

Research into Provision for Pupils with Complex Additional Support Needs in Scotland



CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

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Executive summary

About this research

This report sets out findings of research carried out in 2022 into provision for pupils with complex additional support needs in Scotland. This research was carried out by Humanly and was commissioned by the Scottish Government.

The overall aim of the research was to explore the ways pupils with complex additional support needs within Scotland are supported in order to reach their full potential. The research focused on four main themes: policy, practice, partnerships, and the perspectives of parents, carers, children and young people.

To explore these themes a range of perspectives was sought, including from children and young people, parents and carers, school staff and system stakeholders. The research involved 11 schools across 7 of Scotland's 32 local authorities.

The research locations were geographically diverse and captured a range of local authority sizes, differing levels of deprivation and a variety of local provision. The sample of schools included a range of school settings across early years, primary and secondary. This included mainstream schools, both with and without additional support units, as well as local authority funded, grant-aided and independent special schools.

This research involved 202 participants including 91 children and young people with complex additional support needs, 18 parents and carers, 73 school staff (including class teachers, pupil support staff and senior leaders), and 20 stakeholders from the wider support system.

This research was qualitative and involved in-depth discussions, classroom observations, and creative activities with children and young people. Qualitative research is particularly useful in exploring complex areas, providing an in-depth understanding of particular experiences, perspectives, feelings and behaviours. However, it is important to note that while this report gives an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of those who were involved in the research, its findings cannot be extrapolated to the wider population.

Cross-cutting themes

A number of findings emerged that span the enquiry themes. It is noted that many of these findings reinforce those of Angela Morgan's independently chaired review of Additional Support for Learning in 2020.

The cross-cutting findings include a perceived reduction in resources. Many teachers, support staff, senior school staff, parents and system stakeholders raised the challenges this issue creates.

Staff at every level were reported to be integral to the delivery of positive learning environments for children and young people with complex additional support needs. Many pupils, parents, carers, school staff and system stakeholders highlighted the impact of individual staff as being key to enabling positive experiences of education. Many participants involved in partnership working reported that individual staff make the biggest difference in how partnerships work effectively.

The topic of placements cuts across every theme. There is a perception amongst some parents and school staff that national policy regarding placements is not always implemented as it is intended.

Some system stakeholders, school staff and parents discussed training, which is a topic that spans all of the themes of this report. Participants recognised the positive impact that training can have and acknowledged challenges in accessing it. Many staff also recognised the value of learning from their peers and children and young people.

Policy

The research found that most school staff and parents had a high awareness of national policies relating to the support of children and young people with complex additional support needs. Most of these participants believed that the intent of these policies is positive. Some participants highlighted a perceived conflict between some policies, for example Getting it Right for Every Child and the presumption of mainstream.

Practice

Most parents, carers and pupils reported that staff and positive relationships were overwhelmingly the most important factors in enabling children and young people with complex additional support needs to thrive. There was also a perception from school staff that positive school leadership was integral in creating a supportive culture for both pupils and staff.

Many school staff and some pupils raised the importance of the physical environments of schools. This included outdoor space, quiet space, natural light and resources such as swimming pools.

Many children and young people, parents and carers, and school staff reported that supported access to the local community was beneficial and highly valued. However, some school staff reported a reduction in children and young people being able to access the local community. This was attributed to a perceived reduction in resources.

Practice varies across Scotland, and this is perceived by some parents as a 'postcode lottery'.

Partnerships

Many parents had positive experiences during their children's early years. Parents reported good partnership working within early years settings and were very positive about the support their child received at that time.

Many staff and some parents reported that children and young people have less access to external specialist support than in previous years. These specialists include Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists.

Perspectives of parents/carers and pupils

Many parents and school staff reported positive practices around transitions between schools. Parents and pupils reported that supported transitions have a positive impact on children and young people.

Most children and young people with complex additional support needs reported that having friends and positive relationships with staff were both key factors in order for them to enjoy school and feel fully included.

Conclusion

This report concludes that in the ten years since the Doran report was first published, the context of supporting children with complex additional support needs has changed. The number of children and young people identified with additional support needs has risen in Scotland, with participants reporting an increased number of children and young people presenting with more complex needs.

There have been numerous policies and guidance published since 2012 to support children with complex additional support needs in schools. However, policy alone cannot deliver positive outcomes for children and young people. Despite positive policy intent, this research found that some children, parents and carers are struggling to have children and young people's needs met to enable them to flourish.

This report highlights many examples of good practice that learning can be drawn from, as well as highlighting the barriers and enablers to good practice. It is hoped that the emerging themes from this research provide a helpful evidence base to further inform both this work and ongoing work to implement the Doran Review recommendations of improving outcomes for children and young people with complex additional support needs in Scotland.

Introduction

About this research

In 2022, the Scottish Government's Support and Wellbeing Unit and the Doran Review National Strategic Commissioning Group commissioned Humanly, a human-centred design studio, to conduct qualitative research on the ways pupils with complex additional support needs within Scotland are supported in order to reach their full potential.

Research aims

The research explored three main themes:

1. The ways in which different institutional partners work together to improve outcomes for pupils with complex additional support needs.

The research explored the roles different institutions play to deliver these positive outcomes (e.g. successful transitions) and looked at evidence of cooperation between those partners and evidence on areas where there may be tensions or ineffective deployment of resources.

2. How the above translates into guidance and policies that local authorities offer schools.

The research explored whether existing policies are sufficient to deliver positive outcomes for children with complex additional support needs (e.g. successful transitions), and further explored not only whether there are any areas where policies are lacking or contradicting each other but also how this affects the delivery of the positive outcomes. The research explored some examples of good practice and certain challenges to delivery, as well as whether the approaches that local authorities take on staff training are effective in preparing them to deal with complex additional needs.

3. The perspectives of children, parents and carers on whether the approaches taken by schools and other institutional actors are considered to be sufficiently meeting the complex needs they may have, and whether there are any barriers/challenges to positive outcomes (e.g. are the expectations for successful transitions being met?).

The findings will be used to inform and support further work by the National Strategic Commissioning Group¹ to improve the educational experiences of children and young people with complex additional support needs. This contributes

¹ Link to the web page for the [National Strategic Commissioning Group](#)

towards the implementation of Scotland's 10-Year Strategy (2017-2026)², to deliver children an equitable opportunity to succeed, and to make sure all children reach their potential.

Context

Provision landscape

There are a number of significant and connected factors that must be understood to contextualise this research.

Under the Additional Support for Learning Act 2004, an additional support need is defined broadly. It applies to children or young people who, for whatever reason, require additional support, in the long or short term, in order to help them make the most of their school education and to be included fully in their learning. Under this framework, a formal diagnosis or identification is not required for a child or young person to receive appropriate support with their learning.

Complex additional support needs may arise as result of:

- the severity of one or more factors resulting in need, and/or
- the combined impact of a number of separate factors, one or more of which may be severe.

The Doran Review's 10 Year Strategy notes that 'a rigorous, clearly bounded and universally accepted definition is extremely difficult to formulate because of the multiplicity of factors and the impact of specific contexts in different local authorities.'³

For the purpose of this research the description of complex additional support needs used by the National Strategic Commissioning Group⁴ was employed, with the addition of children and young people who attend a local authority special school.

The children and young people with complex additional support needs involved in the research were therefore within one or more of the following descriptors:

1. Children and young people in receipt of a co-ordinated support plan as defined in the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended);⁵
2. Children and young people aged 3-18 who do not have a co-ordinated support plan, but who have been assessed as stage 3 or 4 by a local

² [The right help at the right time in the right place: strategy for the learning provision for children and young people with complex additional support needs 2017-2026](#)

³ [National Strategic Commissioning Group descriptors of complex additional support needs](#)

⁴ [National Strategic Commissioning Group descriptors of complex additional support needs](#)

⁵ [Education \(Additional Support for Learning\) \(Scotland\) Act 2004 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

authority under a staged intervention model as outlined in the Additional Support for Learning Code of Practice;⁶

3. Children and young people aged 3-18 who attend a local authority, grant-aided or independent special school.

There is a range of provision in Scotland to meet the needs of children and young people with additional support needs, from local authority mainstream and specialist provision to independent and grant-aided special schools.

Education authorities use a range of planning mechanisms to meet the needs of children and young people. These include personal learning plans, individualised educational programmes and the statutory coordinated support plan (CSP). Education authorities are legally required to provide a CSP for children and young people with complex or multiple needs, which are expected to last for a year or more, and require significant support from education, and at least one other agency. The purpose of the CSP is to enable individual support and interventions to be planned in a coordinated way across all agencies involved in supporting the child or young person. These education plans often link into a Child's Plan, under the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) policy framework, which is focused on supporting children and young people's health and wellbeing.

The number of pupils recorded as requiring additional support in Scottish schools has been steadily increasing year on year. In 2022, there were 705,874 pupils in Scottish schools. There were 241,639 pupils recorded as having additional support needs, which is 34% of pupils. 95% of pupils recorded as having additional support needs learnt in mainstream classes. These figures do not include the 132 pupils attending grant-aided special schools⁷ in 2022. Where pupils attend an additional support unit attached to a mainstream school, they are usually included in the figures for the mainstream school. However, some schools and local authorities report pupils attending additional support units separately.⁸

This is an increase from September 2010, when there were 69,587 pupils identified as having additional support needs in a school population of 673,140 pupils.⁹ Therefore 10% of pupils were identified as having additional support needs in 2010.

There are a number of factors that influence this increase in the number of pupils with identified additional support needs. These include increased awareness and identification of additional support needs, alongside changes in the descriptors of additional support needs. In 2010, the way in which information was collected regarding additional support needs changed, and the descriptors for additional support needs widened. Since 2012, six additional categories of reasons for support have been introduced. These are communication support needs, young carer, bereavement, substance misuse, family issues and risk of exclusion.

⁶ [Supporting Children's Learning Code of Practice](#)

⁷ There are seven grant-aided special schools in Scotland. These schools are funded directly by central government and charge fees for educational and residential placements.

⁸ [Pupil census 2022 supplementary statistics](#)

⁹ [Pupil census 2010 supplementary tables](#)

There is no specific category for ‘complex needs’ in the Scottish Government’s annual pupil census data collection as there is no universal definition for the term.

Although it is not possible to disaggregate pupils with complex additional support needs, the following data gives an indication of the national context in which children and young people with additional support needs are learning. In 2022, there were 7,821 pupils in local authority special schools, an increase of 1021 from 6,800 in 2010. The following table provides an overview of the proportion of time pupils with additional support needs spent in mainstream classes in 2022.

Integration of pupils with additional support needs into mainstream classes, 2022

Nature of attendance	Pupils in special schools and those with additional support needs in mainstream schools
All the time in mainstream classes	224,517
$\frac{3}{4}$ or more but less than all time in mainstream classes	3,017
$\frac{1}{2}$ or more but less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the time in mainstream classes	1,565
$\frac{1}{4}$ or more but less than $\frac{1}{2}$ of the time in mainstream classes	553
Some time, but less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the time in mainstream classes	775
No time in mainstream classes	11,212

The latest local government financial returns show that spending on additional support for learning across Scotland’s 32 local authorities was £830m in 2021-22.¹⁰ While a national figure, it is important to note that spend, and spending decisions, vary in each local authority.

Policy and guidance

In 2012, ‘The Doran Review - learning provision for children and young people with complex additional support needs¹¹’ was conducted to identify ways of improving educational outcomes for children with complex additional support needs. The Review made recommendations aimed at providing better outcomes and experiences. The review included recommendations regarding the commissioning

¹⁰ 1. Local Financial Returns – Education (LFR 01) statistical return provided by local authorities to the Scottish Government: Local government finance statistics - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

¹¹ The Doran review: The Right Help at the right time in the right place Strategic Review of Learning Provision for Children and Young People with Complex Additional Support Needs

(as well as the funding) of services, such as the national services. A Strategic Commissioning Project, supported by a Project Board and five workstreams, was established to address these specific recommendations.

A National Strategic Commissioning Group with membership drawn from children, parents, providers, purchasers and representative organisations was established and developed the initial Strategy.¹²

Alongside the Scottish Government's work to implement the recommendations of the Doran Review, the Scottish Government is committed to implementing the recommendations from the 2020 review of the implementation of additional support for learning policy and legislation¹³ by March 2026. A joint Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) action plan was published alongside the review in October 2020.¹⁴ Subsequent progress updates and revised action plans were published in November 2021¹⁵ and November 2022.¹⁶ The review, its recommendations and the associated action plans are focused on improving the learning experience of children and young people with additional support needs, including those with complex needs considered by this research, and the support provided to their families.

These reviews and recommendations, and the research findings in this report, are set in the context of an extensive range of legislation, guidance, reports and ongoing policy work to improve outcomes for children and young people in this area. Key documents, relevant to the inquiry areas and findings in this report, from the year 2000 onwards are set out here by the year in which they were published.

The Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000 (the 2000 Act)¹⁷ sets out the right of all children and young people to education, and local authorities' duty to ensure the education is 'directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential'.

The 2000 Act includes a 'Requirement that education be provided in mainstream schools', which sets out the expectation that education should be provided in 'a school other than a special school' except under these specific circumstances:

- **The education provided in a mainstream school would not be suitable for the aptitude and abilities of the child in question;**
- **The education provided in a mainstream school would be incompatible with the provision of efficient education for the children with whom the child would be educated;**

¹² [The right help at the right time in the right place: strategy for the learning provision for children and young people with complex additional support needs 2017-2026](#)

¹³ [Additional support for learning review](#)

¹⁴ [Additional support for learning: action plan](#)

¹⁵ [Additional support for learning action plan: progress report - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

¹⁶ [Additional Support for Learning review: action plan - November 2022 update - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

¹⁷ [Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000 \(the 2000 Act\)](#)

- **Placing the child in question in a mainstream school would incur unreasonable levels of public expenditure that would not otherwise be incurred.**

Further guidance on the presumption of mainstream was published in 2019, 'Guidance on the presumption to provide education in a mainstream setting' (March 2019).¹⁸ This guidance aimed at bridging the gap between legislation, policy and day-to-day experience, ensuring that children and young people have equitable access to a quality education which meets their needs and helps them achieve their full potential. This guidance outlines the four key features of inclusive practice for children and young people's learning (Present, Participating, Achieving and Supported) and how these can be implemented across mainstream, specialist and 'flexible' provision.

The 2000 Act was followed, in 2002, by the Education (Disability Strategies and Pupils' Educational Records) (Scotland) Act 2002 and its accompanying guidance¹⁹ which sets out the legal requirement for education authorities, and those responsible for independent and grant-aided schools (the responsible bodies under the Act) to prepare and implement an accessibility strategy for all the schools for which they are responsible. The strategy should include:

- **Increasing the extent to which pupils with a disability can participate in the school's curriculum or, as the case may be, the schools' curriculums;**
- **Improving the physical environment of the school (or schools), in relation to which, the strategy for the purpose of increasing the extent to which pupils with a disability are able to take advantage of education and associated services provided or offered by such school (or schools) is prepared;**
- **Improving communication with pupils with a disability.**

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 ("the 2004 Act")²⁰, as amended, sets out the duties of education authorities and the rights of parents, children and young people to additional support for learning. The 2004 Act introduced Coordinated Support Plans and requirements for local authorities and NHS boards to work together to improve outcomes for children and young people.²¹ Under the 2004 Act children and young people are identified as having additional support needs when they require additional support, in comparison to their peers of the same age and stage, in order to benefit from school education. This is not dependent on a diagnosis.

¹⁸ [Guidance on the presumption to provide education in a mainstream setting \(March 2019\)](#)

¹⁹ Planning improvements for disabled pupils' access to education: guidance for education authorities, independent and grant-aided schools - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

²⁰ [The Education \(Additional Support for Learning\) \(Scotland\) Act 2004 \(as amended\) \(the ASL Act\)](#)

²¹ [Supporting documents - Additional support for learning: statutory guidance 2017 - gov.scot \(\[www.gov.scot\]\(http://www.gov.scot\)\)](#), Chapter 5

The guidance supporting the implementation of the Act has been updated to reflect changes and additions to legislation. The most recent edition is the Additional Support for Learning: Statutory Guidance 2017.²²

Legislation published in 2005, The Requirements for Teachers (Scotland) Regulations 2005²³, introduced specific requirements for teachers working with pupils with hearing and visual impairments.

