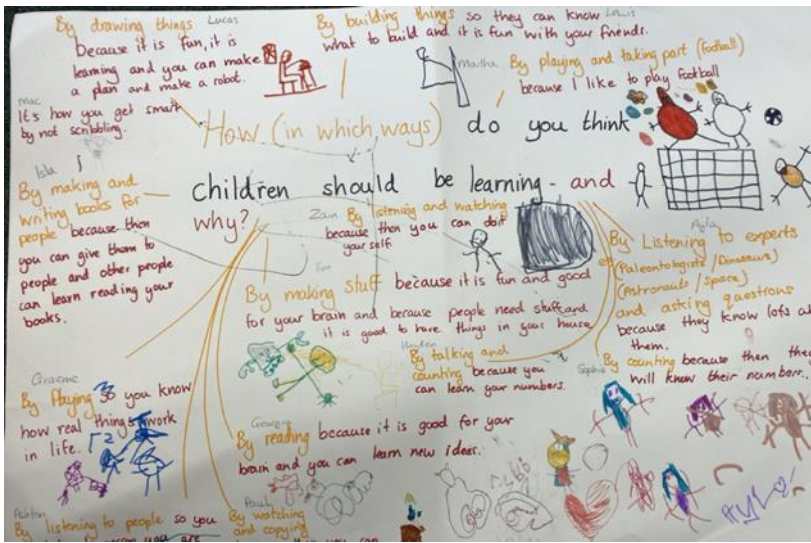
Children were most likely to say they learn best with teaching staff and with their parents and family, but the overarching emphasis of responses was the need for trusted adults who can offer help. The types of people mentioned, from most to least prevalent, were: teachers and classroom assistants; parents; friends; wider family including siblings and grandparents; the rest of a class, groups or partners with a few suggestions they should learn with other classes, and with older children, to learn more; professional experts visiting a class, such as builders, emergency services doctors, head teacher, fire service, lumberjack, driving instructor, lifeguards and scientists; a coach, tutor or club leader; and from technology, online or TV and videos.

“Our friends because we know each other well and like each other. Our teachers because they are smart and work at school. Our parents

because they live with us and can help us. Our grandparents because they can teach you about history.” – Barr Primary School

“Teacher and kids because you learn to be kind to them. Mum and Dad because they help you learn at home - they can help you learn the alphabet and learn my numbers. Family - because they have homework books. With your brother because you have fun - he helps me because he is teaching me to be a ninja. Mum because she teaches me French. Teachers - because they help you learn new things. Classmates - because you can tell them and help them. Experts (palaeontologists) because they help you learn about dinosaurs, because they dig up dinosaur bones. Animal experts like vets because they know a lot about animals.” - Westfield Primary School, P1/2 class

Examples of responses to young learners' questions:



P1/2 Westfield Primary School

The National Discussion @ Broxburn Primary School

WHERE ARE THE BEST PLACES TO LEARN?

- Outside because it is relaxing and peaceful.
- The library because it is quiet and calm.

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU LEARN BEST WITH?

- Their own personal teacher.
- A person who teaches that exact subject for more extensive learning.
- Parents because they make you feel safe and they will help you.
- With a partner to discuss ideas.

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU SHOULD BE LEARNING?

- About the world and skills for life situations.
- Money management, for we are older.
- About nature because we need to save the environment.
- Art because it can make you happy.
- Technology for safety when we get older.

HOW DO YOU THINK CHILDREN SHOULD BE LEARNING?

- Read a book.
- More games so learning is fun.
- In apps.
- With adults.
- With technology so it is more interesting.

Peel Primary School National Discussion Feedback P1 - 3

What do you think children should be learning - and why?

