



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

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Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

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11 December 2018

Dear John

As you are aware the Committee has a continuing interest in scrutinising the level of support available in school for children and young people with additional support needs. The Committee invited Scottish Government statisticians to give evidence to its meeting on 28 November, to scrutinise further the data on school support staff with an ASN specialism. This session followed the Committee's consideration of letters to you from Ross Greer MSP and then the Committee as a whole and your responses. The evidence session generated a number of issues and associated questions from the Committee's perspective and these are set out below for your consideration and response.

### ***Quality of data – ASN specialist school support staff***

As you agreed during your appearance before the Committee on 5 September, additional support needs assistants have a distinct and valuable role. The assessment of the effectiveness of implementation of national policy on supporting pupils with additional support needs at a local authority level requires reliable data on the number of school support staff working specifically to support these children and young people. This is particularly important given the rise in the incidence of children and young people reported as having an additional support need.

The Committee's main concern is the decision taken by statisticians, following detailed quality assurance of the data collected from local authorities, to combine two previously distinct staff categories ('Classroom Assistant' and 'Additional Support Needs Auxiliary or Care Assistant') under the new single category of 'Pupil Support Assistant'. Rather than attempt to validate existing data, in conjunction with local authority education data specialists, in an effort to continue to differentiate between school support staff roles, it appears that the change was made, to some extent, for the sake of expediency. The abandonment of the Additional Support Needs Auxiliary or Care Assistant category means there is no way to tell how many support staff are

working specifically to support children with additional support needs across Scotland. Consequently, there is no way of ascertaining whether there has been a reduction in the number of ASN staff in certain areas or across Scotland and the extent of any such reduction.

A further concern is the accuracy of the data under categories previously released in the census. One of the officials stated in evidence: “The categories we had before did not provide an accurate picture of the number of staff that are working with children with additional support needs”. He went on to state: “Looking at the categories of support staff or specific teaching staff—either before or now—cannot tell us the overall picture of the resource going to support pupils with ASN.”

The Committee appreciates the role statisticians are required to perform and acknowledges that one of their guiding principles, in compliance with the Code of Practice for Statistics, must be the publication of accurate data from the census. Given the limitations of existing data, the Committee explored the need to undertake an exercise separate to the census to provide a more accurate picture of the number of staff specifically working to support pupils with additional support needs. Members invited statisticians to consider what such work might look like. The Committee understands such work may not entirely fall to statisticians and indeed the policy decision to instruct additional work presumably falls to you, guided by your policy officials.

Possible approaches might include undertaking an audit of staffing provision, for example I understand there is currently an audit being undertaken of home link workers across Scotland by the Scottish Government. An alternative discussed was the potential to collect the same or similar levels of information on school support staff supporting children with ASN as is collected for teachers. This approach could provide a higher quality of detail, for example it could include information on qualifications and training to get a sense of the extent to which people working with children with ASN have received appropriate training.

The Committee appreciates that this would be labour intensive as it might require a move to individual level returns. However, the Committee wishes to emphasise, given the incidence of ASN is over 1 in 4 pupils and there are well-documented concerns about a lack of sufficient support in reports such as Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved, it is extremely important to establish baseline data to inform local and national policy and to enable parliamentary scrutiny.

### ***Pupil support assistants***

Turning to the process followed in deciding to merge data relating to two categories of school support staff, the Committee asked about the other options available. Officials highlighted that there were a number of other possible options that were discussed between officials and also between officials and the Advisory Group for Additional Support for Learning. One of the statisticians stated that: “we had a pretty open mind about where we might end up with solutions to this”. The Committee would be very grateful if you could set out what those other options were for the Committee and the basis for the option of merging categories being chosen.

### ***Stakeholder consultation***

The policy official giving evidence suggested that the decision to merge categories had been discussed with the Advisory Group for Additional Support for Learning, that the Group had been consulted on the various options and that the Group was comfortable with the option to merge categories. I should be very grateful if the [Official Report](#) of the session could be shared with all members of the Group given the regularity with which the work of the group was cited during the evidence session. Members of the Group are of course welcome to communicate directly with the Committee on this matter. In addition, I should be grateful for copies of the minutes of the meetings where the discussions referred to in oral evidence took place.

Local authorities and COSLA were mentioned, in particular, as being comfortable with the decision to merge categories, as pupil support assistant more accurately reflects the support provided in schools at present. For reference, the Committee intends to write to all local authorities seeking their perspective on: what information they collect and hold on the numbers of school support staff supporting children with an ASN; what training is provided for staff; and what guidance they have in place on the naming of job roles.

### ***Working with local authorities to produce guidance***

The policy official giving evidence highlighted that the decisions on job role titles and more fundamentally the level of staff employed to support those with additional support needs was a matter for local authorities. The Committee appreciates that local authorities are the employers, but would appreciate an explanation as to why the Government does not appear to be undertaking work to seek consistency of nomenclature for job roles for those undertaking very similar roles across local authorities. Producing clear guidance on job role names or how to reflect them under appropriate categories for data collection would seem to be a useful piece of collaboration that the Government and COSLA could undertake. More consistency could provide more accurate data and remove the need to merge categories in the future.

The Committee highlights that issues with nomenclature and consistency of data was raised by the Scottish Secondary Teacher's Association in early 2017. The SSTA's submission to the Committee's 2017 ASN inquiry was raised in evidence. In particular, members asked about the disparity between the SSTA figures and the census figures on ASN teaching staff numbers. Statisticians agreed to undertake closer scrutiny in order to identify the reason for such a disparity.

Statisticians also offered to give general consideration as to how the Committee's concerns and interest in this area could be factored into the information they produce in the future. The Committee very much welcomes this undertaking. I should be grateful if your response could include an annexe including the pieces of supplementary information statisticians agreed to provide on 28 November.

### ***Additional data provided on request***

Officials suggested a request for data on other categories of school staff that the Government website states is 'available on request' was treated as an FOI request because any request to the Scottish Government is technically a freedom of information request. For clarity, I asked the statisticians during the meeting to provide

a supplementary submission to the Committee on the processes they follow in deciding how to process requests for information.

The Committee's perspective is that if information is already collated and specifically described as 'available on request', treating it as an FOI request is unnecessary as it can easily be provided. Members suggested treating it as an FOI may be more onerous for Government staff, for example requiring unnecessary additional clearance processes. The Committee would be interested in your perspective on whether adherence to FOI legislation is required in this instance and whether it will be used for similar requests in the future.

Witnesses highlighted that a benefit of treating the request as an FOI release was that the information could be published as opposed to just being released to the person requesting the information. The Committee appreciates statistics are subject to quality assurance processes in order to be published as part of the staff census. However, the Committee does not understand why, in the interests of accessibility and openness, these categories cannot simply be published as standard, separate to the census if need be, with associated caveats on the reliability of the figures.

As you know the Committee intends to return to its scrutiny of additional support needs and will consider what form this scrutiny should take once the Government commissioned qualitative research undertaken in response to the Committee's 2017 inquiry has been published. I appreciate you are pausing publication of guidance as you consider the contents of the report Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved, but the Committee considers that the qualitative research could be published in advance of the conclusion of your deliberations as this would enable the Committee to progress its scrutiny.

I should be grateful for a response by Tuesday 8 January.

Yours sincerely

**CLARE ADAMSON MSP**  
**CONVENER**