In 2006, The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006²⁴ was published to further the involvement of parents in their children's education. The Act highlights the shared role and responsibility that schools, parents and carers have in working together to educate children. It also places a responsibility on local authorities to improve parental involvement. The Act is supported by Guidance on the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006.²⁵

Following a public consultation on the reform of children's services in 2005, Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)²⁶ was developed. GIRFEC is the Scottish Government's commitment to providing all children, young people and their families with the right support at the right time. This includes the Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible, Included (SHANARRI) wellbeing indicators.²⁷ The approach was first tested in 2006 with pathfinders across Scotland testing the GIRFEC Implementation Plan. The supporting guidance and resources to GIRFEC were most recently updated in 2022²⁸ following co-production with representatives from the public sector, health boards, third sector and national organisations. Key elements of GIRFEC were put into law in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.²⁹

The Equality Act 2010³⁰ places duties on education authorities to actively deal with inequality, and to prevent direct disability discrimination, indirect disability discrimination and discrimination arising from disability and harassment or victimisation of pupils on the basis, or a perceived basis, of protected characteristics, including disability. Education authorities have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils.

2010 saw the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence,³¹ which applies to both English and Gaelic Medium Education. Curriculum for Excellence is the universal offer for all children and young people's learning in Scotland between the ages of 3 and 18. This includes children and young people with complex additional support needs. Curriculum of Excellence aims at providing a broad general education

²² [Additional support for learning: statutory guidance 2017](#)

²³ [The Requirements for Teachers \(Scotland\) Regulations 2005](#)

²⁴ [The Scottish Schools \(Parental Involvement\) Act 2006](#)

²⁵ [Guidance on the Scottish Schools \(Parental Involvement\) Act 2006](#)

²⁶ [Getting it Right for Every Child \(GIRFEC\)](#)

²⁷ [Wellbeing \(SHANARRI\)](#)

²⁸ [2022 GIRFEC guidance](#)

²⁹ [Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#)

³⁰ [Equality Act 2010 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

³¹ [Curriculum for Excellence](#)

across all curriculum areas from early years up to the end of S3 (third year in secondary), followed by a senior phase of learning from S4 to S6 offering opportunities to achieve and attain (e.g. qualifications and awards).

There are eight curriculum areas in the Curriculum for Excellence, three of which are the responsibility of all staff. These areas are literacy across learning, numeracy across learning and health and wellbeing across learning.

A refreshed narrative on the curriculum was published in September 2019 with the aim that it will help all children and young people in Scotland gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century.³² Ongoing improvement work is currently underway in response to the 2021 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report *Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, Into the Future*.³³ It should also be noted that the Scottish Government has commissioned an independent review of qualifications and assessment, which is due to conclude after this report has been finalised.³⁴

Curriculum for Excellence is designed to allow teachers the flexibility to tailor learning to the age and stage of pupil development. This flexibility is of particular importance for teachers working with children and young people with complex additional support needs who will require bespoke and individualised curriculum planning. It is recognised that some children and young people with complex additional support needs will learn at the curriculum's pre-early level between the ages of 3 to 18.³⁵

In 2016, The Education (Scotland) Act 2016³⁶ extended the rights of children aged over 12 with capacity, under the Additional Support for Learning Act, to use rights on their own behalf to affect decision-making about them. The Act also includes provision for strategic planning to consider socio-economic barriers to learning.

Since 2018, Health Boards in Scotland have had a legislative duty to provide or secure communication equipment and the support in using that equipment, often referred to as Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). This duty applies to children and adults, from all care groups who have lost their voice or have difficulty speaking.³⁷

Specialist AAC provision is delivered across Scotland by the NHS and Integration Joint Boards. This is delivered primarily through speech and language therapy, and

³² [What is Curriculum for Excellence?](#)

³³ [Supporting documents - Curriculum for Excellence review: implementation framework - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

³⁴ [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

³⁵ [Milestones to support learners with complex additional support needs | Learning resources | National Improvement Hub \(education.gov.scot\)](#)

³⁶ [Education \(Scotland\) Act 2016](#)

³⁷ [\(Part 4 of the Health \(Tobacco, Nicotine etc. and Care\) \(Scotland\) Act 2016\)](#)

often in collaboration with Education, Social Work and the Third Sector as appropriate to the assessed needs of the individual.

Health Boards are under a duty to provide communication equipment and support to such an extent as they consider necessary to meet all reasonable requirements, taking into consideration the needs, views and choices of each individual, as is the case with other health provision.

Research methodology

This research involved three phases:

Phase One: Research design

The research design phase was guided by a research advisory group, acting on behalf of the National Strategic Commissioning Group.

Additionally, a review of relevant policy, guidance, research and data was conducted to ensure a robust understanding of the legislative landscape and provide context to the research.

An enquiry framework was developed to explore the key research themes of Policy, Practice, Partnerships and Perspectives of parents/carers and pupils. This framework is available at Annex One. A range of qualitative research methods were developed for exploring the research themes with different participants.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research is particularly useful in exploring complex areas, providing an in-depth understanding of particular experiences, views, choices and behaviours. In this research it allowed for probing of key issues as they emerge, and discussion in a semi-structured way, which enabled a focus on what mattered to the participant. As a methodology it was very valuable in helping to understand a range of perspectives, opinions, experiences, feelings or behaviours, particularly when topics were complex. However, it is important to note that while this report gives an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of those who were involved in the research, its findings cannot be extrapolated to the wider population.

The key limitations of this method include the limited sample size, which means that this research provides an insight into a relatively small number of experiences. Additionally, participation in the research was voluntary and self-selecting, therefore the findings may not be representative of the wider views and experiences of children and young people with complex additional support needs, their parents/carers, school staff or stakeholders within the system.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are always key in conducting any research, however when working with children and young people, especially children and young people with complex additional support needs, there are additional sensitivities that must be taken into account. At the outset of this project the following ethical considerations were identified, along with mitigating actions to adhere to high ethical standards:

Consent forms

Written consent for child participation was sought from the child's parent, carer or guardian.

Choice and consent with children

There is a risk that children and young people who take part in research do not really choose to participate or know why the researchers are there. To mitigate this risk the choice to participate was reiterated at the start of each research session. Children were also informed that they were free to stop whenever they wanted to.

Additional considerations when working with children with complex additional support needs

Establishing clear ethical consent from children with complex additional support needs is crucial. However, this is a complex area, as some children may have a limited understanding of what they are being asked to take part in. At the start of each research activity, the purpose of the research was explained in language appropriate to the child or young person's age and stage. Children and young people were informed that they did not have to speak to the researchers or join in with any activities if they did not want to, and that they could opt-out at any time. Participation in the activity or conversation was considered active consent. The researchers worked with the people around individuals who know them well (e.g. school staff) to ensure that they understood if children and young people were displaying any behaviours that indicated a lack of enjoyment or consent.

Anonymity

Any information that may directly or indirectly identify participants or schools has been anonymised during reporting.

Accessibility

The research team has extensive experience in working with vulnerable groups and ensuring that research methods are tailored to individual needs and preferences. This tailoring ensured that participation in this research was not limited by language or protected characteristics.

Research methods with children and young people

All research with children and young people was conducted in person in their schools. This involved a mix of activities with individuals and small groups. These activities were based around semi-structured conversations and creative activities designed to explore the areas of enquiry with children and young people of different ages and with a wide range of complex additional support needs.

A toolkit of research activities was developed to enable meaningful, enjoyable and accessible experiences. This toolkit is available at Annex Two. Activities were

designed to facilitate open, exploratory conversations, drawing on findings around the tendency among people with learning disabilities to perceive a series of questions asked by professionals or in a formal setting as a test.³⁸ The creative methods used included:

- Providing pupils with the materials to make a mini representation of themselves (a 'mini me'), surrounded by the things in school that make them feel happy and supported, using collage, drawing and writing;



Figure 1: 'Mini me' activity conducted with pupils



Figure 2: 'Mini me' outputs created by pupils

- Presenting pupils with chalkboards with collages of images representing different topics including education, work, fun, having a say, relationships, and home - these were used to explore each of these topics with responses captured on each board.

³⁸ Learning disability and the limits of liberal citizenship: interactional impediments to political empowerment; Marcus Redley 1, Darin Weinberg; Social Health Illn. 2007 Jul;29(5):767-86

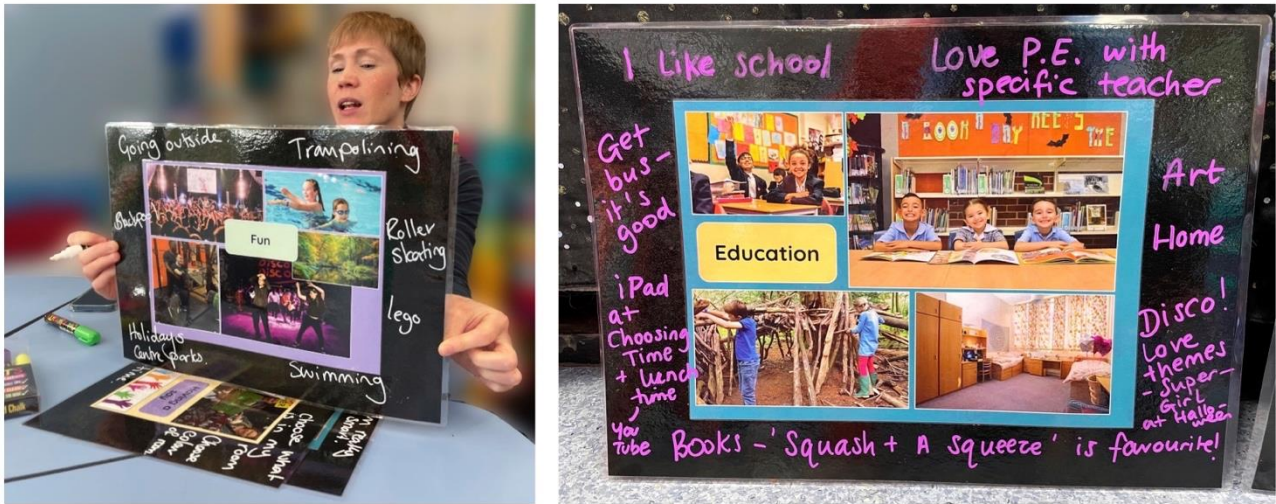


Figure 3: Chalkboard conversations with pupils

Each research activity was tailored around the specific needs and preferences (such as verbal/non-verbal communication) of the individuals involved to enable everyone to participate. Children and young people were given the freedom to express themselves in the way that suited them best (including through talking, signing, using symbols, drawing and making).



Figure 4: Using symbols to support conversations with pupils with non-verbal communication

During school visits these research activities were combined with guided tours of some schools led by pupils with complex additional support needs, as well as observations of classrooms, school outings and trips.

Research methods with parents/carers

Research with parents/carers involved semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions conducted in person at schools and remotely via video call. Parents and carers were given the choice of how to participate in the way that worked best for them.

Research methods with school staff

Research with school staff involved semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions conducted primarily in person at schools. Additionally, some head teachers were interviewed remotely via video call.

During school visits, research activities were combined with guided tours of some schools led by staff, as well as observations of classrooms, school outings and trips. 'Show and tell' activities were also used to explore the materials, resources and tools used by staff to support children and young people.

Research methods with system stakeholders

Research with wider system stakeholders involved semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions conducted remotely via video or telephone call.

Phase Two: Fieldwork

The fieldwork for this research was conducted during November and December of 2022.

Locations and schools

Over the course of this research 11 schools across 7 of Scotland's 32 local authorities were visited.

Research locations and schools were identified in collaboration with the research advisory group. To maintain the anonymity of those who participated in this research, selected locations and schools will not be identified.

The research locations were geographically diverse and captured a range of local authority sizes, differing levels of deprivation and a variety of local provision.

The sample of schools was identified as being representative of the wider system of educational provision for pupils in Scotland with complex additional support needs. This included:

- **a range of school settings, including mainstream schools, both with and without additional support units, as well as local authority funded, grant-aided and independent special schools;**
- **early years, primary and secondary schools;**
- **schools with day and residential opportunities.**

It should be noted that this research was qualitative, and the 11 schools were not representative of the more than 2,500 schools and more than 2,400 early learning centres across Scotland.

Overview of participants

202 research participants were engaged in total, including:

- **91 children and young people with complex additional support needs;**
- **18 parents/carers of children with complex additional support needs;**
- **73 school staff;**
- **20 system stakeholders.**

The 91 children and young people involved in this research had a wide range of needs and experiences. This included:

- **children and young people with emotional, behavioural, physical, learning and communication needs;**
- **children and young people who have received a diagnosis and those who have not;**
- **children and young people who are underrepresented or seldom heard in research, for example children who do not use verbal communication, children who are not involved in existing schemes such as school councils, children and young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities, and children with distressed behaviour;**
- **looked after children (both living with foster carers and living in residential care settings);**
- **children and young people with kinship carers;**
- **a range of ages from 3-18;**
- **a range of genders, socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic backgrounds;**
- **children and young people who identify as LGBTQIA+.**

These participants are referred to as 'pupils' and 'children and young people' throughout this report. All references to pupils, children or young people are pupils, children or young people with complex additional support needs, unless otherwise stated.

The 18 parents and carers of children with complex additional support needs involved in this research included:

- **a range of family types, for example two+ parents/carers, single parents and kinship carers;**

- **a range of family sizes;**
- **parents/carers with complex additional needs;**
- **parents/carers with a large distance or long travel time between their home and their child's school;**
- **parents/carers who are underrepresented or seldom heard in research, for example not involved with parent/carer organisations;**
- **parents/carers who are working and parents/carers who are not in employment;**
- **a range of ages and socio-economic backgrounds.**

These participants are referred to as 'parents and carers' throughout this report.

The 73 school staff involved in this research included head teachers, depute head teachers, principal teachers, class teachers with a range of experience, from newly qualified teachers to teachers with many years of experience, and pupil support staff. All of these participants are collectively described as 'school staff' throughout this report.

The 20 stakeholders from the wider system of support involved in this research included members of the National Strategic Commissioning Group; Scottish Government and Education Scotland stakeholders; local authority stakeholders, including principal educational psychologists and ASN outreach service managers; qualified teachers of the visually impaired and teachers of the Deaf; speech and language therapists; academics; and specialists in assistive technology and augmentative communication. These participants are referred to as 'system stakeholders' throughout this report.

Phase Three: Analysis and reporting

After the fieldwork stage, all of the information gathered was analysed using a process of thematic analysis. This involves researchers manually reviewing all of the responses to identify emerging patterns and recurring themes, as well as singular cases (ideas/perspectives not raised in other responses). In analysing perspectives, key variances were explored between participant groupings, staff and stakeholder roles, local authority areas, and types of school.

Following the conclusion of thematic analysis, a number of overarching themes were identified across the key areas of enquiry. These summarise the views most frequently shared by participants. Within these themes, the research team has sought to be respectful of the full spectrum of views and perceptions expressed within the research.

Within the report, a broad qualitative scale has been used to describe the proportion of participants who commented on particular themes and topics. This scale is provided as a guide.

- **one/an individual – Used where just one participant mentioned an issue.**
- **a few – Used where two or three participants mentioned an issue.**
- **some – Used where more than a few participants mentioned an issue, but less than half.**
- **most or many – Used where half or more than half of participants mentioned an issue.**

However, it is worth noting that approach taken in this research explores key themes in a semi-structured way, and some participants naturally brought up issues in response to questions which others were not specifically probed on. This should therefore not be used to extrapolate findings to a wider group.

The main body of this report sets out the key themes under each of the four areas of enquiry explored within the research. Individual quotes and examples have been used, where appropriate, to illustrate the narrative around specific themes. Views are reported anonymously. Quotes are attributed broadly, to provide an idea of the type of stakeholder commenting while preserving anonymity. Comments have been reported carefully to reduce the ability to identify the school or location being discussed.

Key research findings

Cross-cutting themes

A number of findings have emerged that span the enquiry themes. It is noted that many of these findings reinforce those of Angela Morgan's independently chaired review of Additional Support for Learning in 2020.³⁹ The cross-cutting findings emerging from this research are summarised below and are explored in more depth within each subsequent thematic section.

A perceived reduction in resources

Many teachers, support staff, senior school staff, parents and stakeholders raised challenges experienced as a result of a perceived reduction in resources. This encompassed barriers to the implementation of policy, access to physical resources such as transport or specialist facilities, or changes in practice as a result of a reduction in staffing levels. It also included reduced access to partners from other sectors such as health. This is coupled with a perceived increase in the complexity of children and young people's needs, which was reported by many school staff, parents/carers and system stakeholders.

Staff at every level are integral to positive environments and experiences for children and young people with complex additional support needs

Many pupils, parents, carers, school staff and system stakeholders highlighted the impact of individual staff as being key to enabling positive experiences of education.

It is reported by teachers, support staff and parents that school leaders affect the culture of a school. Supportive leadership was reported by many school staff as key in creating a supportive school environment in which staff and pupils can thrive. Many participants involved in partnership working reported that individual staff make the biggest difference in how effectively partnerships work.