- "I think we should learn Maths so you know how to count. It is important when I grow up and want to be a doctor. I will need to count my patients so I know how many I need to see in a day or the amount of medicine to give to help people feel better." EF, P3
- "I think Numeracy so we can be good at counting up to 30 or 100. If we go to a place like an accountant, you need to be able to count." BC, P1
- "I think Writing so when I am older I will need to write lots, like things like shopping lists so I know what I need at the shops and I won't get angry." EC, P2

Where are the best places children can learn - and why?

- "From your teacher in the classroom they help you to learn and set your tasks for the day." ES, P3
- "Drawing table area - you can draw your learning and you can choose what you want to do, I love free learning." BC, P1
- "Outside learning is very important so we can see everyone and play with friends, especial ones that are not in your class." RG, P3
- "Yes, outdoor learning is great fun, you can best learn outdoors." EC, P2

How (in which ways) do you think children should be learning - and why?

- "Writing is important to learn because you can write your ideas and show your teacher to explain your task." ES, P3
- "PLAY is important so you can learn through doing and with your friends." BC, P1

Who do you think children learn best with - and why?

- "Our friends because my friends know so much and they can show me what to do, by talking me through my work. They know so much stuff, they correct me sometimes if I do not know sometimes." BC, P1
- "The teacher because they show us what to do and they are good at it." EC, P2
- "I work best when work alone. I can challenge myself more, use my learning board to help me organise my day and the teacher can check in and I can share my learning with her." EF, P3

"Our voices are gathered and valued in all we do" - EF, P3



<p>What do you think children should be learning and why?</p> <p>how to do Taxes to help us when we're older.</p>	<p>Where are the best places for children to learn and why?</p> <p>ancient places to learn about history.</p>
<p>How (in which ways) do you think children should be learning and why?</p> <p>Reading because you learn things you never knew.</p>	<p>Who do you think children learn best with and why?</p> <p>mums and dads because they know you best.</p>

