

Children in Scotland

every child - every childhood

Children in Scotland is pleased to contribute to the consultation on the national approach to anti-bullying. We welcome the introduction of a national approach to this important issue and unequivocally support measures that reduce its incidence and deal effectively with its consequences. While we agree with the general content and tone of the draft approach, we believe it would be strengthened by the inclusion of some more specific examples and some additional detail.

1. Vision, aims and approach

We agree with the sentiments expressed in the vision. However, we feel that the 'vision' elements could be more succinctly and appropriately presented. Specifically, description and exhortation should be removed so the vision includes only the 'state aspired to'. We would therefore suggest rewording along the following lines.

Every child and young person in Scotland grows up free from bullying. Scotland's children and young people develop into confident individuals and responsible citizens. All those who play a role in the lives of children and young people are enabled to respond effectively to incidents of bullying and to prevent bullying wherever possible.

We see the aims as appropriate and clearly expressed.

In terms of the approach, we agree with and support the principles. We see the various strands of activity set out under 'Current approaches' as being generally positive and helpful. Greater detail would, however, be useful. For example, there is no mention of how we can establish the scale, scope, severity and nature of the current problem. This may be implicit, but without this kind of information, it is impossible to assess whether "effective anti-bullying policies and practice" are in place. Information on the impact of training, awareness-raising, networking and other elements of the approach would not only be helpful in making an informed response to this consultation, but will be essential to our knowledge of what works and what does not. Achieving an approach that is genuinely 'effective', 'coordinated and cohesive', will be a significant challenge without this knowledge.

2. Strengths, gaps and priorities

There is, demonstrably, a strong partnership of organisations involved in developing and promoting the approach. Collectively they represent and can communicate directly with most of the key agencies and individuals likely to be affected by bullying issues. It may be worth considering whether the addition of specific research/evaluation expertise would enhance the work of the steering group. It would also be useful to make more explicit how participants support the implementation of the approach through their organisations. Of interest, for example, would be to understand how the participation of ADES contributes to achieving consistent and effective policy and practice across education authorities in Scotland, and the specific nature and outcomes of the interventions offered by the service-providing agencies.

Prevention rather than cure needs to be the priority. Obviously the lower the incidence, the less serious (and, probably, less costly) the collective consequences are likely to be. Understanding why some children become bullies and what works in diverting them is critical to this.

As stated above, we believe the knowledge base needs to be robust and accessible.

3. What more needs to be done?

Nationally, an accessible source of relevant information, a robust evaluation approach and an overview to ensure consistency.

Locally, ensuring that best practice is both understood and delivered. Make provision for consistent recording and analysis of incidents. Ready access to resources and support.

Children in Scotland can assist in disseminating information and raising awareness through support for policy development, research, magazine articles, Scotland's Children's Sector Forum (which it convenes), training and consultation events.

4. What more can SABS and its members do?

Support a nationally consistent and comprehensive approach, including elements identified above.

We also believe the particular circumstances of children with disabilities and other additional support needs deserves special consideration. Children in Scotland operates the 'Access All Areas' project in the Scottish Borders, aimed

at developing a fully inclusive approach in schools for children with additional support needs. We also manage 'Enquire', the Scottish advice services for additional support for learning. Below we have included findings from both services in relation to bullying, highlighting some of the children's own experiences.

Enquire

Vision and Aims:

In theory these seem noble but there needs to be more detail in the national approach to support these aims. Enquire often hears about children who have experienced years of bullying and their parents require clearer strategies for dealing with the bullying and for supporting their child to rebuild self-esteem.

Current approaches:

Enquire, the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning, regularly receives enquiries where the main topic involves children/young people who are being bullied in school, with the most severe cases resulting in them refusing to attend school. In the last six-month period, 35% of enquiries involved some discussion on bullying. Frequently, despite having reported all incidents to the school, the child/family still feel there is a lack of support.