Placements

The topic of placements cuts across every theme. There is a perception amongst some parents and school staff that national policy regarding placements is not always implemented as it is intended.

Additionally it is reported by some parents, staff and pupils that a successful or unsuccessful placement has wide repercussions on individual children, other pupils in the same placement, and families.

³⁹ [Review of additional support for learning implementation: report - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

Training

Some system stakeholders, school staff and parents discussed training, which is a topic that spans all of the themes of this report. Participants recognised the positive impact that training can have and acknowledged challenges in accessing it (especially training before people begin their work with children and young people with complex additional support needs). Many staff also recognised the value of learning from their peers and children and young people.

Theme 1: Policy

Key findings

- **There is a high awareness of national policies in relation to the support of children and young people with complex additional support needs amongst most school staff and parents involved in this research.**
- **Most participants who were aware of national policies in relation to the support of children and young people with complex additional support needs believe that the policy intentions are positive.**
- **Some parents and school staff perceive there to be a conflict between Getting it Right for Every Child and the presumption of mainstream.**

Enquiry areas: Are national policies around support for children and young people with complex additional support needs well understood? What would the system look like if national policies were followed? Are there any areas where policies are lacking or contradicting each other?

The research found a high awareness of national policies around the support for children and young people with complex additional support needs, and a strong perception amongst participants (including school staff, system stakeholders and parents/carers) that the policy intentions are positive. There was acknowledgement amongst participants that the policy and legislation is comprehensive, and if national policy had universal comprehension and adherence then the Scottish education system would be 'Getting it Right for Every Child'.

However, there are challenges regarding the understanding and implementation of national policy, which can, at times, lead to perceived conflicts in policy.

An example of this perceived conflict is the relationship between 'Getting it Right for Every Child' and the presumption of mainstream. Some school staff and parents/carers reported feeling that, at times, the presumption of mainstream means that children and young people are placed in mainstream schools when they are unlikely to thrive there. They felt that if a child or young person is viewed as being able to cope with a full time placement in mainstream school then that is where they are placed, even if they are unable to flourish in that environment.

‘The goal has got to be different - the goal should not be for them to physically tolerate mainstream, the goal should be for them to thrive’
(Parent of a child now attending a local authority special school)

‘The presumption of mainstreaming has done some children a disservice’
(Teacher in a special school)

The relationship between the presumption of mainstreaming and other policy has been raised in other papers and guidance. For example, Sheila Riddell states and illustrates through case studies, that:

‘At times, the twin discourses of inclusion and rights appear to be operating in harmony, but at other times, tensions are apparent as parents and children request access to types of education which may appear to contradict the fundamental principle of inclusion.’⁴⁰

Riddell explores the relationship between the presumption of mainstreaming and the focus on children and parents’ rights in policy broadly, rather than a specific policy. The findings of Riddell align with the findings of this research as GIRFEC has a strong focus on children and parents having choice and participating in decisions that affect them.⁴¹

In 2019, ‘Guidance on the presumption of providing education in a mainstream setting’ was published. In the Ministerial Forward, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills at the time of publication, John Swinney MSP, said that the aim of the guidance was ‘bridge the gap between legislation, policy and day-to-day experience’. The former Deputy First Minister also notes that while the legislation and policy in relation to an inclusive approach to education in Scotland are world-leading, the experience of inclusion is not always reflective of this:

‘However, we must improve the experience of inclusion for all pupils if we are to deliver on the promise of such an ambitious framework. Being present in a mainstream school should not be the primary marker of successful inclusion.’⁴²

The guidance sets out key expectations for inclusion, including that ‘All children and young people should learn in environments which best meet their needs’. However, this research found a perception amongst some parents/carers and teachers that this is not how the policy is universally put into practice.

This guidance was published in March 2019, prior to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and associated restrictions in place for much of 2020 and 2021. It is not

⁴⁰ The Inclusion Dialogue: Debating Issues, Challenges and Tensions with Global Experts. Edited by Joanne Banks. Chapter 10: Children’s Rights and School Inclusion in Scotland, Tensions and challenges: Sheila Riddell: 2022

⁴¹ GIRFEC principles and values

⁴² Presumption to provide education in a mainstream setting: guidance

within the scope of this research to discern the impact of the pandemic on the dissemination and implementation of the guidance. However, the findings of this research suggest that, although the overarching theme of the guidance is widely known, some participants do not consider the guidance to be applied consistently. This is an area that could be given further consideration.

Another area where many participants feel that practice does not always reflect policy is in relation to needs based support rather than diagnosis led support for pupils with additional support needs. A model of support based on need rather than diagnosis was reported by the services involved in this research, including the loaning and distribution of technology. However, this was not reflected in the reported experiences and perceptions of many parents and carers. There is a perception amongst many parents and carers that having a diagnosis does impact the support a child or young person can access.

‘I hate labels but unfortunately without a label you won’t get any assistance because the school can’t do anything otherwise. It’s also about funding; you need a diagnosis to get a loaned iPad, and also to access the Base (area of the school). But I don’t think the diagnosis should matter’ (Parent of a child attending a mainstream school)

‘Then in P3 her teacher suggested that it might be time to get her assessed so that she would be able to access support’ (Parent)

The current pressure on resources is cited as a factor in this situation. However, in some instances this has also led to greater flexibility in services. For example, specialist autism provisions accepting pupils before they receive a diagnosis. This is perceived as being due to the wait for diagnosis being so long, rather than policy being implemented as intended.

An additional challenge is the absence of a shared understanding of what constitutes ‘complex additional support needs’. This research found wide-ranging perceptions of what is meant by complex additional support needs amongst school staff, system stakeholders and parents/carers. Some of these participants highlighted this absence of a shared understanding as a challenge.

Enquiry areas: How is national policy interpreted at a local level? What guidance and policies do local authorities offer schools around supporting children and young people with complex additional support needs? How does this vary between different local authority areas?

Building on the findings of the Angela Morgan’s 2020 review, this research suggests that there continues to be variation in how national policy is interpreted at a local level, demonstrated through the variation in provision across schools in different areas. This is explored further in the ‘Practice’ section of this report, including examples of where local authority guidance and policies vary and how this impacts support for children and young people with complex additional support needs.

There was a perception amongst some research participants, including parents, carers and system stakeholders, that the provision available to a pupil with complex additional support needs is dependent on where they live, on occasions, described as a 'postcode lottery'. This was reflected in the sample of schools involved in this research (with disparity between some areas regarding pupil to staff ratios, buildings and access to resources).

Many school staff raised the impact this has on pupils, as well as staff, in schools where they have seen resources decline over a period of time.

'When I started we had horse riding, swimming, our own minibus, it's all gone' (Teacher at a local authority special school)

The theme of reductions in resources is cross-cutting and impacts every area of pupils' education, including opportunities and achievements. Some staff felt that their schools were so under-resourced that at times their focus shifted from supporting pupils to learn, thrive and achieve their full potential, to supporting pupils' safety and wellbeing.

'Now we are just surviving, we used to make magic happen' (Teacher at a local authority special school)

Theme 2: Practice

Key findings

- **Staff and relationships are reported by most parents, children and staff to be a key factor in enabling children and young people with complex additional support needs to thrive. This spans the relationships between school staff and the individual children they work with, school staff and families, and between school staff. Additionally, this includes leadership, which is seen as key to cultivating a supportive culture that many school staff respectively reported as key to enabling positive experiences for children and young people.**
- **Practice varies across Scotland, and this is perceived by some parents as a 'postcode lottery'.**
- **Many school staff and some pupils raised the importance of physical environment. Access to quiet spaces and to the outdoors to enable self-regulation were highly valued by both staff and children and young people.**
- **Many children and young people, parents, carers and staff reported the benefits when children and young people are able to have supported access to the local community. However, there were some reports of**

reduced ability to access the local community, for a range of reasons explored in this section.

Enquiry areas: What does current support look like in practice for children and young people with complex additional support needs? Does current practice reflect national policy intent? Are there gaps between policy and practice?

Current support for children and young people with complex additional support needs varies in practice, with many examples of good practice identified throughout this research across all settings. However, there are also examples where circumstances make it challenging for children and young people to thrive. These areas are outlined across this section.

Areas in which some gaps between policy and practice were reported, were in relation to implementation of Curriculum for Excellence and decision-making around placements.

Curriculum

Curriculum for Excellence has been designed to allow flexibility, however perceptions around the level of flexibility varied amongst those delivering it on the ground. Some teachers, across a range of settings, felt that it was difficult to adapt the curriculum to the needs of their pupils, and that there should be a curriculum designed to meet their needs. However, some teachers were confident that every pupil could have a curriculum designed specifically to meet their needs within the current framework.

The sense of freedom was generally found to be greater at independent and grant-aided special schools. For example, one school outlined their tailored approach to setting learning goals. School staff explained that pupils set their own targets and go at their own pace, with goals varying from 'tie own shoelaces' to sitting National Qualifications.

'We can individualise people's curriculum here which is a luxury' (Support staff in an independent special school)

The research has found local authority schools that are taking a very creative approach to the curriculum. While the duties to meet the individual learning needs of children and young people apply in all types of provision, it was reported to be more challenging to develop and deliver individual curriculums for every member of a class when the class is large and diverse, and there are limited resources to support the delivery of individualised curriculums.

Many teachers who participated reported feeling pressure to cover literacy and numeracy; core cross-cutting elements of the curriculum along with health and wellbeing; with all pupils to some extent. Whilst there were many examples of creative, adaptive, approaches to doing this, these were not always possible due to staffing constraints and limited access to learning away from the classroom. For

example, where teachers would like to teach numeracy through handling money in real world environments such as shops, this was not possible where staffing ratios did not allow for safe off-site learning.

The greatest challenge regarding flexibility was reported by staff in mainstream secondary settings with no specialist ASN provision.

‘There’s only so much you can do in a mainstream setting’ (Teacher in a mainstream school with no specialist ASN provision)

The inclusion of life skills content within the curriculum for pupils with complex additional support needs was seen as positive by school staff, parents/carers and pupils. For example, one teacher described a pupil who, prior to their current placement, had accessed education less than one day a week, with the support of four adults. This pupil is now supported to go shopping as part of his weekly curriculum, scanning items and paying at the self-checkout.

‘I’m a key adult with 3-4 pupils timetabled in with me one period a week. With one pupil we’re working on independent travel and shopping – we plan bus journeys together and we walk together to the shops, working up to them going on their own’ (Teacher)

A few school staff expressed the need for an increased focus on life skills within the curriculum for pupils with complex additional support needs, to prepare them for life after school:

‘...I need to be teaching them how to go to the shops and handle money, how to look at the bus timetable’ (Maths teacher in a local authority special school)

‘Life skills needs brought into the education system, in all schools - including learning about national insurance, taxes, credit, credit ratings’ (Support staff in a special school)

Decision-making in placements

Variation was also seen in the range and type of support provided in relation to the complexity of additional support needs that children and young people have.

During the course of this research the team met pupils in independent and grant-aided special schools whose complex needs had been assessed by their residential authority as requiring highly specialist support not available within their own local provision. It was also reported, however, by a few staff that, in their opinion, some of the pupils in grant-aided and independent special schools would now be able to attend mainstream schools with the right support:

‘We have kids here who would excel in mainstream with the right support’ (Support staff at an independent special school)

Simultaneously, there are pupils in local authority schools who were assessed as having highly complex needs, and where some staff expressed that they felt the pupils' needs would be best met in a school with higher levels of support.

'[Pupils with ASN] don't get a bad deal here but hard to know if they could achieve more in specialist provision' (Teacher in a mainstream school with no specialist ASN provision)

It must be acknowledged that the complexity of a pupil's needs can be related to their environment and the range of additional support that they receive. It may, therefore, appear that pupils in grant-aided and independent special schools have less complex needs, because the resources available are meeting their needs. Some teachers and parents expressed the view that if their child's school had equivalent staffing ratios they would benefit more from their current education placement.

In some independent and grant-aided special schools, staff-to-pupils ratios were reported as being two support staff per pupil, in addition to teaching staff. This is in contrast to some local authority special schools, where there may be one or two support staff and a teacher to 8 pupils.

Factors perceived to influence placement decisions were raised by some school staff and parents/carers. This included the role of care requirements in driving placement decisions and, as explored further in the section of this report on parental perspectives, the role of parental advocacy when placement decisions are in dispute.

During research activities in schools that offer residential care as well as education, school staff explained that the primary reason for many of the children and young people being placed in these schools was their need for care. There were several accounts of multiple foster care placement breakdowns prior to pupils being placed in an independent or grant-aided special school with residential facilities.

There were a small number of pupils who had residential placements at a special school whilst attending local mainstream settings for their education, and some day pupils. However, when considering the residential schools included in this research, most pupils receive both their care and education directly from the independent provider.

During the course of the research, including research with schools and wider system stakeholders, no examples were found of local authority residential special schools. It would, therefore, appear that when a child or young person has complex additional support needs which require a combination of care and education needs, they may be placed in an independent or grant-aided special school by their residential authority.

It was highlighted by one school staff member that trying to secure a placement in a residential school for a pupil can be extremely hard. This school staff member reported situations where parents had offered to pay for residential school placements because they and their child/children are struggling.

Given the range of factors involved in the decision-making process, it would, in the researchers view, merit further exploration with all key stakeholders. This could include exploring decision-making by local area, the role that care needs play in placement decisions and the role of parental advocacy.

Island communities

School staff, system stakeholders, parents and pupils from island communities reported unique benefits and challenges in relation to provision for children and young people with complex additional support needs.

Amongst participants there was a perception of small, supportive communities on islands, which were seen to benefit children and young people with complex additional support needs.

The challenges of travel between islands, and between islands and the mainland, means that there are fewer options for children with complex additional support needs to access specialist provision and they are likely to be supported in their local school. There are some specialist provisions or units on some islands. However it was reported that recruitment and retention of staff can be very challenging in some island settings. Access to training and specialist support services can be particularly challenging on islands, and some staff felt that they are required to be more than teachers.

‘Teachers feel stretched, they have a lot to cope with. They’re heavily involved in their health, social workers - it’s so much more than education, there’s so much burden on teachers.’ (Teacher at an island mainstream school)

It is reported by some school staff and parents that there has been an increase in families with children with additional support needs moving to islands, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. This is attributed to the appeal of a small community and a ‘better life’, which is not always balanced with an understanding that there are few or no specialist services available on many islands. It is reported by some school staff that access to assessments can be challenging, with additional delays due to travel disruption, and services such as mental health support may only be available online.

It was acknowledged by some school staff that the inclusive model of supporting pupils with complex additional support needs in class was becoming increasingly challenging as the needs of pupils become more complex. Although it was widely reported by parents and school staff on island settings that all children could be supported on the island, there were examples of pupils with complex additional

support needs either travelling to the mainland on a daily basis to access education, or attending residential schools.

An additional challenge for island education is the lack of links with other educational partners, for example colleges that offer vocational courses. The options for these broader forms of education are often only available via online provision on islands.

‘Mainland schools have links for vocational courses, here we have “online provision” only’ (Head Teacher at an island mainstream school)

Enquiry areas: What approaches are working well? What makes the biggest difference?

Staff and relationships

When parents, carers and pupils were asked what makes the biggest difference to their school experience, they highlighted the integral role of school staff. Participants frequently referred to staff who go ‘above and beyond’, despite barriers such as the school building, resources available, staffing ratios, and complex make-up of their classes. Again, these findings are reflective of the findings of Angela Morgan’s 2020 review.

The types of activities that some parents felt were going ‘above and beyond’ or ‘the extra mile’ included school staff using time outside of school, or non-contact time, to do things for children and young people in their class. This included sourcing or making items that they felt would help individual pupils. It also included working closely with families to understand what works well for individual children and young people when they are at home, so that they can use this information to positively impact the child’s school experience.

One example from a mainstream setting was a teacher who had used their non-contact time to provide 1:1 support to a pupil. The pupil did not enjoy the mainstream classes, finding the noise and bustle overwhelming. The teacher used her non-contact time to deliver 1:1 art sessions with the pupil, which the pupil really enjoyed.

It was noted by many parents that school staff are often what makes the biggest positive impact on a child or young person’s experience of school.

