

Aberlour Response to the Scottish Government's National Discussion on Scottish Education

December 2022

About Aberlour

Aberlour is Scotland's largest, solely Scottish children's charity. We work with vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalised children, young people and families, providing services and support in communities across Scotland. We help to overcome significant challenges, including the impact of drugs and alcohol on family life, growing up in and leaving care, poor mental health, living with a disability, or the impact of poverty and disadvantage. We aim to provide help and support at the earliest opportunity to prevent problems becoming intractable or spiralling out of control. We are committed to **#KeepThePromise** and to the incorporation of the United Nations Convention in the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Aberlour is a member of the End Child Poverty coalition and is committed to combatting the impact of poverty and disadvantage on the children and families we work with, as well actively campaigning to see a Scotland where no child grows up in poverty. We deliver the [Aberlour Urgent Assistance Fund](#) which provides financial support via small grants to families and young people aged 21 and under living anywhere in Scotland and experiencing extreme financial hardship.

Introduction

Aberlour supports children and young people's learning and education in a variety of ways, working in partnership with schools and local authorities across Scotland. We deliver Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) and attainment focused support in schools. Working in both primary and secondary schools, this includes direct one-to-one support or group work with children in school, focusing on routines, change and transitions, health and wellbeing and emotional support.

Our family support services work with children and families at home and in the community, often in partnership with schools, to help and support children with the challenges in their lives and at home that can impact on their learning and education. We work with families to understand the stressors in their lives and to ask them what will best help them and their children. This allows us to develop trusted relationships, find solutions together and ultimately help children to be ready to learn when they arrive at school.

As a provider of residential care for children who can't live at home we also recognise the challenges and barriers to education for care experienced children and young people. We work in partnership with schools to provide additional help and support for learning for the children and young people who live with us. We also operate our dedicated Learning Service which is an additional resource providing out of school learning support for children who live in our cluster of residential children's houses in Fife.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the National Discussion on Scottish Education, and our contribution reflects our experience supporting the learning of children and young people at Aberlour, as well as what children and young people we support across Scotland have told us about their learning and education. To inform this response we facilitated discussion groups with primary school aged children in Dundee and secondary school aged children in Moray. We have also used the range of evidence, insight and views of children and young people Aberlour works with from across Scotland who have contributed to other discussions on learning and education since the pandemic.

Impact of Poverty of Learning

We know that when children come to school hungry, tired or stressed their ability to learn is significantly diminished. A critical part of the work we do to support children's learning is focused on family wellbeing and mitigating the impact of the often multiple and intersecting challenges families face in their lives. The single biggest challenge that the majority of families supported by Aberlour face is poverty. We help and support families in a range of ways to limit the impact of poverty and disadvantage on their children's learning. Through applications to our Urgent Assistance Fund we see that teachers are one of the most common referrers for families to access financial support from the fund, and know that every day schools and teachers are responding to the impact of poverty on their school community.

We welcome the commitment and investment from the Scottish Government through PEF and attainment funding, which is specifically intended to tackle the impact of poverty on children's education and to reduce the poverty related attainment gap. We recognise the important role that schools and teachers play in understanding and identifying the issues that most affect children. It is vital that decisions on how best to target resources aimed at tackling the attainment gap are informed by local needs, as well as by the evidence of what works to best support the learning of children affected by poverty and disadvantage.

However, too often we have seen PEF targeted with too narrow a focus on what support can be delivered within schools and during the school day. We know from our work supporting children and families at home and in the community that through helping to address the issues and challenges in children's lives we can remove the barriers that get in the way of their education and better support their ability to learn.

We know that what most often impacts on a child's learning is what happens away from school – before and beyond the school gates, at home and in the community. Children spend the majority of their time away from school, with only around 15% of their time spent in school¹. For children who are struggling with their learning, additional in-school support is important, such as nurture hubs, learning support bases and education support workers. But we also know there must equally be a focus on what is going on in children's lives when they are not in school. Children who are affected by family breakdown,

¹ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07148/SN07148.pdf>

domestic abuse, addiction, poor parental mental health, trauma and other forms of childhood adversity are unlikely to be able to focus and learn as well as their peers.

For children growing up affected by these issues, poverty is also a common factor in their lives and often exacerbates the other challenges they face. By understanding and responding to the stressors and challenges that are causing children's distress, and by building and maintaining trusting relationships with those children, we are better able to help them regulate, to manage and overcome the challenges in their lives and to support them to be ready to learn.