P1-4 Canisbay Primary

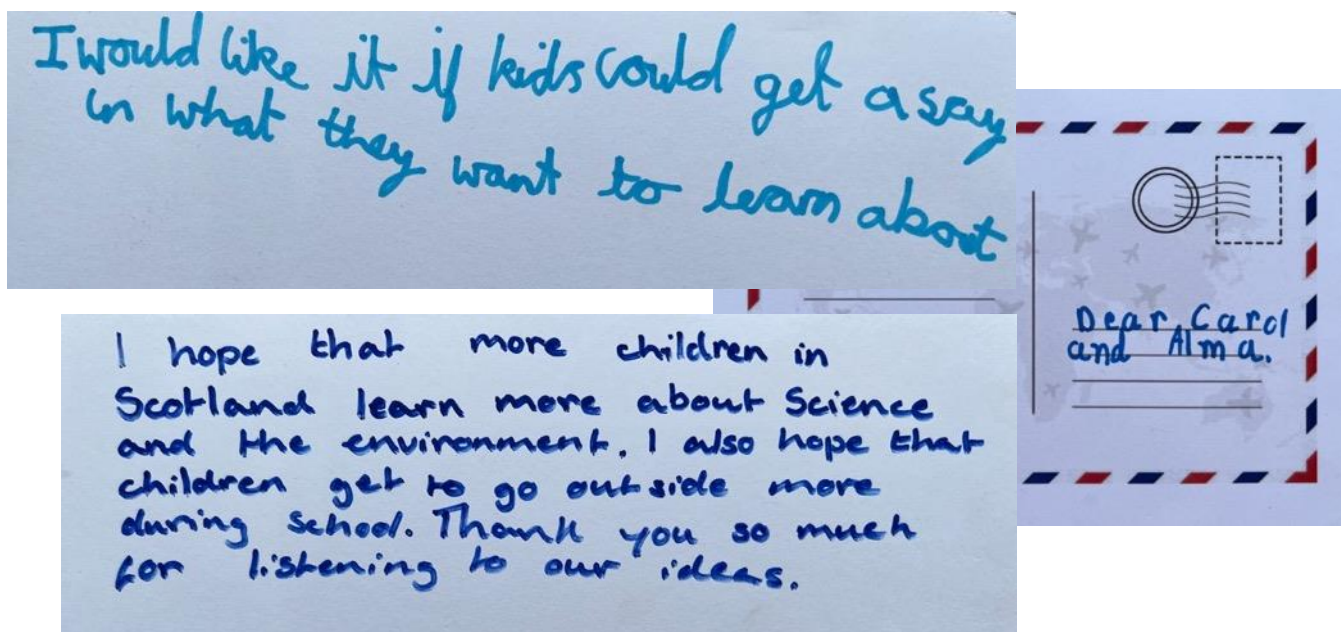
Forgandenny Primary School

7. Conclusions

The level of engagement with the National Discussion for Education was exceptional; at least 12,323 participants shared their views in various formats over 5,671 responses.

Learners, parents, teaching staff and many other stakeholders with detailed knowledge shared their hopes for the future which will help to provide a useful evidence base for the co-facilitators of the National Discussion and the Scottish Government to draw on when developing their vision and Call to Action. This report provides a high-level analysis which reflects the range of participants' experiences, expertise and perspectives⁶.

While some clear priorities are evident, we emphasise that nuance, different perspectives and multi-faceted responses featured in each strand of debate. It is unlikely that the new vision for education will satisfy all, and it will be a challenge to address the full range of ambitions expressed by those who participated in the National Discussion, given diverse priorities and the scale of the change that some would like to see.



Responses from Children's Parliament event

⁶ For more detail, readers are encouraged to look to individual responses where permission was given for publication via the [Scottish Government's consultation website](#).

Appendix A: Methodology

The Lines Between was commissioned to provide a robust, independent analysis of responses to the National Discussion. The large number and varied nature of responses required a clear and systematic process for collating, coding and analysing all responses. We detail the steps in this process below.

Sample

The analysis in this report is drawn from multiple sources.

The National Discussion page on the Scottish Government's Citizen Space consultation portal received 5,388 responses⁷. Participants directly entered these into the portal, so most responses aligned with the ten core consultation questions. Participants could also upload documents to support their submission; 133 did so. Half of the supporting documents repeated the information entered into the survey, so no further action was taken. The remaining material did not align with the consultation questions or contained notes from group discussions. These were processed using the analysis methods developed for non-standard or group responses described below.

Another 196 responses were received via a specific Citizen Space portal for group discussions with children and young people, parents and families, teaching staff and various stakeholders. These were facilitated by schools, organisations and the Scottish Government's National Discussion team. Just over three-quarters of these responses (156 of 196) were entered directly into Citizen Space and aligned with the questions in the group discussion guides. The remaining 40 groups uploaded a document with their responses, and analysts added this data into the coding framework; where comments did not align with the questions, analysts used their judgement on where best to add the data.

A further 87 non-standard responses were emailed to the Scottish Government. Most of these came from organisations and were submitted in PDF, Word documents, PowerPoint presentations and images.

The social media analysis involved a review of over 1,300 original Tweets with the hashtag #TalkScottishEducation.

Numbers of participants

Throughout this report we have referenced the 232 responses we know were produced following group discussions. This figure comprises the 196 responses entered into the group discussion portal, eight provided via the National Discussion portal and 28 provided as non-standard responses.

When entering the findings from their group discussion, participants were asked to indicate how many people were in their group. Across these 232 responses, 6,884 were noted as taking part. Along with the 5,439 participants who did not leave a

⁷ The profile of this sample is detailed in Appendix B.

number, this means at least 12,323 people were represented by a response to the National Discussion.

In addition, approximately 26,000 people participated in National Discussion Live Assemblies co-ordinated by Education Scotland. Therefore, a total of at least 38,323 people were reached in the National Discussion.

Data cleaning

Data checks were carried out within and across both Citizen Space databases and non-standard responses, primarily to identify any duplicate responses. Standard checks were carried out by participant name, email address and organisation name.