‘I think in P6 the teacher was amazing, and I said to the teacher that that really changed her life...it was honestly life changing’ (Parent of child in mainstream provision)

Most pupils also highlighted the importance of staff and supportive, trusting (and in some cases, caring) relationships. The characteristics or approaches that they valued highly in staff included being caring, encouraging, fun, and the sense that

staff understand them. These are illustrated in the following quotes from pupils from a range of schools:

'If you can build up good relationships with staff that's the key to thriving in school' (Pupil)

'The Support for Learning workers are so funny, we always have really funny days here' (Pupil)

'They are really kind and say you can do it' (Pupil)

'Teachers take the time to help you understand, they encourage you' (Pupil)

'They're always there and they don't judge, I feel like they really care' (Pupil)

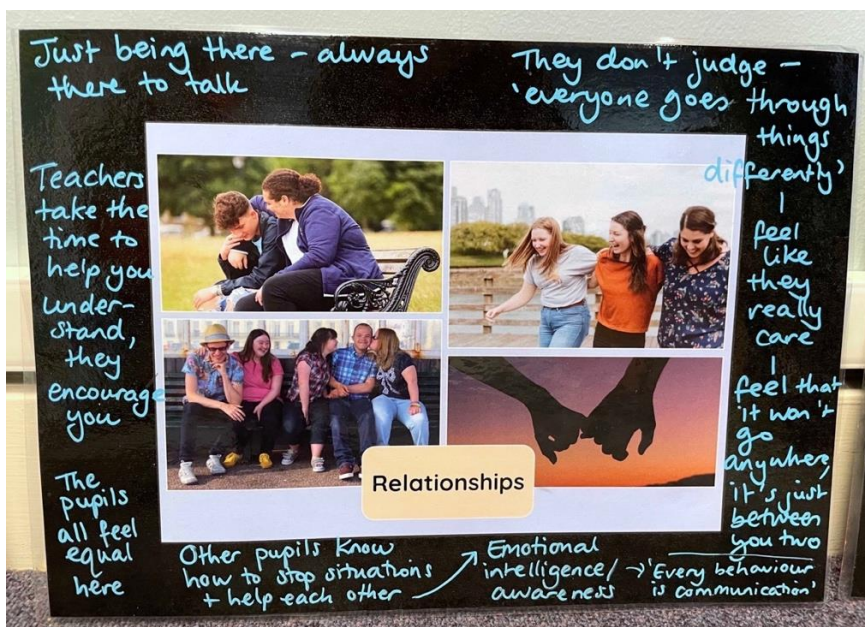


Figure 5: 'Relationships' chalkboard with pupil responses about relationships with staff and other pupils

The results of creative research activities with pupils who do not communicate verbally supported this finding. Many pupils referenced staff on their 'mini me', which involved children and young people creating a collage with themselves at the centre and all the things that make them happy at school around them.

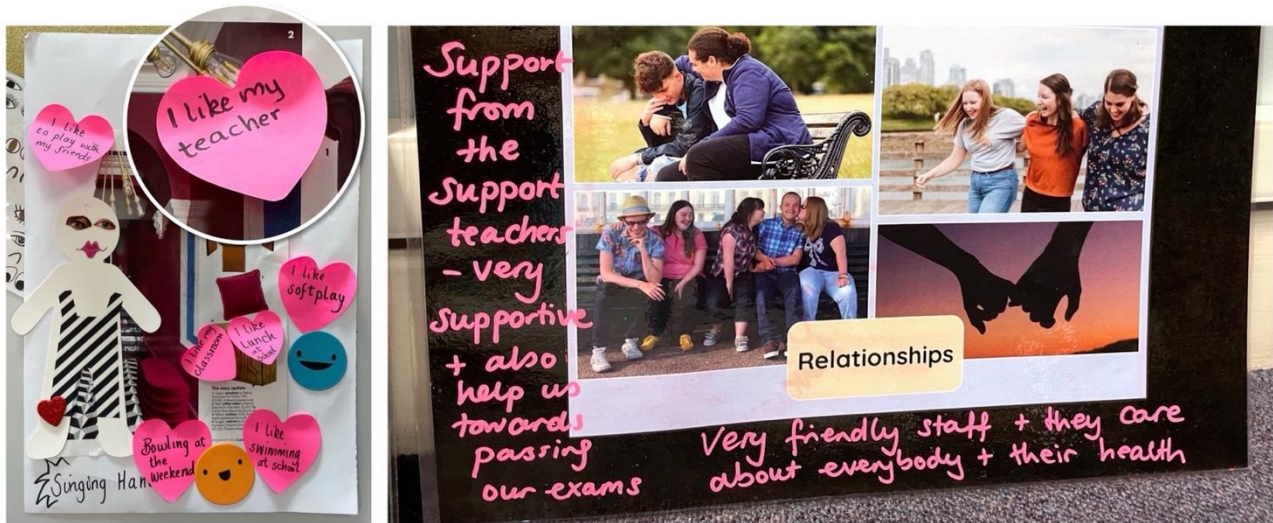


Figure 6: 'Mini me' output and chalkboard with pupils highlighting the importance of staff and relationships

Examples were also given of staff encouraging and enabling pupils to achieve with as much independence as possible. This clearly generated an enormous sense of pride in pupils and was also appreciated by parents.

'My son's communication has come on so much - he just used to sit by the window, now he comes and pulls my arm - I never thought he'd be able to do that' (Parent of a child that attends a local authority special school)

In another example, one pupil with a physical impairment, which meant they were unable to use their hands, was encouraged and enabled by a pupil support assistant to complete a creative research activity independently with the minimum physical support. When others offered further support to the pupil, the pupil support assistant politely explained that he was able to do the task himself and the pupil demonstrated their enjoyment and pride in carrying out the activity themselves.

A reliance on teachers going 'above and beyond' for pupils to have a positive experience does however cause a number of challenges. For example, some teachers reported a sense of frustration, due to feeling stretched.

'We know we make a difference but we get frustrated because we know we could make more of a difference if the barriers were removed' (Head Teacher)

School buildings and environments

Some pupils raised the importance of the school environment being equipped to meet their sensory needs, for example through reducing noise and providing adjustable lighting. During the fieldwork, a wide range of schools were visited and it was observed that purpose-built schools better provide pupils and staff with spaces that work for a wide range of physical and sensory needs. In these schools there

was usually plentiful natural light, and the sounds within the building had been carefully considered to meet pupil's additional support needs.

The purpose-built schools visited were also able to offer easy, safe access to an outdoor area, and/or an indoor quiet space where pupils can choose to go to if they need to calm down or time alone. These spaces were highlighted by staff as being extremely helpful in supporting pupils to self-regulate.

'A lot of incidents are avoided through breakout spaces; ours have sensory lights and bean bags' (Head Teacher)

Many pupils who make use of breakout spaces highlighted the importance of these. This was raised by pupils across a range of settings, including mainstream and specialist settings, as something that they found helpful.

'If I need time out, I can take it' (Pupil)

'I can go there [breakout room] if I need to be alone for 5 minutes' (Pupil)

The element of choice was an important caveat in relation to breakout spaces. Some pupils highlighted that children and young people need to be able to choose when they access these, and the importance of spaces not being used to segregate pupils.

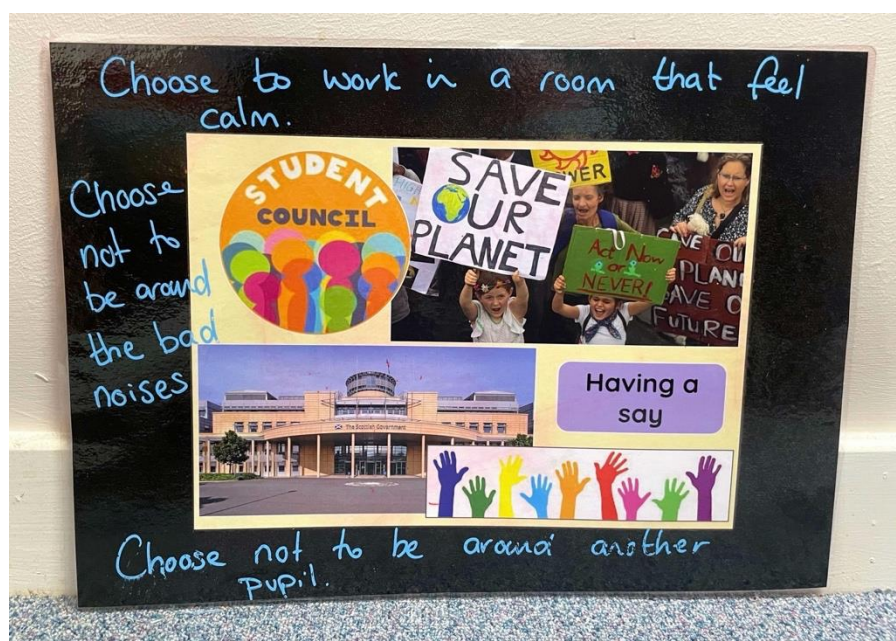


Figure 7: 'Having a say' chalkboard with pupil responses around the physical environment they work in

Where schools do not have purpose-built breakout spaces, there were examples of creative approaches to offer a similar experience for pupils. This included the use of tents or dedicated spaces in classrooms, and a sofa near staff offices where pupils could go and sit.

Outdoor learning

During school visits and research directly with children and young people, it was highlighted that access to the outdoors is extremely valuable, and highly valued by pupils.

Many pupils described themselves as being happiest outside, or when asked to create an image of themselves and the things around them that make them happy, they chose to surround their 'mini me' with images and representations of the outdoors.



Figure 8: 'Mini me' outputs where pupils depict themselves as happiest when outdoors

In schools where there were nature approaches in use, these were widely popular with pupils. As explored earlier in this report, the resources that schools have access to are varied. Some are set in large grounds with access to open space and woodland, and have the transport and staffing capacity to travel to other outdoor spaces such as beaches. Other schools have a small patch of land that they have repurposed as a Forest School area, or have a local park that they are able to visit, where staffing allows. In all of these circumstances the outdoor learning provided was extremely popular with the pupils at the schools.

Where pupils did not have regular access to outdoor learning, or outdoor activities, this was cited by both themselves and staff as something that pupils missed. For example, when a pupil selected a horse riding symbol when asked what they enjoy doing, the staff then explained that they no longer get to go horse riding.

For some pupils, moving to a school where they were able to go out, every day, had an enormous positive impact on the young person.

'I love the forest in the summer and going on walks' (Pupil)

'Not every kid wants to be confined to a classroom and not every kid learns in classroom, we all learn in different ways and it's not just the case because you have additional needs' (Parent)

Good practice in mainstream schools

During the research it was evident that there were examples of happy and thriving children with complex additional support needs in mainstream settings. This was expressed by pupils themselves:

'I belong in this school' (Pupil in mainstream school with no specialist provision)

'I have lots of friends here – too many to name' (Pupil in mainstream school with no specialist provision)

'It feels safe and homely' (Pupil in mainstream school with no specialist provision)

One pupil, who had previously been placed in a specialist secondary provision, and had subsequently moved to a mainstream setting, felt that this placement better met their needs.

'They thought I might not cope in a mainstream and look at me, I'm thriving!' (Pupil)

Some school staff noted that the benefits of mainstream included integration with a wider cohort of pupils, enabling children and young people with complex additional support needs to mix with a wider range of their peers. Some school staff also reported benefits for the whole school population. The perceived benefit to pupils who do not have complex additional support needs is that they become more accepting and more aware of different people's needs, therefore creating a more inclusive society.

'The benefit of mainstream is they're more exposed, more prepared for the challenges of the real world... And they realise they're not completely different to neurotypical people, they have stuff in common' (Support staff at an independent special school)

'Integration equals exposure. Kids are more aware and accepting, they'll hold doors open and help others who need it. Kids [with additional support needs] don't feel out of place here' (Teacher in mainstream school with no specialist provision)

'Other pupils know how to stop situations and help each other. There's good emotional intelligence and awareness that "every behaviour is communication".' (Pupil in mainstream school with no specialist provision)

'The pupils all feel equal here' (Pupil in mainstream school with no specialist provision)

The mainstream schools included within this research that did not have specialist or enhanced support for children with complex additional support needs used Nurture approaches. A Nurturing approach has been promoted at a national level as a key approach to supporting behaviour, wellbeing, attainment and achievement in Scottish schools. Nurture approaches have ‘a focus on wellbeing and relationships and a drive to support the growth and development of children and young people, many of whom come from areas of disadvantage and require additional targeted support to close the equity gap’.⁴³

The mainstream schools without specialist provision visited, included support such as Nurture rooms, Nurture groups and whole school Nurture approaches. For example, in one mainstream school there was a ‘Nurture nook’ in every class, which had been created with pupils to meet their specific needs.

‘We have Nurture nooks in every classroom to regulate emotions’
(Principal teacher)

‘The “emotion thermometer” is used by everyone so there’s no stigma, it’s not an “additional support needs” thing’ (Principal teacher)

Nurture approaches were widely reported by school staff as being used in schools, and they were perceived to be beneficial to the entire school population, irrespective of their support needs.

Another positive example in a mainstream school was the use of ‘time out’ passes, which are provided to pupils who need these.

‘They gave me a “time out” pass which really helps. It has a QR code on it linked to a video on how to calm down, I can stand in the corridor and do breathing exercises’ (Pupil)

Good practice in special schools

During visits to special schools, whether they be local authority funded, grant-aided or independent, there were pupils who were reported by school staff and the pupils themselves as thriving. Many pupils expressed that they had friends, they had good relationships with the adults, and they felt safe; all of which is key to feeling included. In the special schools visited, pupils were actively part of the school community, and able to experience many of the elements of school life, for example involvement in choirs, school plays, pupil councils and playing with friends at break times.

Participants reported a high level of dedication, care and enthusiasm in the special schools included in this research. In most of the local authority specialist provision,

⁴³ Nurture and trauma-informed approaches: A summary of supports and resources | Learning resources | National Improvement Hub (education.gov.scot)

lessons were personalised to individual needs and enjoyment, including where there is a need to include core subjects. For example, a class of young pupils with complex needs all engaging in maths-related activities in a way that worked for them. An example involved using sensory play involving a range of grains (sand, rice, dry beans) enabling support staff to introduce the idea of big and small.

It was acknowledged by many of the staff working with pupils with complex additional support needs that it is a job that you must want to do, as it is not without its challenges, but that despite the challenges it can be enjoyable and highly rewarding work.

‘You have to have a passion, you have to want to do it’ (Support staff)

‘I came from mainstream on supply just to give it a go. It was the best decision I ever made, I wondered “why didn’t I do this the whole time?”. I still love the job’ (Teacher)

This dedication is appreciated by many of the parents we met:

‘If there’s something you want to work on they’re right there with you. My son stopped drinking and would only drink in the bath, the school introduced a lot of water play and got him to drink out of a measuring cup which they went out and bought. We’ve actually still got the cup and it makes me smile!’ (Parent)

Enquiry areas: Where are the challenges?

School buildings and environments

As reported in the previous section, purpose-built schools can provide environments that support positive experiences for children and young people with complex additional support needs. Where schools are not purpose-built for inclusive education, for example, older school buildings or repurposed buildings, challenges were highlighted by staff regarding space.

Challenges were also described where specialist mobility or medical equipment is needed, and where pupils have sensory needs or where being in close proximity to other pupils presents a significant challenge. In these circumstances, schools are extremely creative in achieving the best possible learning environment for their pupils. However, these buildings continue to create challenges.

For example, in repurposed buildings, the sensory needs of pupils with complex additional support needs are more challenging to meet. There may be less flexibility for easy access to the outdoors or to quiet spaces linked to every classroom. It was highlighted that where there is no space for pupils to have time away or calm down, it can lead to more distressed behaviours from pupils.

Staffing ratios

The research found extremely varied ratios of staff to pupils with complex additional support needs across settings, for example a teacher may have a class of eight pupils all requiring personalised planning, some of whom may exhibit distressed behaviour, and only one member of support staff. This is in comparison to other settings where a teacher may have three pupils with complex additional support needs to plan for and four support staff.

In both of these scenarios there may be pupils who exhibit distressed behaviour, however, the level of staffing and the environment influence staff members' capacity to respond to pupils needs before a crisis point is reached. Where there are high staffing ratios, staff report that they are able to act at an early stage and take steps to support a pupil. In low staffing situations, with a lack of space, this is not always possible.

'You can see situations escalate, you know how to stop it, but you can't do anything because you have no-one to help and can't leave the rest of the class alone.' (Teacher)

'I think it's [the] system. If there's 5 children with complex needs, and 2 are [displaying behaviour that communicates the need for urgent support] and 3 who are quiet, you're not going to pay attention to the quiet children. But I really think it must be the system - it's about how many people are there to take care of those children and the training for [supporting] those children' (Parent)

Many participants highlighted that staffing levels must be sufficient to enable effective learning, although the researchers acknowledge that decisions on what this means in practice are undoubtedly complex. The availability of appropriately trained staff is also clearly an influencing factor. This could be an area that would benefit from further consideration.

Evidencing progress

Some local authority school staff reported experiencing or perceiving pressure to show progress and achievement. This has reportedly been challenging due to a perceived lack of mechanisms for measuring progress for pupils with complex additional support needs. Some staff report that the lack of assessment frameworks for pupils at some levels makes it feel like the children they work with do not count.