Food insecurity is increasingly an issue faced by more and more low-income families as financial pressures take their toll. School meal debt is a problem for many struggling families who are not eligible for free school meals. Aberlour research has highlighted a concerning and inconsistent picture of how individual schools and local authorities respond to school meal debt². Our research has also indicated the strong and concerning likelihood that secondary school pupils without any money in their school meal account are avoiding stigma, shame and debt, and instead are going hungry. We are concerned that the issue of school meal debt is largely hidden and that local practice in Scotland in responding to families experiencing school meal debt is inconsistent, can be stigmatising and is potentially failing to protect children's human rights.

Schools play a vital role in the lives of all children in Scotland. With more than 1 in 4 children in Scotland growing up in poverty³, and the disproportionate likelihood that children and families living in poverty will require additional help and support, tackling child poverty must be a key focus for schools in order to make sure they are part of the joined-up response to how we tackle and reduce child poverty in Scotland.

Supporting Learning at Aberlour

Pupil Equity Fund/Attainment

Our work to support children and young people's learning and education includes Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) and attainment focused support in primary and secondary schools across Dumfries and Galloway, Dundee, Falkirk, Glasgow and Moray. The PEF funded support we deliver is primarily focused on in-school support for learning, with additional practical and emotional support for children and their families away from school when required. This includes direct one-to-one support or group work with children in school but out of the classroom, focusing on routines, change and transitions, health and wellbeing and emotional support.

The support is largely focused on working individually with children or in small groups in school, but out of the classroom, during the school day. The support and activities include: Seasons for Growth groups

² <https://web-backend.aberlour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Summary-of-School-Meal-Debt-processes-June-2022.pdf>

³ <https://cpag.org.uk/scotland/child-poverty/facts>

focussing on change and transitions; one-to-one sessions focussing on health and wellbeing; family focused support to understand and respond to family circumstances; building strategies for emotional support to help children self-regulate; and exploring routines, including sleep routines. Support also often includes 'ad hoc' support to respond to family crises. In addition, support includes delivering family sessions or peer support activities to help and support parents.

Children and family workers maintain regular contact with parents to discuss their children's progress, as well as to provide advice, information and signpost families to other agencies (including other Aberlour services) which are able to help respond to specific issues, including: financial support, bereavement support, housing support and mental health concerns.

In Dundee alone, we have been able to support more than 500 children in the last year through the delivery of PEF funded work across 6 primary schools. This equates to more than 80 hours dedicated support per week. One primary school teacher has commented: *"The support our children receive from Aberlour is invaluable, having [Aberlour staff member] has allowed time and space for children to discuss their feelings and find ways to manage them."*

Family Support

Our family support services work alongside education colleagues and in partnership with schools for families who have school aged children. We work with children and families at home and in the community to help and support children with the challenges in their lives that can impact on their learning. We support families on their terms, to understand the stressors in their lives and to ask them what will best help them. We aim to make sure children and families are at the centre of decision making so they can determine and have choice in what the help and support they get looks like. This allows us to develop trusted relationships, find solutions together and ultimately help children to be ready to learn when they arrive at school.

Aberlour Attain Case Study

Aberlour Attain is a mentoring and family support service that provides flexible, relationship-based mentoring to support care-experienced children's learning for children looked after at home or in kinship care. Adult volunteer mentors support children in the community with a focus on strengths to build confidence and support learning. The service works with the whole family in partnership with schools to identify barriers to learning and to find family focused solutions to the challenges in their lives.

Joe (13) and Robert (14)* are both autistic. Dad passed away last year and Mum has very poor mental health, resulting in emotional breakdown and suicide ideation. Renfrewshire Council social work supported the family and referred them to Aberlour. The family were in financial crisis and needed financial support from Aberlour's Urgent Assistance Fund. Joe and Robert both attended the same school for children with ASNs. Pre-pandemic the boys received respite care at the weekends, but this

stopped during lockdown. Aberlour Attain were able to support the boys and both were matched with individual volunteer mentors. During the pandemic the mentors met with the boys for socially distanced contact and activities. The service had regular contact with Mum to provide emotional and practical support (even just to let off steam on the phone). Mum was supported to a school meeting due to concerns about Joe's behaviour. The service worked with the school to help arrange groups for the boys to attend in school, and also helped to deliver additional in school support. The boys are now coping much better and engaged with their education. Joe recently achieved full marks in a recent science test.

