

**Aberlour Evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee
Call for Views on Additional Support for Learning (ASL) in Scotland**

December 2023

About Aberlour

Aberlour is Scotland's largest, solely Scottish children's charity. Delivering more than fifty services across Scotland, we work with disadvantaged, marginalised and discriminated against children, young people and families, providing services and support in communities around the country. We help to overcome significant challenges families face, such as the impact of drugs and alcohol, 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 UNCRC.

Introduction

"An additional support need can arise for any reason and be of short or long term duration. Additional support may be required to overcome needs arising from learning environment; health or disability; family circumstances or social and emotional factors." ([Support for Learning: All our Children and all their Potential](#))

"Education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full." (Article 29, [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#))

At Aberlour we deliver services across Scotland that support children, young people and families with a range of needs. We support families living with a disability through our community-based family support services, as well as our dedicated disability residential and short breaks services. We also provide safe, loving and nurturing homes for children who can't live with their families through our residential children's houses and fostering services.

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, often intersecting, challenges and 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.

Through our work we either directly or indirectly support the education and learning of all our children who require additional support for learning, working in partnership with schools and local authorities across Scotland helping to realise children's right to a meaningful education. 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. For children who require additional support for learning in-school support is important, such as nurture hubs, learning support bases and education support workers.

However, we also know that most often what 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. The single biggest challenge that the majority of families supported by Aberlour face is poverty. We know that when children come to school hungry, tired or stressed their ability to learn is significantly diminished. We help and support families in a range of ways to limit the impact of poverty and disadvantage on their children's learning.

Children who are affected by family breakdown, 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. By understanding the impact of poverty and those intersecting issues in children's lives, and responding to what is causing children's distress 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.

For care experienced children and young people who can't live at home with their families we also recognise the additional challenges and barriers to education they can face. We work in partnership with schools to provide additional 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.

To inform our response to the Committee's call for views we have supported children and families we work with to share their views on their experiences of learning and education. We have also provided our own insight and observations from our work supporting children who require additional support for learning and their families.

1. Implementation of the presumption of mainstreaming

“Trying to get the packages and communicate all the needs is a hard and emotional fight” (Parent supported by Aberlour)

In 2020, the independent review on additional support for learning – Support for Learning: All our Children and all their Potential² – published its report and recommendations. In the report's conclusions it highlighted that: ***“the evidence that emerges from this Review affirms that Additional***

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

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/review-additional-support-learning-implementation/documents/>

Support for Learning is not visible or equally valued within Scotland's Education system.” It is our view that this continues to be the case three years on from the Review, despite a joint commitment by the Scottish Government and COSLA to implement the Review’s recommendations³.

For children who require additional support for learning and their families that are supported by Aberlour experiences of learning and education are mixed and inconsistent. Too often there is a failure to adequately understand children’s needs and therefore provide the support necessary for children to engage with their learning and education in a meaningful way. Families with more than one child requiring additional support for learning can often have varying experiences of support, where one child has a positive and meaningful learning experience, and another does not.

In our experience, environmental needs can often best be met for children with additional learning needs within specialist provision. However, we also recognise there are positive wider social and environmental outcomes available for children through mainstream schools. Although, significant limitations in capacity and inadequate staffing levels to provide the support that many children who require additional support for learning need, too often results in a poor learning experience for those children in mainstream.

Learning support bases can provide positive learning environments for some children, but they must be properly resourced and staffed at an appropriate level. With regard to their child’s experience in a learning support base in a mainstream school, one parent supported by Aberlour highlighted: ***“he started in a class of four pupils in the learning base...The next year it doubled in size. In the 3rd year they put in so many other people in, it was up to 30 plus. Finally, he just stopped coping in that setting and at home.”***

Mainstream settings can provide positive and meaningful learning experiences for children who require additional support. However, in our experience, this is the exception rather than the rule. Where we do see this happen it is through effective partnership working between schools and third sector services supporting the child and their family, and where the necessary investment has been made (most often through Pupil Equity Funding) to deliver additional capacity to focus on children and families’ wider needs and to provide qualified and experienced pupil support staff.

Lack of Inclusion

“He was in a room on his own, not even a cupboard, just alone in a room with all the windows high up. It was a horrible experience of singling out and isolating that had a massive impact...In the morning he would hold on to the bannister in the house and say he didn’t want to go in that room”
(Parent supported by Aberlour)

Families around the country supported by Aberlour highlight that **isolation, lack of inclusion and inequality in their learning are common experiences for children who require additional support for learning** in mainstream schools. It is the consistent view of families that isolation and a lack of opportunity for children who require additional support for learning are the direct result of

³ <https://www.gov.scot/news/improving-additional-support-for-learning/>

inadequate staffing and lack of capacity and skills in mainstream schools. Some families feel that their child's learning experience was as good as it could have been within the limitations of what mainstream schools can provide. However, others told us they feel they have had to fight to get what their child needs from their education. One parent stated that choosing to put their child in a mainstream school was "***the worst thing I ever did***".