'SNSA (Scottish National Standardised Assessments) don't work for our kids, why isn't there one that does fit our kids? Do they not count?' (Teacher)

Some schools are using the SCERTS® Model (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support), and there are positive reports from both staff and parents regarding the introduction of this:

‘The ‘SCERTS’ seems to be a really good way of bringing accountability into the system. Before we had nothing to work to, no goals, and no accountability’ (Parent)

In light of these findings, further consideration could be given to the level of awareness of current measures of curricular learning, curricular milestones for children and young people with complex additional support needs and skills based tracking. These points could be considered as part of any further opportunities that may arise out of ongoing work to deliver the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan.⁴⁴

Enquiry areas: What are the conditions that enable or foster good practice? What are the barriers to good practice?

The factors identified through this research as those which foster good practice are a supportive culture, with supportive leadership being a key part of this, and sufficient paid time for support staff. School sizes and access to the local community were also raised as potential enablers or barriers.

Supportive staff culture

Whilst high quality training in supporting children and young people with complex additional support needs was acknowledged as being both desirable and useful, most staff, including support staff and teaching staff, felt that they have learnt the most through actively doing their job and learning from each other.

‘I’ve learnt more from other staff and on my feet than any sort of training’
(Support staff)

This learning and sharing is enabled by a culture of support and teamwork. Staff across settings raised the importance of working as a team, having the ability or capacity to support one another, and how this better enables staff to support the pupils.

‘It’s a very supportive team and that makes all the difference’ (Teacher)

The importance of a supportive environment for staff was emphasised by some staff who have experienced environments that are not supportive, whether that was in previous schools or the same school under different leadership.

Participants gave a number of examples of good practice that enabled staff to support each other. These included having paid time outside of classroom hours for

⁴⁴ [Additional Support for Learning review: action plan - November 2022 update - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/documents/2022/11/Additional_Support_for_Learning_review_action_plan_-_November_2022_update_-_gov.scot.pdf)

class teams to have time together, and ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ debriefs with the head teacher following difficult incidents in school. The hot debrief allows staff to express feelings and offload immediate stressors in the heat of the moment. The cold debrief is an opportunity to reflect on an incident and learn from it. Teachers and support staff widely reported that leadership has a significant impact on how supportive a school environment is for its staff.

‘[The head teacher] has an open-door policy, you can go and have a “hot debrief” and vent after an incident, then come back and discuss it again once you’ve cooled down. There is a focus on everyone’s wellbeing, which helps the children and young people too.’ (Support worker at independent special school)

Paid time for support staff

Teachers and support staff raised the challenge that is created when support staff are paid limited hours. This time varied across schools, however most support staff involved in this research reported being paid only for the hours that pupils are in school, not allowing any time for working with teams and teachers to plan and prepare.

‘The support staff are only here when the pupils are here, so their only opportunity for training is on the job, plus there’s no time to plan, discuss, think’ (Head Teacher at a local authority special school)

For pupils with complex additional support needs, who require high levels of personalisation and support, support staff often deliver part of that learning. This is particularly the case where pupils from one class have to learn in different rooms.

It was reported by staff in one school that support staff are paid for an extra 30 minutes at the end of each day. This time was highly valued by the staff, and seen as both time to prepare for the next day as well as build team relationships. This was reported to contribute to both the support for pupils, and a sense of being valued amongst the staff.

Pay, which is set by individual employers (whether that be the local authority or the managers of grant-aided or independent special schools) was also raised, which is broadly viewed as not reflective of the high level of skills and the intensity of work that teachers and support staff do.

The researchers note that these are matters that are currently being considered by the Scottish Government and partners in the Pupil Support Staff working group, whose remit includes the consideration of recommendations in this area from Angela Morgan’s 2020 review.

School sizes

There were mixed views in relation to school sizes. Whilst there are advantages to large facilities, such as allowing for more resources such as swimming pools and trampolines, access to these can be challenging as they are shared amongst many children. Small schools were seen as having more of a 'community' feel and a better environment for some pupils. In very small schools, however, there were challenges around forming peer friendships when pupils spanned primary and secondary year groups and some year groups only had one pupil.

'I don't think our model would work if the school was bigger, a small number of pupils is key' (Teacher)

Access to the local community

One of the most important activities that parents, carers, staff and pupils highlighted was participation in the local community. However, this is also an area that illustrates the barriers to good practice.

Access to local communities varied enormously. The amount that pupils were able to access their local community depended on the school that they attended and the support that was available within that school.

At schools where staffing ratios were high, and schools had the autonomy to assess what was safe for individual pupils, pupils were able to be present and participate in their local communities. This took a wide range of forms, including visiting supermarkets, swimming in local leisure centres, as well as one-off trips on special occasions.

Where this is happening the benefits were reported to be broader than just to the pupils, who themselves report that being able to get out and about is an important part of their school life, and enables them to practice new skills in real-world situations such as handling money in shops. Additionally, school staff report that the local community becomes more inclusive. For example, shop staff becoming accustomed to pupils who occasionally display distressed behaviour in the store and calmly encouraging other shoppers to just continue with their shopping. Another example, shared by a school staff member, was local leisure centre staff proactively seeking to learn from the school staff about how to best support their pupils whilst they are using the swimming pool. Parents report that these opportunities have enabled their children to do things they never thought possible. This extends into their home lives where they are, as a whole family, able to access more of their local community.

However, where schools have lower staffing ratios, pupils have far fewer opportunities to access their local community. In some instances, the challenge of staffing ratios can be compounded by local policies that either state, or are interpreted as, pupils only being able to leave the school site with a teacher, not with support staff. The staff in these schools were reported as resourceful and

determined to offer their pupils the best possible education and opportunities despite their limited resources, for example setting up their own 'shops' in school for pupils to role play handling money and making purchases. This, however, does not support pupils to gain experience in their local communities. It also does not provide the broader benefits to the community and does not, therefore, contribute to developing a more inclusive society.

In these settings, pupils expressed that they missed doing activities that they had been able to access in schools they attended previously, such as swimming or going to a local shop to buy ingredients.

'We used to go to the shops more.. we want to build more independence, get support from staff to go shopping' (Pupil)



Figure 9: Chalkboard with pupil response around access to the local community

This was also reflected by staff, who felt that getting out into the community was important for the pupils they support, but was not something they were able to provide on a regular basis. The barriers to providing these opportunities were reported to be staffing ratios and access to other resources such as buses and drivers.

'We did more stuff in the community previously - building life skills, for example using PECS⁴⁵ in [a supermarket]. We had more buses and trained drivers, we have much less now' (Teacher)

Enquiry areas: What role does technology play in supporting children and young people with complex additional support needs to achieve their full potential? What equipment and tools (e.g. accessible digital devices, Alternative and Augmentative Communication tools) are used in schools, and what impact do these have on educational outcomes?

During school visits a range of technology access and use was observed. There were settings where technology was largely absent, settings where technology was present but not being used to its full potential, and settings where technology is being used successfully to support the learning of pupils with complex additional support needs. Overall, analogue communication aids and approaches were more

⁴⁵ PECS; the Picture Exchange Communication System <https://pecs-unitedkingdom.com/pecs/>

widely seen in use in the schools visited e.g. PODD⁴⁶ books, PECS, and Makaton.⁴⁷

There was a perception from some school staff that the availability of technology across schools is not equitable. For example, there was a perception that all pupils in Glasgow schools have iPads, but this is not available for all pupils across Scotland yet. However, it is noted that the Scottish Government has made a commitment that, by the end of this parliamentary session, all school-aged pupils in Scotland will have access to an appropriate digital device, and where necessary an internet connection, to support their learning.⁴⁸ The delivery of this commitment would therefore increase access to devices for all children and young people including those with complex additional support needs.

‘Every pupil should have a computer and the tech they need to make it work for them’ (Teacher)

Although access to devices will increase, there are currently barriers to use. These include connectivity and local authority policies around downloading software and apps, which reportedly require data protection impact assessments to be completed prior to approval. Participants reported that this can be a long process, especially where local authorities have contracted out the assessments. Many modern devices have extensive accessibility options built in, for example the ability to change cursor size or use dictation. However, it is reported that it is not possible for staff or pupils to access the accessibility settings on some local authority provided devices. This is reportedly most problematic on devices with a specific operating system, creating an additional barrier to making technology accessible to pupils with complex additional support needs. Where these settings are accessible, staff or pupils need to be aware of the possibilities of the devices to be able to set them up to work best for the individual.

In some schools teachers have developed ways around these barriers, for example asking parents to download apps on pupils’ devices or relying on web-based activities rather than apps.

It is noted that Health Boards have duties to provide Augmentative and Alternative Communication equipment. However, some schools noted that they are currently relying on CALL Scotland⁴⁹ to loan devices, ‘but there are hoops to jump through’.

⁴⁶ PODD, which stands for Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display, is a comprehensive and complete communication system for individuals who cannot meet all of their communication needs with speech alone. <https://www.cpec.org.au/podd>

⁴⁷ MAKATON Makaton is a unique language programme that uses symbols, signs and speech to enable people to communicate. It supports the development of essential communication skills such as attention and listening, comprehension, memory, recall and organisation of language and expression. <https://makaton.org/TMC/>

⁴⁸ [Devices for 700,000 children - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot)

⁴⁹ [CALL Scotland](https://www.callscotland.org/) is a service that provides information to families and professionals about how Assistive Technology and Augmentative Alternative Communication can help learnings with additional support need. Some of the services they provide include pupil assessment and support, Assistive Technology loans and technical support, professional learning and training.

The role of parents/carers was also highlighted by a few staff members as influential to individual pupils' access to technology.

'Some parents privately buy devices and software, other children have equal need but don't have that' (Depute teacher)

'If a kid needs an iPad we have to fight for it from the NHS, not all parents are able to do that' (Teacher)

In the schools visited, very few examples were found of more specialist equipment, however the small sample size must be noted. In one school, a small number of pupils had personal eye gaze devices and, additionally, the school had one eye gaze device in order for other pupils to try this out. The class teacher completed training on how to programme the devices and demonstrated how these can be customised for individual pupils to build their skills in using the technology, for example to independently access learning resources, make choices and communicate.

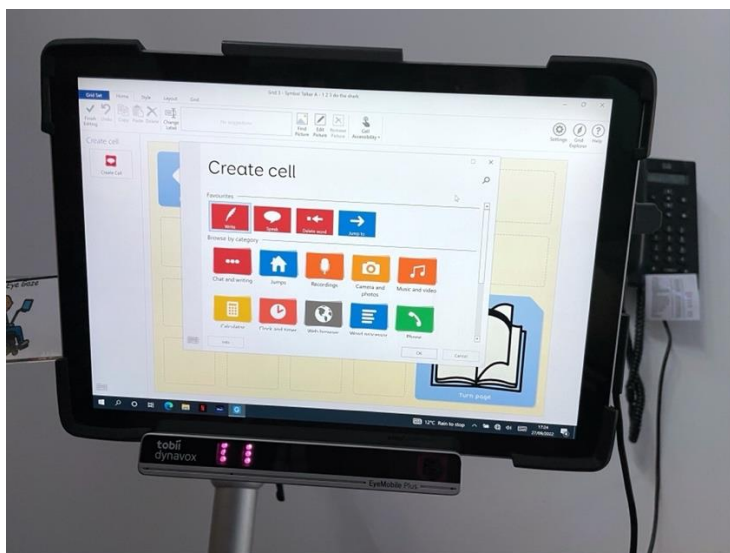


Figure 10: Demonstration by a teacher of how they customise an eye gaze device to a pupil's needs

In schools where pupils have personal tablets, these were seen to be making a difference to pupils.

Pupils emphasised the desire for more access to technology, and those who did have a tablet were enthusiastic about what this enabled them to do, demonstrating how they have been able to modify the in-built accessibility settings to customise the device to their needs and preferences.

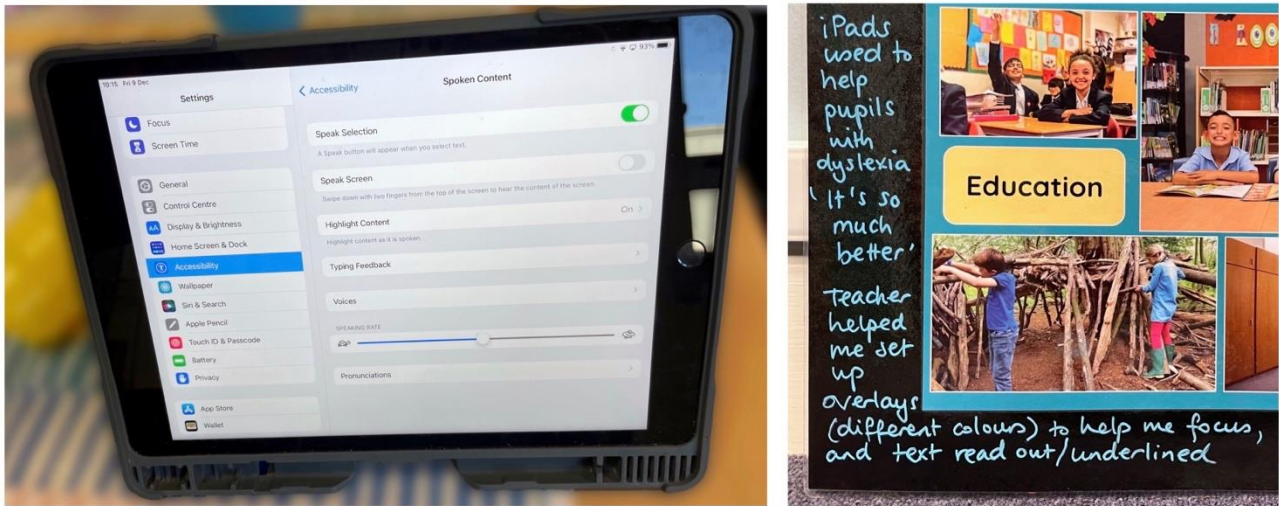


Figure 11: Demonstration by a pupil of how they customise the accessibility settings of their personal device to their needs (left); and chalkboard with pupil responses around how accessible technology enhances their learning experience (right)

'People struggle to read and write, it would be easier if they had computers. People keep asking for laptops, but sometimes there aren't enough there. Not everyone has their own device.' (Pupil)

'I'd like to do more on computers here, we don't do much on computers' (Pupil who has taught themselves to code in their spare time and wants to become a developer)

'A teacher helped me set up overlays to help me focus, and text can be read out or underlined. It's so much better' (Pupil)

'My primary account transferred to secondary so I can see all my primary writing on my iPad' (Pupil)



Figure 12: Chalkboards with pupil responses around technology access and use

Teachers were also positive about the benefits of pupils having their own devices, or shared devices:

'I love the iPads, it makes everything seamless' (Teacher)

'We have three iPads per class, the pupils all love using these at breaks and at their workstation' (Teacher)

'We use the IXL online learning platform for literacy and numeracy - it's only £100 for a whole school licence for a year' (Teacher)

'Having iPads is a huge resource. They're really good for pupils with additional support needs – they can zoom in to make things larger, they can post on Teams if they need additional support, they can type if they struggle to write.' (Teacher)

One school shared that they are an Apple distinguished school, and that pupils support each other with any tech issues. School staff shared that one of their pupils showed staff from Apple, who were visiting the school, features they were not aware of, as well as showing other pupils how to use these.

However, there were some concerns from staff over pupils' overuse of devices. In one school, staff explained that pupils are only allowed to use tablets at school one day a week, in order to build their social skills 'as they spend a lot of time on gadgets on their own outside of school'. In another school they ran lunch clubs 'to stop pupils using iPads' during lunchtime.

The researchers note that the provision of accessible technology may vary between each authority and setting, dependant, in some circumstances, on local contracts being in place. This can impact the length of time taken to provide accessible technology in the classroom. It is noted that current work is underway between Scottish Government and partners to trial a streamlined approach to the data protection impact assessment process and reduce barriers to the use of accessible technology in schools. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) provision more broadly is also being considered in more detail in a user research study that has been commissioned by the Scottish Government.

Enquiry areas: How was continuity of learning provided to children and young people with complex additional support needs, both on and off campus, during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a significant challenge to all schools and pupils, however the schools involved in this research reported being able to continue to provide continuity of learning using a range of approaches.

In schools with residential provision, learning for residential pupils was delivered in the pupil accommodation.

In day schools, approaches included online learning, with technology such as Seesaw and MS Teams being used to enable this. This was not an option for all pupils however, and some pupils were not able to access or engage with online learning. In some circumstances, schools offered outreach to pupils, going to their homes to provide support and education.

