

Education and Skills Committee
Focus group notes – additional support needs
20 February 2019

1. A delegation of members met with parents, young people and individuals and organisations involved with additional support needs on 20 February 2019. Members present were Clare Adamson (Convener), Ross Greer and Oliver Mundell.
2. The Committee has been scrutinising additional support needs issues since its establishment in 2016 and is reviewing what progress has been made since it produced 20 recommendations in 2017. The purpose of the focus group was to assist with this review.
3. This note is drafted around themes discussed during the focus group as opposed to chronological order.

Role of mainstreaming

4. One attendee said there has been a presumption of mainstreaming since 2000, but local authorities need to build a continuum of provision as those with ASN are not a homogeneous group. They were of the view that excellent ASN provision declined after 2005.
5. Another attendee opined that you need “a lot of ducks in a row” for inclusion to work, and that for some children, mainstreaming would never work. Some attendees felt that the use of ASN units attached to mainstream schools achieved a good balance for many ASN pupils (although this would not be the answer for all) as it would allow some children to take part in some mainstream classes where appropriate and better involve children in the school community.
6. The parents present did also suggest that, where mainstreaming was not appropriate, it was important for children to be placed in specialist schooling as soon as possible due to the stress and anxiety for the child and the wider family.
7. An attendee suggested more interventions in primary school are needed so that pupils have as much time as possible to be identified and understand what support works best for them.

Resourcing and training

8. Some attendees felt there is a dearth of understanding and experience of working with ASN at a local authority level. One attendee mentioned that a specialist school recently advertised a post which only listed experience with ASN as “desirable” rather than “essential”.
9. An attendee said there are endless initiatives and plans but they are only meaningful if they are followed through and resourced properly.

10. School buildings were described by some as a “sensory nightmare” due to the way they are built. Basic accommodations, such as lights being switched off when not needed, are not thought of.
11. Attendees felt that far more resources are needed for proper mainstreaming, in terms of staff numbers and turnover, pay, and workload/time. This was a frequent theme of the focus group. It was believed that pay levels for support staff are not high enough to retain and attract people to the profession.
12. It was also stated that teachers and staff have too little time to properly think about ASN. Attendees also frequently mentioned that there was not enough training for teachers, and the training that does exist can be negatively framed around “problem” children rather than getting it right for every child.
13. Attendees felt the ethos in a school and leadership that understands a continuum of need is vital; one example given by an attendee was a Depute Head telling a pupil with ASN to “look me in the eyes when I am speaking to you”.

Data and assessment

14. Not everybody with ASN is being identified and there are invisible needs. Some young people appear to cope during the day, but their anxiety builds up and then emerges at home at night. This builds up cumulative stress and anxiety and means children are not performing as well as they could.
15. Data and statistics is important – data on looked after children published every second year. Although exclusion figures are going down for looked after children, they are still higher than for other children, despite guidance saying it should only be used as a last resort. One practitioner commented on a notable rise in overall exclusions from P1-P3 based on a recent study they had undertaken.
16. Questions were raised by a number of attendees over how many kids were on part time timetables or even not attending school at all, and the belief that any figures given for children on part time timetables or not attending school were not robust and fully reflective.
17. Looked after children are assumed to have ASN unless they have been assessed to the contrary. However, different local authorities take different approaches to assessment and this can also affect discrepancies between social work and education departments regarding numbers of kids with ASN. Unless you have the right numbers/data, you cannot begin to assess what is needed.

Experiences of parents and young people

18. One parent said that their child with ASN had been traumatised through education. They had been identified throughout school as needing one to one support but the local authority insisted that they had to try a mainstream school

before other avenues would be explored. The child nearly ended up in a secure unit due to the trauma caused by experiences and the assumption that they had to try mainstream.

19. One young person was not picked up as being autistic until their teens. They felt constantly tense in schools, not helped by emphasis on group work. Breakout spaces are a great resource but there needs to be gatekeeping of provision to avoid them being misused/viewed as a punishment space.
20. Parents said it can be a postcode lottery in terms of how local authorities treat ASN, even within local authorities, and had experience of being passed back and forth between social work and education.
21. A teacher suggested there were two groups of parents; those who were articulate fighters that knew the system, and those who did not know their rights. However, some said parents have to know their rights but even well-informed parents with the means to push for their children's rights can face battles.
22. Parents said they shouldn't have to fight for support for their child, or have to worry about whether the support will always be in place. One parent said they had to suggest they would seek a judicial review in order for them and their partner to be allowed to take part in a course for parents of children with ASN. The parent said this course (More than Words) was an invaluable but expensive resource; due to being in full time employment, it was incorrectly suggested they would not attend every course, which was what led to the initial decision.
23. Another parent said that they had had an "email battle" with their local authority over their child's care, and that the local authority had ignored suggested plans on how their son could be educated until the parent sent them the full paper trail, copying in their local MSP and MP, demonstrating that the local authority had not responded.
24. Reference was made by a parent to an ongoing petition regarding restraint and seclusion. Examples were given by attendees of children excluded due to a lack of staff, taught in corridors, isolated in support base or given reduced timetables. One young person didn't attend school from 14 until they could legally leave.
25. One young person living in a rural area reported that provision between their local schools in terms of support staff numbers could differ massively. Some suggested good practice was the use of profiles created alongside a support worker to help staff understand individual needs – e.g. "I struggle in noisy rooms".