Families tell us consistently that their children are being placed on reduced timetables. One example was shared by a parent whose child can only access in-school learning three hours a week, and this is in an after-school programme for children who struggle in the classroom. Their child had already missed a full academic year due to the appropriate learning support not being in place for them in school, but now what learning is available is isolating and feels like exclusion. This parent remarked: "***[she] isn't even encouraged to be part of the school day with this out of hours timetable. This is more like singling them out than inclusion***".

Our services report that often children's needs fail to be met adequately due to a lack of knowledge, understanding or experience within mainstream schools. The impact of this is most apparent when children display behaviours that are perceived as 'challenging' when they are anxious or distressed. The common response to such situations in mainstream schools is that parents are asked to come and take their child home. Often the child is not able to return to school until a review meeting has taken place, and then only on a reduced timetable which limits their learning and education and becomes isolating.

The Promise was clear that for care experienced children and young people: "***formal and informal exclusion must end***."⁴ However, we see informal suspensions and exclusions and illegitimate reduction of timetables and school time commonly applied within mainstream schools as a result of a lack of pupil support resource and, therefore, schools being ill-equipped to respond to the needs of children who require additional support. As a result, many children are simply placed on reduced timetables, others' entire school day is spent in a separate room altogether, away from their peers, and some do not attend school at all. This is not inclusion.

We have seen that for some children part-time timetables can be a helpful intervention when it is part of an overall child's plan. However, most often part-time timetables deepen existing inequalities for children and their families with many children becoming further isolated from peers and are unable to participate meaningfully in school life. One consequence of the impact of part-time timetables and inadequate support for children's learning that we see is increased parental anxiety and stress, which can impact on parents' ability to work. For many families already living in poverty this may mean further hardship.

'Proactive inclusion' (inclusive education as a trauma informed and responsive practice) is an approach we have seen some schools implement as part of the curriculum, enabling a whole school culture of inclusion by building awareness of what inclusion means and looks like in practice for children who require additional support for learning. Such a trauma informed approach not only improves outcomes for children and young people with ASN but can also do so for all children within

⁴ <https://thepromise.scot/resources/2023/promise-oversight-board-report-two.pdf>

a school community. There are schools and educational settings across Scotland which have evidenced the positive impact of taking such an approach.

Transitions

In our experience **mainstream schools are too often unable to adequately provide the support that children need for their transition between primary and secondary school**. We see difficulties with schools identifying a child's particular needs before they enter a mainstream setting and there is often a lack of clear understanding around what is required to best support children's transitions. For those children experiencing social and emotional challenges that impact on their learning and education, the experience of moving from a primary school environment to a secondary school environment can be overwhelming and creates anxiety and stress. Where Aberlour supports children and their families it is possible to provide the additional support that we know children need, particularly during that period of transition. However, many children and families will not have such extra support and rely on what schools can provide, which can be limited and inadequate due to a lack of capacity and resource.

Families have consistently highlighted that their children's transition was badly managed. One parent shared that despite positive planning meetings and discussion with the school which began a year before their child started secondary school, none of the agreed support was ever put in place. A lack of – or poor – communication between schools was raised as a key issue impacting on transitions, meaning children struggled to adapt to new environments and routines. Another parent told us that their child's transition **"wasn't good"**, and an assessment of their needs was only undertaken when they requested it.

Achievement

"[I] worried about him approaching exams and not getting the help he needed because his needs weren't properly recorded." (Parent supported by Aberlour)

It is clear that the education system still places too narrow a focus on attainment for all children through qualifications via exams. It is our experience that for children who require additional support for learning, and for whom the exam-based qualification system does not align with their learning needs, achievement in their learning is rarely visible in any meaningful way. The review on additional support for learning concluded: ***"The achievements and successes of children and young people with additional support needs must be celebrated publicly, in equivalence to attainment and exam results."***⁵

Parents have concerns about the quality of the teaching their children receive in school and in what ways achievement is measured or celebrated as part of their learning journey. An Aberlour service manager observed: ***"The young people we support achieve in different ways and learn at a different pace to mainstream and often their achievements are not recognised for what they are."***

⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/review-additional-support-learning-implementation/documents/>

A little achievement for many mainstream children is a huge achievement for a young person with a learning disability."