Learning hubs were available to pupils with complex additional support needs. Although these were suitable for some children and young people, they did not meet the needs of all children with complex additional support needs and it is reported that during the initial stages of lockdown many families chose to keep children and young people at home.

Enquiry areas: What impact did school building closures have on children and young people with complex additional support needs? Were there any benefits, or innovation in services offered, that can be learnt from?

The majority of special schools remained open during the COVID-19 pandemic to enable continuity of provision for the most vulnerable pupils. When all schools reopened to pupils there was the introduction of small (less than 5 pupils) 'support bubbles'⁵⁰ to limit the contact between pupils and staff and reduce the risk of transmission. This research has found that this had an impact on how school days ran. These adaptations related to bubbles were most common example given by school staff when asked about benefits or innovations during the pandemic that can be learnt from.

School staff reported that some of these adaptations have been ongoing. These include new flexibility around where pupils are able to eat their lunch in some schools. When bubbles were introduced, pupils ate their lunch in their classrooms to prevent bubbles from mixing. For some pupils, this was preferable to eating in a dining space with lots of other children and young people. In two schools we visited, the options for pupils to continue to eat in their classrooms continued after bubbles were no longer utilised. Pupils can now choose to eat in the dining space, or in their room depending on which they prefer.

'We stopped having assemblies during COVID and we haven't brought them back, they used to be quite stressful for some pupils' (Head teacher of a special school)

A less positive consequence of bubbles has been that for some pupils, who attend specialist units co-located with or as part of a mainstream school, the opportunities they had to mix with pupils in the mainstream classes reduced. For some pupils, mixing with mainstream pupils has not yet resumed. This is reportedly partly due to the needs of the pupils and the requirement for this reintroduction to be carefully and slowly reintroduced. It is also reported, however, that in some instances there is not enough staff to ensure that it would be a positive experience.

'COVID meant our kids couldn't go into mainstream classes. Since COVID there hasn't been the staff to enable it' (Teacher)

Enquiry areas: In what ways are learning and workforce development used to enable staff to support positive outcomes, including successful transitions, for

⁵⁰ 'Bubble' groupings as a COVID-19 risk mitigation were in place for limited periods during the 2021-22 academic year.

children and young people with complex additional support needs? Are these approaches effective?

Staff in special schools shared many examples of ongoing training opportunities. For example, support staff being able to attend training once a week. Staff also gave a number of examples where they have been trained to become trainers themselves, for example in Makaton or Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI),⁵¹ in order to provide ongoing training to existing and new staff members.

Although there are training and development opportunities once staff are working with children with complex additional support needs, there is a perception reported, amongst teachers, support staff, senior leaders, parents and other stakeholders, that there should be more training in additional support needs and complex additional support needs Initial Teacher Education (ITE). It was reported that currently teachers receive only one short, optional, lecture or module on supporting pupils with additional support needs. Many participants felt that teachers who are training should have optional, or mandatory, placements in specialist ASN settings. However, participants reported that this is not currently available.

‘Previously if you wanted to work with ASN children you needed to do an additional year at university. They’ve taken that requirement away. It’s needed as it’s a completely different job’ (Teacher)

‘There is no university course in Scotland for complex additional support needs, not even a module’ (Teacher)

‘I did a course down in Birmingham out of my own pocket, and it was amazing’ (Teacher)

‘I remember one lecture on additional needs; 1 tutorial debate on nature vs. nurture - there was nothing at all on visual timetables, PECS, etc’ (Teacher)

‘Practical experience of learners [with complex additional support needs] is so important’ (Teacher)

‘There’s a mandatory nursery placement, but no ASN class-based experience. Whereas every teacher will have an ASN pupil in their class, hence a new teacher who joins has to go straight into the job with no practical experience’ (Teacher)

It should however be acknowledged that there were also reports of new teachers who had excellent teaching abilities and focus in working with children with complex additional support needs. Many parents and carers reported that one of the

⁵¹ Built on relational practices, TCI is a trauma-informed, evidence-based, systems approach developed by Cornell University. [RCCP Home: Learn About the Project's Major Programs \(cornell.edu\)](https://www.rccp.org.uk/learn-about-the-project/major-programs)

elements that makes the most difference to their and their child's life is if their teacher 'gets' them. This is not necessarily reliant on training, and seems to require a largely attitudinal element on the part of the teacher. There were examples of teachers in the schools visited who had first worked in a specialist setting on a supply basis, and found that they enjoyed it, but would not have considered it if it were not for that experience.

Support staff also raised a need for introductory or initial training, at times entering the role with no prior experience of ASN and feeling 'thrown in the deep end'.

'I felt like there was a lack of preparation for the role' (Support staff)

Those participants, who did not receive introductory or initial training, expressed a desire for this before delivering support to pupils with complex additional support needs. They expressed that this should include communication techniques for pupils with non-verbal communication, in order to best support pupils.

There were examples of support staff who had received training and experienced work shadowing before they started supporting children and young people. However, even within one setting, this varied - and although some staff found it helpful others felt that there was little that you can learn online or on a course that truly prepares you for the work.

Additionally, some participants felt that more workforce development is needed for those who are already working as teachers or support staff. This was mentioned in relation to two main areas; legislation and the change in cohorts.

In relation to legislation, there is a perception amongst some parents that not all staff are aware of the policy and legislation that underpin the support for children and young people with complex additional support needs.

As highlighted earlier, it was widely reported by many participants that the cohorts at the different types of school provision have changed over recent years. Participants reported that the presumption of mainstream has meant that many pupils who would have previously attended specialist provisions are now attending mainstream schools. At the same time, participants reported greater numbers of pupils with complex needs, often including medical needs or social, emotional and behavioural needs, alongside other learning needs.

In most settings, staff expressed that their pupils' needs have become increasingly complex in recent years. However, it was reported that there has not, necessarily, been a change in or an upskilling of staff. It was reported that this is less the case in earlier school years because the transition to pupils with more complex needs began earlier. This means that teachers have either adjusted to the new cohort and adapted, or have moved to different settings where the cohort is made up of pupils with mild to moderate needs, who they feel more equipped to support.

'There has been a seismic shift in the past four years, our staff were used to pupils who could sit and do their reading and writing, now we are seeing increasing numbers of complex learners with distress' (Head teacher at a special school)

Whilst more training was seen as desirable to many participants, it was highlighted that training in and of itself does not necessarily translate into the classroom easily, due to the fact that every child is unique and there is no one size fits all approach to working with them. Many staff members who had been working in the area for a number of years noted that they are constantly learning, and when they work with a new class or a new pupil it's like going back to day one of the job. It was widely viewed that in order for support to be successful, it is key to get to know each child as an individual and to adopt a tailored approach with them.

'Every child is so different, we get to know them as individuals' (Support staff)

'Every day's a school day for everyone, disnae matter how long you've been here' (Support staff)

'You're only as good as the children you know' (Support staff)

Theme 3: Partnerships

Key findings

- **There are good examples of partnership working in early years settings. Many parents whose child had a recognised complex additional support need, or whose child's additional support need was first recognised during their time in early years, were very positive about the support their child received at that time and of the partnership working that took place.**
- **It is reported by many staff and some parents that they and children and young people have less access to partners, including Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists.**

Enquiry areas: What roles do different institutions play to support improved outcomes for children and young people with complex additional support needs, including successful transitions? What partnerships or relationships exist between the different institutions that support improved outcomes for children and young people with complex additional support needs?

Many participants referenced schools, health and local authorities as the key institutions seen as playing a role to support improved outcomes, including

successful transitions, for children and young people with complex additional support needs.

Partnerships between education and health were seen as key, particularly in relation to speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Partnership working between schools and local authorities were also frequently highlighted, in relation to the support offered by education psychologists.

Enquiry areas: How are different institutions and stakeholders working together?

Team around the Child (TAC) meetings were referenced by parents, system stakeholders and school staff as a way in which different institutional partners work together. Parents and school staff were positive about the different professionals involved in the Team around the Child. There were concerns amongst some parents and school staff, however, about a perceived reduction in access, especially in-person access, to the partners involved in the team including educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists.

‘The educational psychologist is great but I don’t see enough of her. She’s always in a rush when she comes for TAC meetings’ (Parent)

‘When we get it [speech and language therapy] it is invaluable, but it is so hard to get’ (Head Teacher)

‘The speech and language therapist comes in one day a week. She is great but we would love to have more of her’ (Head Teacher)

It was raised across most areas and schools that there has been a change in the way that speech and language therapists and educational psychologists work with the schools visited in this research. It is reported that, previously, these specialists saw children in school and worked with them directly, as well as providing staff with strategies. This has moved to a consultancy model with far less direct contact with children and young people. This was reported by both teachers and specialists, with the change being considered a necessity as the number of children with additional support needs has increased since 2010. Whilst it is clear that these changes in ratios may necessitate a change in delivery, there appears to have been an additional impact from COVID-19. It is also reported that some services have not returned to providing in-person support since the COVID-19 pandemic required most services to be delivered remotely. This is broadly perceived to be less desirable than in person interactions in this context.

‘They’re all cut to the bone. 10 years ago we had 3 days of speech and language therapy with 2 speech and language therapists - now we get 1 day with 1 speech and language therapist’ (Head Teacher)

‘A lot of professionals came previously - OTs, educational psychologists - they’d be in and out a lot. Now we never see them’ (Teacher)

This approach has implications for staff, children and parents/carers. Whilst some therapists believe that this approach is preferable as it upskills the workforce, some teachers report difficulties with the approach. In particular, some teachers feel that support staff miss out on the upskilling they used to gain when specialists were in class.

‘Previously, they’d come into the classroom and work with you, they’d role model and the support staff could pick up skills too. Now we’re supposed to learn from them after school, and we have no time to train the support staff’ (Teacher)

Parents have reported being uncomfortable about TAC meetings taking place where it is perceived that professionals who have never met their child are making decisions about their future.

During a system stakeholder interview, ‘The Balanced System®’⁵² was described as a tiered system in use in Health Boards and, in some local authority areas, to deliver speech and language therapy services to children and young people with complex additional support needs: This stakeholder was positive about ‘The Balanced System®’ model of universal, targeted and specialist support. They highlighted the model’s potential for delivering support to higher numbers of pupils through speech and language therapists having an input into the communication of more pupils, without an increased caseload. It was highlighted that good relationships are key to successful implementation of this approach, including relationships between speech and language therapists, school staff, children and young people and parents/carers, in order to develop trust in the different tiers of support.

Support for pupils with sensory impairments

In the areas where research was conducted, the delivery model of Qualified Teachers of the Visually Impaired and Teachers of the Deaf had not changed. Support continues to be largely provided in-person, with a combination of direct work with pupils and working with teachers and support staff to ensure they are able to support pupils with sensory impairments.

Some schools reported that the input from Teachers of the Deaf and Qualified Teachers of the Visually Impaired was excellent, and that they continued to work directly with pupils. There are some areas where this support has moved towards a more consultancy based model, raising concerns that this is not providing pupils in

⁵² ‘The Balanced System® is an outcomes-based framework and suite of tools and templates that can be used to improve the commissioning and delivery of services for children and young people which benefit from an integrated approach to delivering outcomes.’ (<https://www.bettercommunication.org.uk/the-balanced-system/>).

those areas with the same level of specialist support and input. However, there are more challenges within the sensory teaching services. It was reported that there is an increase in need and a decrease in resources and that this is likely to become more of a challenge.

Whilst there may be challenges when it comes to resources keeping up with demand in regards to sensory impairment, it is the only area where specialist qualifications are required to support pupils with specific conditions. It was raised that, in the past, 'hubs' existed within some mainstream schools, where pupils were able to access 'the best of both', in that they could access the broad curriculum and integration that mainstream schools offer, whilst being able to form relationships with peers who have shared experiences.

Enquiry areas: Is there evidence of effective cooperation between partners? Where are there potential challenges, tensions or ineffective deployment of resources?

There has been a range of examples of effective cooperation between partners, across different stages of education. This was most commonly reported at early years. Whilst only one early years setting was directly involved in this research, parents were asked about their and their children's experience at different stages of the education system, including early years.

During interviews with parents/carers, a strong theme emerged that they felt their child had been well supported in early years settings. It was reported that there was good access to multidisciplinary support by specialists, such as educational psychologists and speech and language therapists. Parents also felt there was close engagement between themselves and the early years provider.

'When she was in nursery she got lots of support, say educational psychologist, paediatrician, speech and language therapist' (Parent)

The challenges reported around Team around the Child (TAC) professionals having little direct contact with the child were not reported in the nursery setting visited, or by parents when describing their experience when their child was at nursery. When discussing what steps nursery staff take if they have concerns regarding a pupil potentially having complex additional support needs, they explained that they can, as part of an early intervention approach, have informal conversations with the speech and language therapist or the ASN outreach team (as they are in attendance every week).

Some parents expressed that, when their child moved from nursery to primary school, the support from a range of professionals and external agencies reduced, or, in some cases, disappeared. One parent explained that this led them to believe that their child needed a diagnosis to access support, when they had not seen a need for diagnosis while their child was at nursery.

‘We didn’t get a diagnosis at that time [during nursery], there was no need as the support was in place. In primary all the support vanished. Then in P3 her teacher suggested that it might be time to get her assessed so that she would be able to access support.’ (Parent)

Relevant context to the level of support a child receives in the transition from early years to primary has been noted below. This area may benefit from further research in order to determine which factors have an impact on the reported change in experience.

As set out in *Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC): practice guidance 2 – role of the named person*,⁵³ when a child is in early years education their named person is usually their Health Visitor or Family Nurse (although this role may occasionally transfer to a member of the early learning and childcare team). Health Visitors responsibilities include the named person role and function. When a child transitions to primary schooling, the named person changes and is usually a principal teacher, depute or head teacher (or other promoted teacher), therefore there is a change in agency delivering this role from health to education.

There is also a change in the number of children in relation to the number of adults in each setting. In Scottish early years settings, there are limits on the ratio of children to adults. These limits are dependent on the setting and the ages of the children. For non-domestic settings, these limits depend on the ages of the children. For children under the age of 2 there is a ratio limit of 1 adult to 3 children, for children who are aged 2 to 3 the ratio limit is 1 adult to every 5 children, and for children aged 3 and over the ratio is 1 adult to 8 children.⁵⁴ In Scottish primary schools there is a limit to class sizes. In P1 the limit is 25 pupils and in P2 and P3 the limit is 30 pupils.⁵⁵ The average class sizes for P1 - P3 are lower than these limits; in 2021 the average P1 class size was 20.9.⁵⁶

It is also important to note that for most children and young people with neurodiversities, these could be identified by age 6 years.⁵⁷ While any identified specialist support should be provided before this point, and observations and investigations are underway, an assessment or diagnosis may not be possible for every child or young person during their early years education.

Co-location of institutional partners

The research suggests that where services share locations with schools, multidisciplinary working can become organic. Where a person or team providing services, such as speech and language therapy or social care, either share a

⁵³ [Getting it right for every child \(GIRFEC\): practice guidance 2 – role of the named person](#)

⁵⁴ [National care standards early education and childcare up to the age of 16](#)

⁵⁵ [The Education \(Lower Primary Class Sizes\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 1999](#)

⁵⁶ [Summary Statistics For Schools In Scotland 2021](#)

⁵⁷ [National Neurodevelopmental Specification for Children and Young People: Principles and Standards of Care \(www.gov.scot\)](#), 3.11

location with a school or are very regularly present at the school, it enables informal conversations between partners.

‘They share our building, allowing us to work in close partnership and benefit from a joint planning approach’ (Head Teacher)

This capacity for informal conversations was reported to enable staff to approach services for advice before deciding on next steps. This can be beneficial to both the school and the service providers:

‘Having informal and professional conversations on a daily basis helps a lot with planning and expediting processes. It enables early intervention as well - we can touch base, and give a heads up of possible issues’ (Depute Teacher)

Enquiry areas: In what ways do these partnerships deliver improved outcomes (including successful transitions) for children and young people with complex additional support needs?

In one example given by a parent, wider agencies became involved during the transition process for a pupil who was struggling within their current school environment. This included an educational psychologist, who visited a number of schools to explore other options for the pupil before suggesting a school that they believed would suit the needs of the pupil. The child's parents visited and were impressed, and the local authority agreed on the suitability of the placement. There was then a transition period where the pupil was able to attend the new school one day a week, whilst still attending his old school two mornings a week. This enabled a smooth transition, and the pupil is now settled and happy in the new school.

Schools also highlighted how they work in partnership with their feeder schools to ensure good transitions for pupils with complex additional support needs:

‘We are in contact with all the local primary schools so we know early on if any pupils need an extended transition. We have enhanced transition meetings, extra layers of support. Meeting with families to explore needs of pupils before they come across - it’s personalised’ (Head Teacher at a mainstream secondary school with no specialist ASN provision)

Theme 4: Perspectives of parents/carers and pupils

Key findings

- **Many parents and staff reported positive practices around transitions, with the positive impact that these had for children and young people being appreciated by parents.**

- Most children and young people with complex additional support needs reported that having friends and positive relationships with staff were both key factors in order for them to enjoy school and feel fully included.