***names have been changed**

Supporting the Learning of Children in Residential Care

Our children who live with us in our cluster of children's houses in Fife have access to Aberlour's Learning Service. Early relationship disruption and trauma, such as that experienced by children who can't live with their family, can impact on a child's development and learning. For some children and young people who struggle with their education and the experience of school, our Learning Service provides an alternative learning environment that encourages them to be actively involved with their education plan whilst supporting them to recognise their ability and fulfil their ambitions. We have strong links with local schools and have educational psychologists as part of our dedicated learning service team.

Working in partnership with schools the Learning Service plans and develops alternative ways to support learning. This includes, outdoor learning, the Duke of Edinburgh Award (DofE), as well as access to our Nurture Hub – a quiet, safe space to explore ideas and creativity as well as traditional curriculum-based material supported by the child or young person's school.

The pandemic had an unexpectedly positive impact on the learning of some of our children and young people in residential care. During the pandemic our children's houses offered an insight into how we can think differently about the learning of some of our most vulnerable children and young people. Many of our children and young people, as well as the adults who work with them, reported reduced stress as a result of not being in a formal school environment. The positive impact on children's learning and wider wellbeing was significant, with many children and young people feeling more settled and flourishing during that period.

A more relaxed, personalised programme of learning meant increased engagement with education. Children who previously struggled to complete their schoolwork started to do schoolwork independently, asking for support when they needed it. Many children learned to manage their workload when they had the agency to work and learn at a pace that suited them – in contrast to pre-lockdown, where some of children required full-time, one-to-one support to help them engage with their school day. This has enabled us to think differently about how we support the learning of children in residential care. Working in collaboration with our children and young people we have developed a

new approach that allows a more personalised and experiential way of supporting learning that draws on children's strengths, interests and talents.

Working alongside schools this approach has also allowed staff to build the confidence of children who face multiple complex barriers to learning in a school setting and to be flexible and responsive to the child's needs whilst still tracking their attainment and progress

What we observed during lockdown:

Sense of difference was removed for children; everyone was now learning a different way and in a different environment; some of the shame and worry our children have about how school can feel for them was removed.

We could think more flexibly, be creative and less prescriptive, focus on individual interests, relate learning to everyday activities, be less formal and think differently about how we access learning.

When demand was reduced, young people improved – building trust is crucial to enable goal focused conversations with children.

Relationships between children and young people in the houses improved.

Later starts worked better.

Children and young people had more time to reflect on and consider what they want and need.

What children and young people told us:

Often, they feel their skills, interests and talents aren't nurtured in school; but home learning/lockdown enabled them to explore these more.

They would like: to be listened to more; more interactive learning; flexibility; later starts; more outdoor learning; more choice over their education; and more time to think about what they want and need from education.

A more relaxed and less distracting environment is better for them.

Some would like to carry on with the lockdown model, whilst others have preferred returning to school.

Children and Young People's Views

Children and young people supported by Aberlour in primary and secondary schools in Dundee and Moray participated in facilitated activity groups to gather their views and ideas in response to the National Discussion on Scottish Education. A total of 26 children and young people took part. These groups generated discussion on a range of issues, challenges and topics relating to their experiences of school and learning. The sessions focused on their responses to the questions: "what is going well?"; "what could be better?"; "what should priorities be for the future?"; "how will we get there?". This

input has been collated and grouped across four broad themes relating to wellbeing, rights, equity and learning.

Wellbeing

We know that children learn best when their emotional needs are being met and their mental health and overall wellbeing are supported. Integrating wellbeing support into schools means children can feel settled and confident in the classroom, have meaningful relationships with peers and feel ready to learn.

Children told us that having support for their wellbeing in school helps them to manage their feelings and make friends. Children want to feel respected and loved in school. One primary school learner told us that at school: *"I feel good when I am appreciated, when people care about me."* Quiet spaces outside of the classroom were also important to children, who valued time in the school library as it was 'calm' and 'cozy' and liked having a supported space to come to at lunchtime.

However, some older pupils indicated they felt teachers lack understanding of wellbeing needs and have 'no safe spaces to go' when they are feeling stressed or anxious. Some thought that far too often children get excluded rather than get support for wellbeing and emotional issues.