Communication

A **lack of communication** about decision making which impacts on children's learning is a common experience for families. Families have expressed concerns about only being aware of changes to their child's learning and education after the fact. One parent highlighted that her child was taken out of mainstream classes in primary without this being discussed with her. Another told us their child was placed within the dedicated ASN environment without any consultation. Even though parents recognise this may be the correct decision for their child, they express frustration at not being included in the discussion and decision-making process.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on additional support for learning

"So many children from 2-4 have speech delays because of the masks. Things that aren't coming to light until now." (Aberlour Service Manager)

The impact of the pandemic on the education of children who require additional support for learning was significant and continues to have an effect on the learning and education for many children Aberlour works with. Our services report that many children struggled with the lack of routine in the absence of school during the pandemic, but then similarly struggled when they returned to school having been out of that environment for so long. Transitions back to those routines were difficult and even now some are still not coping.

Our services have observed that school readiness remains a significant issue for many children who require additional support for learning, as an ongoing effect of the pandemic. They report that children were out of school for a long time and falling behind already, and the pandemic made things worse for many with anxiety remaining high for many children. However, some children were able to access education support hubs during the pandemic, and despite the limited education that children received parents felt that this was a welcome support at a time of additional stress.

Again, transitions were a particular challenge for many children who require additional support for learning and their families during the pandemic. One parent told us about her child's transition to high school: ***"She was meant to have enhanced transition, but this didn't happen because of covid. The teachers didn't get to know her or her support needs. [She] was just expected to show up and know what to do. She was in 1st year. She would go in and at 10 or 11[am]. She would just come home"***. Similar experiences were shared by other families Aberlour works with.

Supporting the Learning of Children in Residential Care

The pandemic had an **unexpectedly positive impact on the learning of some of our children** and young people who live with us in our residential children's houses. During the pandemic our children's houses offered an insight into how we can think differently about the learning of some of our most traumatised 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 feeling more settled and flourishing during that period. A more relaxed, personalised programme of learning meant increased engagement with education.

Children and young people who previously struggled to complete their schoolwork started to do schoolwork independently, asking for support when they needed it. Many 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 required full-time, one-to-one support to help them engage with their school day.

This experience enabled us to think differently about how we support the learning of children and young people in residential care. Working in collaboration with our children and young people we developed a new approach towards a more personalised and experiential way of supporting learning that draws on children's strengths, interests and talents. Working alongside schools this approach 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.

However, the flexibility and opportunity afforded to our children and young people in residential care that enabled them to engage differently and, in many cases, more positively with their education and learning has subsequently been lost in many ways, with a return to formalised learning within the school setting. We see little evidence of the positive aspects of home learning and experiential learning supported during the pandemic that benefitted some of our most traumatised children and young people being embedded within education provision since.

What we observed during lockdown:

- Sense of difference was removed for children; some of the shame and worry our children have about how school can feel for them was removed
- 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 accessing 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.

3. The use of remedies as set out in the Act

“Parents don’t have the energy” (Parent supported by Aberlour)

In our experience there is little knowledge or awareness of those legal remedies available to families with children who require additional support for learning. In most cases families are unaware of their child’s rights regarding their learning and education or what steps they can take to challenge decisions by schools or local authorities which they may disagree with. Many parents simply accept decisions when a school implements a reduced timetable for their child or makes changes to their education provision.

Our services report that they often advocate on behalf of families in response to decisions made by schools or local authority education or social work teams. They will support families to prepare for meetings regarding their child’s education and also support the child to have their voice heard. However, they are aware this additional support will not be available to all families. It is clear that there is simply not enough information around remedies or rights for families and many families are unclear how to formally challenge decision making.

Families have consistently told us they are unaware of the Act itself but are aware of advocacy services, which some have used with varying experiences. One parent highlighted that they had lodged a formal complaint that was upheld regarding a decision that was made about their child’s learning, but that they were only aware of the process to do this because their partner works in education. Families have told us that they find it stressful and exhausting and often don’t feel they have the energy to go through complaints processes or formal channels for challenging decisions.

Asked what they would say to the Education, Children and Young People Committee in response to this inquiry one parent told us: ***“It’s resources that are required to resolve additional support for learning and these are stretched so thin. It is a much bigger issue, it encompasses all aspects of learning. It floods all the way down into the ethos of school. Is it a supportive school or is it there just to get people through the day and out the other side? Need to look at the system as a whole, not in individual parts.”***

For further information contact Martin Canavan, Head of Policy & Participation
Martin.Canavan@aberlour.org.uk