- Figure 13: 'Mini me' output and chalkboard with pupil responses highlighting the importance of friendships

Enquiry areas: Do parents/carers consider the approaches taken by schools and other institutional actors to be sufficiently meeting their child's complex needs?

Feedback from participating parents was mixed, with many parents having experienced times when they felt that their child has been well supported and times when the system has been viewed as not meeting the needs of their child.

As detailed in the 'Partnerships' section, during interviews with parents of children with complex additional support needs, there was a strong theme that they felt their child had been well supported in early years settings, where parents reported good access to multidisciplinary support and felt there was close engagement between themselves and the early years provider.

Most parents reported minimal anxiety regarding their child moving from early years to primary. Some parents reported having few concerns about their child continuing into mainstream primary, due to them thriving at nursery, however found that their child received less input or support at primary and, then, struggled. Sometimes this resulted in the child being moved to another setting. However, it was also reported that some children struggle through primary with little support or input from other agencies.

'It was worse in primary - my son doesn't cope in certain environments, he has meltdowns and uses bad language - the staff didn't have the training' (Parent of child in mainstream secondary)

The transition from primary to secondary school was reported as a major source of anxiety by most pupils, parents and carers who had been through or were approaching this transition. Some parents did not feel that their children would cope in secondary school, many of whom felt they were not listened to when decisions about their child's placement were made. However, there were reports of successes where pupils have been well supported in secondary school and thrived.

'I'm getting way more support here than in primary school' (Pupil in secondary school)

This view of increased support was not universal, however, and there was an equal number of examples of pupils with complex additional support needs who struggled at secondary school and were on very reduced timetables. This led to the pupils eventually moving to a different placement, an experience that was reported by research participants as hugely disruptive and traumatic for the young person and their family.

Enquiry areas: What do parents/carers perceive as working well in the current system / at the school their child currently attends?

Successful transitions

During the course of this research, transitions were a key theme. Both pupils and parents reported that once a placement in a specialist setting had been secured, the transition process was handled well. There were many accounts from pupils themselves of supportive transition processes that helped them to adjust to a new school settings. This, commonly, included multiple visits to their new school, meeting and getting to know the staff and getting used to the building (for example, the layout and the sounds). Examples were given of transition processes tailored to the specific needs of individuals, and moving at the pace required by the pupil (for example, a pupil who stayed outside the school initially, with members of staff coming outside to spend time with her until she was ready to come into the school).

School staff also shared examples of 'enhanced' transition processes for pupils who need this (including at mainstream secondary schools with no specialist ASN provision).

'They [staff at the new school] were on the ball - they did the bus journey with us, he got four or five visits on his own, extra time to walk around the school and familiarise himself with the building as he was worried about getting lost, time with the Depute Head Teacher' (Parent of a child at a mainstream secondary school with no specialist ASN provision)

'The transition period started with two hours once a week to see how my daughter got on, while I was able to stay within the school in a different classroom. Then we went up to two days a week and the school would phone me to update me on her progress' (Parent of child at a special school)

'We transition pupils into the school as slowly as possible. Staff visit them first, for example, in a local park, to start to get to know them. Then, they visit the school for increasingly long times. We've recently started giving pupils a personalised "transition box" of sensory toys and signifiers of the new school' (Head Teacher of a special school)



Figure 14: Chalkboard with pupil response around a positive transition process

In contrast, there were also some accounts of difficult transitions, however these were largely related to COVID-19 restrictions and the logistics of new schools being built.

'I don't feel like there was any transition and with COVID as well it was - surprise! You're in a new school' (Pupil)

The researchers noted that the Scottish Government is undertaking work with partners to improve transitions for children and young people as part of the delivery of the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan and wider work to improve transitions into adulthood. This work aims to build upon the existing duties that apply to local authorities regarding planning for children and young people's transitions.

Co-location of provision

Co-location of specialist provision and mainstream schools offers opportunities for the benefit of pupils attending both provisions. There are excellent examples where specialist provision is very much embedded in the school. In these instances, the parents involved in this research were extremely positive about co-located provision.

'To use the same door as everyone else, to park outside the school and watch him go in with everyone else and come out with everyone else means so much' (Parent)

Examples of co-location working well were found in both primary and secondary settings. In one secondary example, the school and ASN unit have one head teacher and one school identity - including the uniform, the school name and the building. The school successfully supports a wide range of pupils to have a positive

learning experience. This includes pupils accessing specialist support in what they refer to as the 'base', where they feel 'safe'. For pupils who want to, and are able to, it is possible to access a broader range of subjects that are on offer in the mainstream setting.

Parents whose children attend the school are extremely positive about not only the education that they provide, but also the support in ensuring that the transition to the school is smooth. Pupils are offered multiple opportunities to visit the school before starting, including at times when other pupils are not there. They meet the staff they will be directly working with, as well as other members of staff that they might come into contact with, for example caretakers.

Pupils are also able to access lessons in the mainstream setting, if or when this is something that the pupil wants to do. Whilst in some examples, participants described opportunities to mix, but little uptake, at this school pupils in the ASN provision reported attending a number of clubs that are joint clubs with mainstream.

The model means that pupils with differing needs who attended primary school together, for example as friends and siblings, are still able to attend the same secondary school.

'We don't split families and friendships...it [the ASN unit] doesn't feel separate, it feels like a faculty not a different school' (Head Teacher)

In a positive primary school example of co-location, pupils from the mainstream and special schools share many spaces. This includes corridors, a dining space that both schools use at the same time, and play spaces.

Enquiry areas: Do parents/carers perceive any barriers or challenges to positive outcomes, including successful transitions being met?

Whilst policy intent is that placement should be right first time, many parents/carers expressed a view that that for many families this is not working. Many research participants expressed the view that placements in specialist settings are difficult to access, for example only being accessible after the pupil has firstly been placed in a mainstream setting which has not proved to be the most appropriate educational setting for that pupil. This is perceived as being a result of the presumption of mainstream.

Some parents who participated in this research reported that they felt their child's needs would be best met in specialist provision, however the pupil has been placed in a mainstream setting. It was reported that this has to prove unsustainable in order for the pupil to then move. Some parents and pupils described experiencing extended periods of struggling and sometimes distress, before being able to access an education setting that best suits their needs. This can lead to a distrust or dislike of educational settings that, then, needs to be overcome before the pupil is, then, able to successfully engage in education again.

'I went to three [primary] schools before this one, they were all awful. I didn't get on with staff, they didn't understand me.. Due to my previous experiences I struggle with new people, building trust' (Pupil)

'They need to be bounced about before they can come here' (Support staff at independent special school)

'Three failed placements before they end up here, then they end up with trauma' (Support staff at independent special school)

Some parents report that their child has missed education due to this experience, with multiple accounts of pupils who struggle in mainstream settings being given reduced timetables. This results not only on them missing education, but also has an impact on their families' and parents' and carers' abilities to work.

'I had to leave my job as I had to pick up my daughter from school so often - now I haven't had to pick her up once so I've got bored! I'm applying for jobs now' (Parent whose child has moved from mainstream to special primary school)

The outcome of the reduced timetable, based on the experiences that were shared during interviews and research activities, is that the pupil is eventually moved to a setting that better suits their needs. Participants said this resulted in extending the period of time a pupil is accessing little or no education.

Another impact of this is that once a child or young person is successfully placed in an additional support needs setting, where they are well supported and happy, they and their parents or carers are understandably very reluctant for them to leave that setting.

'It's changed our whole family, we are all able to get to our work, we are confident and comfortable' (Parent)

One group of parents, whose children now attend a special school, expressed what they described as a 'fight' to enable their child to get the placement. These parents have experienced their children struggling at school, and now being settled and flourishing at school. All of these parents' children were primary school aged and they are in the process of trying to ensure they can secure a placement at a special school when their children reach high school age.

'My daughter was so angry this time last year, now she's only been here a few months and has 100% attendance' (Parent)

'My son's the same, he runs out the door to get into the taxi, he's excited to go to school' (Parent)

The role of parental advocacy

There is concern amongst some parents, who feel able to advocate for their children, that the children of parents who are not able to advocate for them in the same way may be receiving less support. This ability to advocate relies on a complex range of factors that can include, for example, access to information (including language/literacy) regarding the support available and the rights of a child, socioeconomic resources, available time, and personal connections (for example with other people who have similar experiences, or people working in health or education roles).

Most examples that were shared, where pupils have moved from a mainstream or special local authority funded school/unit to a grant-aided special or independent school, have been described as parents or carers having to 'fight' for a change of placement. Parents also reported feeling that the situation within the current placement, and often at home, had reached crisis point. In some examples of where a crisis point was not reached, were circumstances where families had access to legal support. This was described by participants either as acquiring legal knowledge themselves, or having the financial resources to fund legal support.

It is unclear how much awareness there is amongst parents/carers of their right to make placing requests and access free legal representation to challenge local authority decisions, as this was not mentioned by any parents during this research.

The Scottish Government funds legal support for parents of children with complex additional support needs through Govan Law Centre's Education Law Unit.⁵⁸ The unit provides: legal representation to parents or pupils in appropriate cases; an Education Law Helpline which is available to anyone who has an enquiry about any legal aspect of additional support needs in education in Scotland; and free template letters and resources.

'I think there are some parents who don't have the know-how or the confidence - and then those children are failed even further.' (Carer of child with complex additional support needs)

'Now sometimes the children that get the support are children with families with the financial ability to get a private diagnosis. Not all parents have the ability to do that' (Teacher)

Integration

Whilst there are positive examples of co-located special and mainstream provisions, there are also examples where the different provisions exist on the same site with little interaction between the two. It was highlighted that for integration to be a positive experience and to become inclusion, there needs to be

⁵⁸ [Govan Law Centre's Education Law Unit](#)

sufficient staffing to support pupils, which participants felt is currently not available in some schools.

'I fought to get her to this school, but they've only taken her to the mainstream section of the school six times.' (Parent)

'He asked to go to the "Top" group which doesn't exist - it's how he conceptualises the mainstream school, he wants inclusion' (Teacher at a special school co-located with a mainstream school)

Enquiry areas: Do parents/carers feel involved and empowered in decision-making regarding their child's education?

The level of involvement and empowerment parents feel varies, with many factors playing a part such as their previous experience and whether school and parents are in agreement regarding the type of education that would best suit the pupil.

Positive communication between schools and parents is an important element in enabling parents to feel supported, involved, and that they have a role in their child's educational life. Parents shared that a regular two-way dialogue between home and school can also have an impact on family wellbeing. Parents reported appreciating being informed if their child has had any challenges during the day, or when they are particularly enjoying activities or experiences. This helps families to support their child at home. This was reported as particularly important when pupils have barriers to communication. Many examples of positive communication were shared including use of technology such as Seesaw and Google Classrooms, but also regular contact via email or phone calls.

'We use Seesaw to communicate with home...We use it as a daily diary, which used to be written... Parents can message teachers and vice versa.' (Teacher)

In this example, the school are also using Seesaw as a way to include pupils more in home/school communication. Pupils are able to access their own Seesaw, and are involved in choosing which photographs to share with their parents or carers.

'It has been totally collaborative, they say "drop me an email", I'm not just able to talk to them at the school' (Parent)

'Constant communication from the school, including when it's not going well, but they tell me what they are going to try' (Parent)

The research activity has shown that regular communication helps to build relationships and trust, and parents report feeling able to have an input into their child's targets and goals when the relationship between home and school is positive. Additionally, some schools offered parents the opportunity to come to the school to learn communication approaches that they can use with their children at home. These sessions are very well received, and again support parents to feel involved in their child's education.

'I feel involved and included in the decision making. Targets come home for feedback and approval. If I have things I want him to be working towards, then the school is happy to include that and help' (Parent of primary aged young child)

Enquiry areas: Do children and young people consider the approaches taken by schools and other institutional actors to be sufficiently meeting their complex needs? What do children and young people perceive as working well in the current system / at the school they currently attend? Do children and young people perceive any barriers or challenges to positive outcomes, including successful transitions being met? Do children with complex additional support needs have friends / feel part of their home communities?

The children and young people with complex additional support needs involved in this research, who were able to communicate an opinion about school, reported enjoying school and feeling that their needs were largely met. This was particularly clear amongst pupils who had experienced school placements that had not worked well for them previously:

'My old school was not good at education for autistic kids' (Pupil in specialist provision)

Pupils reported enjoyment of a wide range of elements of school, however the importance of the relationships with staff came through as integral across all types of school settings.



Figure 15: Outputs from research activities with pupils highlighting the importance of staff and relationships

Pupils reported that staff were friendly, supported them and that they felt safe at school.

'The adults are the greatest thing about this school. And hugging - I like hugs' (Pupil)

'I feel less angry and stressed since I came here. It feels like I belong. I have loved this school so much. It feels like home. It's a nice, calm and friendly school. The teachers are friendly' (Pupil)

Another positive element of school for pupils with complex additional support needs is the opportunity to develop friendships. Many children and young people report not having many friends in their local communities.

'In terms of my town I don't go out much. I had a local pal round my bit, but he left, nuthin' much tae dae. It's boring in ma street. Quiet' (Pupil)

Pupils who attend specialist school settings largely reported having lots of friends at school, and this being one of the things they liked best about school. They particularly appreciated being amongst other pupils like themselves:

'I like that all the pupils here have autism' (Pupil in specialist provision)

'I have actual friends here' (Pupil in specialist provision)



Figure 16: Chalkboards with pupil responses around friendships

An exception to this is where pupils attend very small specialist settings, especially those with a large age range. In these circumstances there are often few other pupils that are the same age as them, and therefore friendships can be difficult to establish.

It was reported by parents that friendships can be more challenging for pupils with complex additional support needs in mainstream settings:

'I think that works to a certain extent. But I think socially it's difficult because he will get left out from friends - he gets left alone in the playground and at lunch. I think if he had children who were like him, he would have friends then...I think mainstream schools do work, but there has to be something there.' (Parent of child in mainstream primary school)

A pupil who had previously attended mainstream schools, but was now attending a specialist unit, reported that he was very positive about his new school. One of the reasons he gave was that 'everyone's my friend here'.

There were many subjects and activities highlighted by pupils as being popular, for example outdoor learning. Additionally, Maths, Art and Music were commonly reported as favourite subjects. Swimming was consistently raised as important by children and young people, even where pupils didn't currently go swimming with their school but had in the past. Teachers also raised that there are pupils who would greatly benefit from hydrotherapy but do not have access to it.



Figure 17: 'Mini me' output depicting a pupil wearing armbands and happiest when swimming (left); and chalkboard with a pupil response around enjoying swimming, but not being able to do this currently

Access to swimming or hydrotherapy was variable and the barriers to access were greater than locational. Where schools have their own pool, the pupils were more likely to be able to access swimming. However, there were challenges relating to staff and resources that dictated whether swimming could go ahead or not. Where schools do not have their own pools, the challenges are even greater, and include rules around who can take pupils off site, access to transport, allocation of staff to accompany the pupils, the vicinity of the pool to the school, and the relationship with the local pools.

'In primary I did swimming, I don't do it anymore. The pool wasn't at school but it was worth travelling to. I really enjoyed it, I'd like to still be able to do it' (Pupil in a local authority special school)



Figure 18: Outputs from research activities with pupils highlighting the importance of swimming

Where extracurricular clubs and activities are available, they are popular with pupils. Positive examples include shared clubs between additional support needs units and mainstream provision. This provided pupils with opportunities to mix with pupils in the mainstream school and access activities which there may not be enough uptake for in the unit, for example chess and an LGBT club.

‘There are around 10 of us, 3 or 4 of us are from [specialist provision] and the rest are from mainstream. It means you can make friends with nice mainstream pupils’ (Pupil)

Other positive examples included local attractions offering free access and a dedicated time when the attraction would not be open to the public or other schools. There were also examples from residential schools where pupils had been on residential trips.

‘The camping trip was amazing – we had a fire, had burgers and toasted marshmallows’ (Pupil)

It should be noted that these examples of frequent trips to attractions, and residential trips were in schools where there were higher ratios of staff to pupils, good access to transport, and flexibility in who could accompany pupils off site.

It was raised by some parents, carers, and pupils, at some special schools that there can be a lack of opportunities for children and young people with complex additional support needs outside of core school hours. This included extracurricular activities after school and clubs during the holidays. When there were activities available, some children and young people were unable to take part due to having transport arranged for the end of the school day.