However, the nature of the National Discussion meant a person could make multiple submissions – for example, a head teacher might submit their response and that of their parent council, or a school could have submitted multiple responses from different classes. All potential duplicates of this kind were reviewed but kept in the data.

As a result of the data checks, ten records were deleted; three contained no data, and seven were duplicate entries.

A further 52 participants, primarily individuals, responded to the consultation at least twice using the same email address but with different answers. We cannot know that the same person responded; for example, a parent may have allowed their child to respond using their email address. All participant comments have been analysed, but we counted each duplicate as only one participant.

Three coordinated responses were identified. This is where some participants use the same or similar wording promoted or made available by another participant, typically an organisation. These constitute a valid responses, and all have been kept in the data. Each set had seven participants with a specific interest in:

- Catholic education
- education for deaf young people
- global citizenship education

While responses came from various individuals and organisations, it is unclear how many people are represented by each response. For example, a class from one school may have discussed the questions and submitted one response. In contrast, learners from another school may have shared their individual responses as part of their lesson. For analysis purposes, each submission was treated as a separate response. All views are included in this report regardless of whether a large or small number of respondents raised them.

Developing a coding framework

The team created a customised coding framework for each consultation question. This was developed in three stages.

Firstly, we reviewed a sample of responses in a team workshop and identified emerging themes. This ensured all team members began the coding process with a shared understanding of the emerging themes, developed consistent approaches to data categorisation, and contributed to the development of the framework.

To create an analysis sample, every National Discussion Citizen Space response was allocated a number between one and twenty based on the order they were submitted. This produced a set of twenty randomly selected sub-samples of 270 responses from the sample of 5,388, each of which broadly matched the overall respondent profile and contained 250 responses from individuals and 20 from organisations. A draft coding framework was created for each question based on an initial read of a sample of responses. To develop the coding framework for Q1, 271 comments from sub-sample one were reviewed; for Q2, 271 comments from sub-sample two were reviewed, and so on.

The draft coding framework was then tested in a pilot coding exercise. This involved coding a different sub-sample per question to test the framework's validity. For Q1, 270 comments from sub-sample eleven were coded; for Q2, 270 comments from sub-sample twelve were coded, and so on. The methodology used in the pilot exercise allowed us to:

- consider one answer from every respondent across the development of the coding framework and the pilot coding
- confirm a high degree of consistency in comments across the two sub-samples used for each question
- identify themes which appear across all questions, and apply these consistently across the coding framework at all questions, along with the question-specific themes which emerged

Finally, new codes were created through an iterative coding process if additional themes emerged as the entire data set was processed.

Reflecting the high level of engagement in the National Discussion and the broad nature of the questions, many themes emerged within and across responses. Codes for cross-cutting themes were developed and included in the framework across all questions. This ensured that all data on these themes was captured consistently.

The final framework included c.80 common codes which spanned all questions, and a further c.10-20 specific codes for each question.

Coding

Every response was coded against the coding framework for the relevant question. If a comment covered multiple themes, it was coded against all pertinent themes in the framework.

The group discussion guide included ten questions used in the National Discussion. Analysis of a sample of group discussions identified that the themes strongly aligned with those identified in the main sample, and these responses were coded

with the framework used for the main sample of 5,388 responses. In addition, bespoke code frames were created for the other four group discussion questions.

Non-standard responses

Some responses to the National Discussion, and attachments to Citizen Space responses, were provided in a range of formats. As well as PDF and Word documents, participants submitted PowerPoint presentations, Jamboards, Padlet posts and photographs of mind maps, drawings and posters created by children and young people.

Where the information in these non-standard responses aligned with specific questions, analysts added the data to the coding database and coded against the relevant themes.

Approximately 50 responses did not directly address any consultation questions. To ensure this content was captured in the analysis process, it was coded in a separate database against the c.80 themes evident across the National Discussion.