For some they felt bullying is a major problem and said it impacts on attendance and learning, as well as makes them feel unsafe and not protected. However, others highlighted that in their school pupils had been involved in reviewing the bullying policy, and that this helped them feel valued and included. Some older children want to see teachers and schools become better trauma informed and to see this put into practice.

Rights

All children have a right to education. The state has a duty to fulfil that right and there must be equitable access to education for all children. Where children struggle to learn or engage with their education in formal environments there is an obligation to make sure their learning needs are met and responded to appropriately with the correct help and support.

Older children in secondary schools who need extra support with their in-school learning told us they need to feel respected and free from stigma amongst their peers. For those who require extra help they highlighted the sensitive approach to classroom support they receive through dedicated Enhanced Learning Support Workers. Those young people reflected on the positive impact of building trusting relationships with staff and increasing confidence in their own abilities.

We know from our work supporting young people who are unable to attend school that taking a long-term tailored approach allows them to re-engage with learning at a pace which better meets their learning and emotional needs. Our Learning Service has had positive results using personalised learning plans which allow young people to reach key markers of Curriculum for Excellence whilst exploring personal interests and building on existing skills. Those young people told us a different approach to learning has helped them achieve on their terms and in a way that responds to the challenges in their lives that can impact on their education.

Children have the right to have their say and to be taken seriously. However, children told us that they did not feel listened to and do not have any say in how or what they learn. Some primary school aged children had experience of having input on topics learned in class, but most agreed that they would like more say on this in the future as they didn't feel they could choose what they learn until secondary school. Some older children said they would like a more personalised approach to their learning with more choice.

Equity

We know that learning is not one size fits all and children and young people deserve an education system flexible enough to respond to and meet the diversity of children and young people in Scotland and their varied and changing needs.

Some children need more flexibility and support than others to support their learning. We know that it is important to understand that this includes having long term integrated support for children with disabilities, as well as dynamic and trauma informed support available for children with experience of trauma.

Older children told us that they felt there is a *"huge lack of diversity in social education; you leave school not educated in every aspect of adult life"*. They felt that the current education system leaves young people feeling unprepared for adulthood without having the opportunity to develop practical and 'living skills.'

Some children reflected the positive experience of being able to contribute to and shape their school values. However, others felt that their schools and teachers did not follow their own values.

Some older children thought that even though additional support for those who need extra help was important there are simply not enough inclusion teachers or guidance teachers available in their school, and those they do have are always too busy to help. However, another young person reflected that what they thought was going well was having an inclusion teacher who supported their learning and *"was someone to speak to."* Older children agreed that schools working in partnership with external agencies helped and supported their learning.

One young person was clear that schools must do more to 'narrow the gap' so that *"everyone has an equal chance, not just the rich."*

Learning

Just as schools should respond to how different children learn in different ways, so too the curriculum itself should reflect the breadth of interest and different strengths, talents and interests of young learners. It is important that the education system recognises the value of learning that happens outside the classroom as well as within it, creating flexible pathways for rewarding experiential and practical learning and achievement in its widest senses.

Primary school aged children told us that they valued experiential learning on school trips, as well as getting to learn outdoors. One child explained how in PE they were working towards a trip to climb a

local hill and felt really motivated by contextualising learning this way. Children also expressed interest in practical skills for the future, wanting to explore coding and digital skills for social media. Older children agreed and felt schools could do more to reflect 'tech trends' saying, "*we need to keep up with the World*" and should also use technology to link in with other schools.

There was a sense amongst older children that since the pandemic everything was 'back to normal' and that nothing has changed to make things better now there was no more online learning or teaching. Thinking about what needs to change older children told us that "*one size fits all doesn't work – hybrid learning should be an option.*" Children also want to see more flexible timetables that would allow opportunities that arise (e.g. short courses), reduced class times and a later start to the school day.

Some older children said that schools need to "change [their] Victorian attitudes" and that they need to cater for different learning styles. One young person said, "*people can learn or recount certain information, but they have no understanding of its context or how to apply knowledge to a different situation or know how to make logical arguments in favour of their opinions.*"

Finally, thinking about exams and assessments, older children told us they think that Scotland needs to be in line with other countries for exams and assessments. They believed that the Scottish education system should have subjects assessed on coursework, as opposed to "*all sitting writing essays or sitting exams*" and that this would better "*help to gain skills, not just memorizing content*".

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