‘The school is great, but there aren’t any after school clubs, or holiday clubs. Kids with additional support needs don’t have anything like that available’ (Parent of primary aged child attending a special school)

Enquiry areas: What are the hopes and aspirations of children with complex additional support needs and does the current system support them towards these?

In the course of this research, children and young people with complex additional support needs expressed a broad range of aspirations and hopes for the future.

Several secondary school pupils in their senior phase aspired to work in ASN settings in order to support pupils like themselves, utilising their own experience to help others. Another common aspiration amongst pupils with complex additional support needs is to pursue further education and/or work related to a creative passion, for example music, storytelling (through writing books, creating comics or working in TV production), and game development.

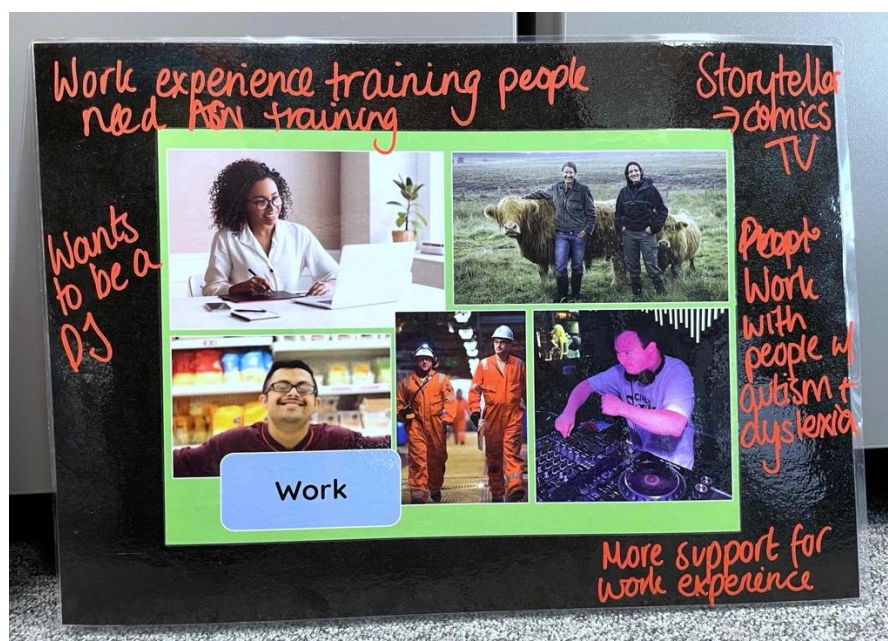


Figure 19: 'Work' chalkboard with pupil responses around gaining work experience and aspirations for future careers

One pupil noted that as well as gaining work experience, they would like to work with employers to create inclusive workplace environments:

'It's great that we get work training, but companies like [high street supermarkets] need more training on ASN' (Pupil)

Opportunities related to transition into adulthood came up from both pupils and school staff. This included opportunities to attend college part-time, and opportunities to gain work experience.

Senior phase pupils shared positive examples of attending college with support:

'I do music at college one day a week. The support staff from my school come and sit in the college canteen, they're there if you need them. The college staff are brilliant' (Pupil)

Most schools involved had ‘Developing the Young Workforce’⁵⁹ initiatives including running cafe services and barista training and participating in the creation and running of social enterprises. Pupils were very positive about these opportunities.

Access to a range of subjects

One element of specialist settings that a few pupils with complex additional support needs, but not severe learning disabilities, would like to change is access to a wider range of subjects. This was highlighted as a positive feature of school where pupils felt they had access to all of the subjects they are interested in.

‘I like that it’s a big school. It’s better than a small school – we have more classes, more subjects’ (Pupil in mainstream school with no specialist provision)

There are examples of schools having partnerships with local mainstream schools and colleges in order to offer this broader curriculum to pupils. For example, at one school some pupils wanted to do ‘proper’ science, by which they meant in a lab, which the school did not have. The school has now developed a partnership with a local high school and pupils will be able to use the lab there.

This was also a problem for some island communities, where despite the fact that pupils attended mainstream schools, there could still be limitations to the subjects they were able to study:

‘I would like to see the same opportunities as the mainland in terms of subjects - some pupils can’t do what they want at college as they need certain Highers’ (Parent)

Pupils and staff also often felt that a further focus on developing skills for the future would be useful for pupils moving towards adulthood. One pupil came up with the concept of a network of connected schools enabling pupils to access a broader range of subjects. This pupil’s idea was that pupils would attend a main school where they would access a core curriculum including maths and literacy, alongside the specific education and support they needed for the future, as well as attending different schools to try out or access different subjects. The pupil felt that an additional benefit of this model would be the opportunity for pupils to meet and interact with a wider range of people beyond their own school.

This model suggested by a pupil is similar to a model that is in action at a mainstream school with a specialist provision unit. Unlike instances where a specialist school and a mainstream school are located in the same place but are entirely separate entities, this school operated as one. Pupils attending the specialist provision accessed the facilities of the mainstream school, including the science labs and Design Technology workshop. For other subjects, like maths and

⁵⁹ Developing the Young Workforce is a seven year programme that aims to prepare children and young people aged 3 – 18 years old for the world of work.

history, the teachers come to the ASN class in their classroom. The pupils can also access further subjects by joining mainstream classes in later years; a process that is carefully planned and supported to ensure the pupils are genuinely included in the lessons they attend.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the ten years since the Doran report was first published, the context of supporting children with complex additional support needs has changed. The number of children and young people identified with additional support needs has risen in Scotland, with participants reporting an increased number of children and young people presenting with more complex needs.

There have been numerous policies and guidance published since 2012 to support children with complex additional support needs in schools. The participants in this research agreed that there is positive intent within the policy and legislation that currently exists to support children with complex additional support needs. However, policy alone cannot deliver positive outcomes for children and young people. Despite policy intent, this research found some children, parents and carers are struggling to have children and young people's needs met to enable them to flourish in their school settings, at times impacting their lives at home, too.

This report has outlined how practices of inclusion are not applied consistently, nor are they universally understood as intended by all practitioners and stakeholders working within the Scottish education system. This research has found that at times the presumption of mainstreaming is perceived to stand in contention with Getting it Right for Every Child. This report suggests that without robust policy, practice and resources around inclusion that enable the implementation of a flexible and tailored approach to every child's needs, the perception of a conflict existing between the presumption of mainstreaming and Getting It Right for Every Child will continue.

This research found that flexible inclusion, that enables children to flourish includes, but is not limited to, an understanding of the adaptability of Curriculum of Excellence. Teachers must also feel they have the capacity and autonomy to implement such adaptations, including focusing on life skills to prepare children for life after school.

Without robust and comprehensive practices and resourcing around support for children and young people with complex additional support needs, children, parents and carers will continue to struggle at times within this system. Currently, this means that at certain points some parents and carers feel that their children are unsuitably placed in schools that do not enable them to flourish. More exploration is needed into the implementation and practices of inclusion in schools in order to ensure all children have an equitable chance to succeed.

This research has also heard concerns relating to decision-making regarding allocation of resources, including school placements. This included decisions relating to placements at independent or grant-aided special schools, and placements in local authority mainstream or special schools. Some parents reported concerns regarding the role of parental advocacy in placement decisions. Additional factors reported to play a role in placement allocations included children and young people's care needs, for example the need for a residential placement.

The report suggests that due to the complex range of factors involved in the decision-making process it would, in the researchers' view, merit further exploration with all key stakeholders.

This research found many examples of good practice that have enabled children with complex additional support needs to flourish. Overarchingly, parents, carers and children remarked throughout this research on the positive impact teachers can have. There was a perception that many teachers 'go above and beyond' to support children with complex additional support needs. This report has identified key characteristics of good practice within schools to enable its replication across school settings; these include a supportive work culture and leadership, sufficient paid time for support staff, and rigorous professional training balanced with experiential learning.

The research illustrated many examples of how built environments and certain resources can encourage children to feel happy, fulfilled, and thrive. These features included infrastructure, such as outdoor space and activities, access to local communities, access to technology, break-out areas, swimming pools and purpose-built schools with space and natural light. It was found that there was inequitable access to such resources across different school settings. More exploration is needed to understand how to replicate these desirable features across all school settings. However, this report acknowledges the difficulty of this within the context of limited resources.

Partnerships across different types of school provision and services had clear positive outcomes in circumstances where these partnerships were well established. These were evident across many schools where pupils were experiencing successful transitions between schools. The most successful partnerships across services that were reported were those that were established organically because they were co-located in the same building. However, there were also perceptions amongst parents and teachers of decreasing access to resources, and therefore diminishing partnerships with specialists such as educational psychologists and occupational therapists.

The views of children and young people, parents and carers were central to this research. When school placements are successful, and children and young people feel well supported, the impact is profound on the young person's sense of belonging, sense of self and ability to thrive. Children and young people, parents and carers often had clear ideas about what they needed and what worked well for them. Coupled with these clear articulations were often narratives of 'fighting' a system and experiencing a 'struggle'.

Most parents and carers that discussed their experience of their child attending early years provision articulated their experiences of this having been positive, owing to the close relationships they had with early years providers. Anxiety and struggle became more prominent in parents', carers' and children's reported experiences as children and young people ascended in their education. A primary reason articulated for this was around barriers to accessing specialist provision. It

was perceived that some children are only able to access specialist support after being placed, sometimes multiple times, in mainstream settings that do not meet their needs. This has led to some children and young people missing education and/or developing anxiety around school.

Examples of children and young people thriving were seen across settings. Notable examples include where specialist provision was co-located with a mainstream setting, and integration was consistently occurring between these settings. In all settings a key enabler or barrier was staff resourcing. Sufficient staff ratios supported integration and access to a broad curriculum. Important characteristics for parents and carers to feel empowered and supported include, but are not limited to, clear communication with schools and agreement surrounding the type of education their child should receive.

What is clear, and not new; the needs of children with complex additional support needs are incredibly varied, and a tailored and flexible approach is required to meet their needs and enable them to flourish at school. This research has identified four themes that are integral to delivering inclusive and tailored approaches to all children and young people. These include:

- Resourcing, in particular in relation to staffing;
- The brilliant, committed and supportive nature of staff surrounding pupils;
- Where children are placed for their schooling; and
- Robust training for all providers who interact with children with complex additional support needs.

The researchers note that the Scottish Government is currently undertaking work with partners to respond to the recommendations of Angela Morgan's 2020 review into the implementation of additional support for learning. Many of the themes highlighted in this report reinforce, and build upon, her findings and pose areas for further research. It is hoped that the emerging themes from this research provide a helpful evidence base to further inform both this work and ongoing work to implement the Doran Review recommendations of improving outcomes for children and young people with complex additional support needs in Scotland.

Annexes

Annex One: Enquiry Framework

Theme 1: Policy

- Are national policies around support for children and young people with complex additional support needs well understood?
- What would the system look like if national policies were followed?
- Are there any areas where policies are lacking or contradicting each other?
- Do existing policies deliver positive outcomes (including successful transitions) for children and young people with complex additional support needs?
- How is national policy interpreted at a local level?
- What guidance and policies do local authorities offer schools around supporting children and young people with complex additional support needs? How does this vary between different local authority areas?

Theme 2: Practice

- What does current support look like in practice for children and young people with complex additional support needs?
- Does current practice reflect national policy intent? Are there gaps between policy and practice?
- What approaches are working well? What makes the biggest difference?
- Where are the challenges in the system?
- How transferable are the examples of good practice identified?
- What are the conditions that enable or foster good practice?
- What are the barriers to good practice?
- Does having a diagnosis have an impact on support?

- **What role does technology play in supporting children and young people with complex additional support needs to achieve their full potential?**
- **What equipment and tools (e.g. accessible digital devices, Alternative and Augmentative Communication tools) are used in schools, and what impact do these have on educational outcomes?**
- **How was continuity of learning provided to children and young people with complex additional support needs, both on and off campus, during the COVID-19 pandemic?**
- **What impact did school building closures have on children and young people with complex additional support needs? Were there any benefits, or innovation in services offered, that can be learnt from?**
- **In what ways are learning and workforce development used to enable staff to support positive outcomes, including successful transitions, for children and young people with complex additional support needs? Are these approaches effective?**

Theme 3: Partnerships

- **What roles do different institutions play to support improved outcomes (including successful transitions) for children and young people with complex additional support needs?**
- **What partnerships or relationships exist between the different institutions that support improved outcomes for children and young people with complex additional support needs?**
- **How are different institutions and stakeholders working together?**
- **Is there evidence of effective cooperation between partners?**
- **Where are there potential challenges, tensions or ineffective deployment of resources?**
- **In what ways do these partnerships deliver improved outcomes (including successful transitions) for children and young people with complex additional support needs?**

Theme 4: Perspectives of parents/carers and pupils

- **Do parents/carers consider the approaches taken by schools and other institutional actors to be sufficiently meeting their child's complex needs?**

- **What do parents/carers perceive as working well in the current system / at the school their child currently attends?**
- **Do parents/carers perceive any barriers or challenges to positive outcomes, including successful transitions being met?**
- **Do parents/carers feel involved and empowered in decision-making regarding their child's education?**
- **Do children and young people consider the approaches taken by schools and other institutional actors to be sufficiently meeting their complex needs?**
- **What do children and young people perceive as working well in the current system / at the school they currently attend?**
- **Do children and young people perceive any barriers or challenges to positive outcomes, including successful transitions being met?**
- **Do children with complex additional support needs have friends / feel part of their home communities?**
- **What are the hopes and aspirations of children with complex additional support needs and does the current system support them towards these?**

Annex Two: Research toolkit for involving children and young people with complex additional support needs

Mini me activity

Activity introduction

In this activity, we are going to talk about what makes you feel happy and what you find helpful.

We would like you to make a mini version of yourself. This 'mini me' should represent you feeling at your happiest.

Stick your 'mini me' onto a piece of paper. Around your 'mini me' add all the things that make you feel happy and supported in school.

Activity plan

The activity will be adapted to suit the needs of the pupils. Outputs can be created through collage, drawing and writing, and conversations supported through the use of symbols, signing and other communication methods.

As pupils create their 'mini me' representations, the below prompt questions will be used to gain further understanding where appropriate.

Prompt questions

- **When are you happiest? What helps you feel this way?**
- **What do you like about your school?**
- **Do you have friends at school? Do you have friends where you live?**
- **What support do you find helpful?**
- **Are there times when you don't have the support you need?**
- **Is there anything that is meant to help you, but you don't think it does?**

Materials required

- **Mini me templates;**
- **paper;**
- **pens;**

- magazines;
- stickers.

Chalkboard conversations

Activity introduction

We are going to look at a range of pictures and talk about how these things make us feel. There is no right or wrong answer to anything we ask, we just want to learn what you think about things.

Activity plan

Pupils will be shown chalkboards with collages of images representing different topics including education, work, fun, having a say, relationships, and home. They will be asked about each of these topics including how they feel about them.

Responses will be captured on the boards using chalk pens by pupils or the researchers.

The activity will be adapted to suit the needs of the pupils. Responses can be provided through talking or writing, and conversations supported through the use of symbols, signing and other communication methods.

The below prompt questions will be used to gain further understanding where appropriate.

Prompt questions

- **What's your school/class like?**
- **What do you like about your school/class? What is the best thing about your school/class?**
- **What don't you like about your school/class? Is there anything you would change?**
- **Do you feel supported at school? What support do you find the most helpful? Do you think you get enough support?**
- **What do you want to do when you leave school? What would help you achieve this?**
- **Do you want to work in the future? What would you like to do?**
- **What are your favourite things to do? Do you get to do these things often?**

- **What do you find fun? Do you have fun at school?**
- **Do you have a say in what you do at school? How do you have a say? (e.g. through picking subjects, pupil councils, etc)**
- **What relationships are important to you? Do you have friends at school? Do you have friends where you live?**
- **Where do you live? Do you live in the same place all the time? What do you like to do at home?**
- **Materials required:**
 - **Chalkboards with image collages;**
 - **chalk pens.**

Observation, immersion and guided tours

Activity plan

Where possible, research activities in schools will be combined with:

- **guided tours of the school/facilities led by pupils with complex additional support needs;**
- **classroom observations;**
- **school outings and trips.**

Informal conversations with school staff and pupils will add to observations to build a picture of pupils' experiences, the materials and resources used to support pupils, and any challenges in meeting pupils' complex additional support needs.

Where appropriate school staff and pupils will be asked to show the researchers technology and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools used in the school.

The below prompt questions will be used to gain further understanding where appropriate.

Prompt questions

- **What can you do with this tool/device?**
- **How does it help you/the pupil?**

- **Is there anything you would like to do with it but can't? If so what stops you from being able to do this?**
- **How long have you had it?**
- **Do you/does the pupil take it home? Is it used at home as well as school?**



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