Social media

Analysts used the Tweetbinder tool to download a database of 7,745 tweets which included the hashtag #TalkScottishEducation in the six months up to 13 January 2023.

Of these, 6,140 were retweets, leaving 1,605 original tweets for analysis. Within this, 249 were original tweets from Professor Campbell, Professor Harris, or from Scottish Government accounts; they were typically comments to thank or encourage participants and are not included in the analysis. A sample of 1,356 relevant original tweets remained for analysis.

Analysts reviewed all 1,356 original tweets to determine if the comments pertained to the questions in the National Discussion. Almost three-quarters did not contain relevant information; they mainly encouraged participation in the National Discussion or thanked people for participating. The remaining quarter had information relevant to the analysis. These tweets were coded in a separate database, using the cross-cutting themes framework developed to analyse responses to the National Discussion.

Analysis

A public consultation of this kind means anyone can express their views; individuals and organisations interested in the topic are more likely to respond than others. This self-selection means the views of participants do not necessarily represent the views of the entire population.

Reflecting the large number of participants in the National Discussion, it is impossible to detail every response in this report; some participants shared lengthy submissions reflecting their specific area of interest or expertise. Full responses to the consultation, where permission for publication was granted, can be found on the Scottish Government's website.

Where appropriate, quotes from a range of participants are included to illustrate key points and provide useful examples, insights and contextual information⁸.

Qualitative analysis

The main purpose of consultation analysis is not to identify how many people held a particular view, but to understand the full range of views expressed. This means an insightful view expressed by a very small number of participants is not given less weight than more general comments shared by a majority.

This report lists the themes identified in responses from most to least commonly mentioned. Qualitative analysis of open-ended questions does not permit the quantification of results. However, to assist the reader in interpreting the findings, a framework is used to convey the most to least commonly identified themes in responses to each question:

- ‘many participants’ is used to denote a prevalent theme mentioned by more than one in five participants
- ‘several participants’; a recurring theme raised by between one in 10 and one in five
- ‘some participants’; another theme mentioned by fewer than one in 10
- ‘a few / a small number’; fewer than one in 20, a less commonly mentioned theme

Sub-group analysis

Responses to each question were reviewed to identify if themes were more or less prevalent between groups of participants. The primary variable in this analysis was the classification participants selected in the consultation survey, i.e. learner, parent, or teacher/education practitioner/school support staff. Differences between these groups are summarised in Chapter 6 and detailed for each question in Appendices C to L (see supporting documents).

The data was also analysed for any divergence in views between individual and organisational responses and between protected characteristics including sex, ethnic background, disability or long-term condition, sexual orientation and gender reassignment, and religion.

Equalities considerations.

Chapter 5 presents comments drawn from across the National Discussion about the impact of reform on those with protected characteristics and other equalities issues.

⁸ Quotes from individuals are labelled with the classification they selected from a list provided in the consultation survey i.e. learner, parent, teacher, education practitioner, or school support staff. Those who did not answer are labelled as Individual.

Appendix B: Participant profile

The analysis in this report is drawn from the following sample:

- 5,388 participants who responded via the Citizen Space survey
- 196 group discussions which were entered into the group discussion survey on Citizen Space
- 87 non-standard responses which were not submitted through Citizen Space; these were typically sent to the Scottish Government via email

The profile of each sample is presented below. Citizen Space survey participants were asked several demographic questions, but limited profile information was collected for the group discussions or non-standard responses.

Percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding or if multiple answers were permitted.

Citizen Space responses (n=5388)

Respondent Type	N=	%
Individual	4982	92%
Organisation, including schools	406	8%

Type of individual respondent	N=	% of individuals
Parent	2427	49%
Teacher	760	15%
School support staff	68	1%
Learner	493	10%
Other	300	6%
Education practitioner	216	4%
Not Answered	718 ⁹	14%

⁹ Due to a survey error, this question was not asked of the first 615 Individuals who complete the Citizen Space survey.

What was your age last birthday	N=	% of individuals
6-11	164	3%
12-15	242	5%
16-24	112	2%
25-34	495	10%
35-44	1640	33%
45-54	1390	28%
55-64	406	8%
65+	135	3%
Not Answered	398	8%

Do you have a physical or mental health condition or illness lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?	N=	% of individuals
Yes	737	15%
No	3651	73%
Don't know	101	2%
Prefer not to say	291	6%
Not Answered	202	4%

If you answered 'Yes' to the above question, does this condition or illness affect you in any of the following areas?	N=	% of those with condition
Mental health	312	42%
Mobility (for example walking short distances or climbing stairs)	165	22%
Stamina or breathing or fatigue	165	22%
Socially or behaviourally (for example associated with autism, attention deficit disorder or Asperger's syndrome)	96	13%
Learning or understanding or concentrating	76	10%
Memory	66	9%
Dexterity (for example lifting or carrying objects, using a keyboard)	68	9%

Hearing (for example deafness or partial hearing)	54	7%
Vision (for example blindness or partial sight)	31	4%
Other	117	16%
None of the above	52	7%

What is your sex?	N=	% of individuals
Female	3701	74%
Male	890	18%
Prefer not to say	167	3%
Not Answered	224	4%

Do you consider yourself to be trans, or have a trans history?	N=	% of individuals
Yes	42	1%
No	4388	88%
Prefer not to say	185	4%
Not Answered	367	7%

Which of the options best describes how you think of yourself?	N=	% of individuals
Heterosexual/Straight	4030	81%
Bisexual	129	3%
Gay/Lesbian	68	1%
Other	47	1%
Prefer not to say	370	7%
Not Answered	338	7%

What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?	N=	% of individuals
None	2771	55.6%
Church of Scotland	739	14.8%
Roman Catholic	538	10.8%
Other Christian	373	7.5%
Muslim	55	1.1%
Pagan	25	0.5%
Buddhist	21	0.4%
Jewish	18	0.4%
Hindu	10	0.2%
Sikh	5	0.1%
Another religion	79	1.6%
Not Answered	348	7.0%

What is your ethnic group?	N=	% of individuals
Scottish	3468	69.6%
Other British	663	13.3%
Any mixed or multiple ethnic group	75	1.5%
Irish	68	1.4%
Polish	43	0.9%
Indian, Indian Scottish or Indian British	34	0.7%
Pakistani, Pakistani Scottish Or Pakistani British	33	0.7%
Chinese, Chinese Scottish or Chinese British	17	0.3%
African, African Scottish or African British	11	0.2%
Arab, Arab Scottish or Arab British	10	0.2%
Black, Black Scottish or Black British	8	0.2%
Bangladeshi, Bangladeshi Scottish or Bangladeshi British	5	0.1%
Caribbean, Caribbean Scottish or Caribbean British	3	0.1%
Gypsy/Traveller	3	0.1%
Other ethnic group	237	4.8%
Not Answered	304	6.1%

Group Discussion responses (n=196)

Were members of your group mostly speaking as?	N=	%
Children and young people	73	37%
Teachers	44	22%
Parents	43	22%
Other	19	10%
Practitioners	13	7%
Not stated	4	2%

Type of group (classification by analyst)	N=	%
Primary school	52	27%
Secondary school	50	26%
Further / Higher education	2	1%
Other organisation / unclear	48	24%
National Discussion event	9	5%
No details provided	35	18%

Non-standard responses (n=87)

Respondent Type (classification by analyst)	N=	%
Individual	10	11%
Organisation, including schools	77	89%

Type of respondent (classification by analyst)	N=	%
Parent	2	2%
Teacher	12	14%
Learner	21	24%
Other	7	8%
No details provided	45	52%

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this <statistical bulletin / social research publication>:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Statistics
- are available via an alternative route - individual responses, where permission was given for publication, are available via the [Scottish Government's consultation website](#).
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact <email address> for further information.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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