There can also be the added complication of communication and/or awareness difficulties for many children with additional support needs (e.g. those on the autistic spectrum or with another disability). This is an area that may need to be addressed re 'prejudiced based' bullying, within the national approach.

Legal framework:

The prevention of bullying behaviour is obviously the priority, but it is also important to emphasise the need to ensure that there is support available for those currently struggling in school due to bullying. Within the legal framework section, reference to The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 should be strengthened – e.g. The ASL Act places a duty on local authorities to direct any additional support required by a child or young person towards their fullest potential. Additional support may be required for any reason, which can include bullying.

What more needs to be done:

Resulting from the day-to-day concerns of families that Enquire hear about, we strongly agree that particularly on a local level, there should be consistent monitoring and evaluation of policies, robust recording procedures and access to effective support.

Access All Areas

What are the issues – how are they being solved?

Stigma and bullying

Potential stigma

In primary schools and the majority of secondary schools, pupils were highly complimentary about the Learning Support that they had received.

"This is a good system because people help you and put it in a way you can understand."

P7 pupil

Many pupils found it easier to concentrate when working in the smaller groups and quieter environment that Learning Support provided. They thought the work done in Learning Support had a positive impact on their work in mainstream classes. Whilst valuing the support they got, many pupils also expressed concern about what other people thought about them getting this extra help. This worry was most evident amongst older primary school pupils and younger secondary pupils. What was interesting was that often the perceived stigma seemed almost self-imposed – pupils did not think that others receiving learning support were necessarily less intelligent, but it made **them** feel less intelligent.

"If someone else is there in LS, there's nothing wrong with them, but if you're there, there's something wrong with you." *S4 pupil*

"They're there [Learning Support] to help you but no offence, Learning Support makes me feel thick." *S3 pupil*

A few secondary pupils felt they learnt better in mainstream classes (which they saw as 'normal' classes) and said they felt bored and frustrated in Learning Support. One pupil called the work they did in Learning Support "baby work" – although this seemed to relate more to how he felt others viewed the work they were doing, rather than the pupils in the class finding it too easy. There did seem to be a problem sourcing age appropriate material for some pupils – for example, finding reading books of the right difficulty, but based on more adult themes and with pictures that were not 'childish'.

Bullying

While the potential for bullying was a concern for pupils in many of the schools, there were a number of schools where the issue of pupils being bullied or teased by other pupils because of their additional support needs was not even raised. It has proved impossible to find a simple answer to why that might be, but there are two areas that seem to be significant.

First, the school's overall ethos seems to play an important role in developing positive attitudes in pupils towards 'difference' of any kind. Research carried out by the Anti-Bullying Network has led to similar findings. The school's ethos seemed to permeate from the headteacher, through all the staff, to the pupils. Second, all the schools happen to include pupils with a range of additional support needs including physical disabilities and learning difficulties. Thus, pupils experience education alongside pupils with additional support needs on an everyday basis.

While bullying did not seem to be a particular issue for the majority of pupils, for a small number of pupils, bullying had and was continuing to have, a huge negative impact on their school life. Not all of these pupils had an additional support need, but a number did. During consultations, it was noticeable that both pupils receiving additional support and those not, felt the potential to be bullied was more of an issue for pupils with learning difficulties, autism and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties – and less of an issue for pupils with physical disabilities or sensory impairments.

Sometimes, the pupils being bullied talked of a long history of being bullied, often starting at primary school and continuing in secondary school. There was a desperate feeling of helplessness because although pupils (and even parents) had reported being bullied in the past, the bullying continued. If teachers tried to resolve issues by giving punishments to the bullies, this could make the situation worse as the punished bullies sought revenge on the person who had "grassed" on them. In some cases, this feeling of powerlessness led pupils who were being bullied to "stand up for themselves", which, in turn, led to getting into trouble themselves.

"Being in learning support gets me into fights." S3 pupil

As well as having an enormous impact on their emotional well-being, pupils spoke about bullying: being a root cause of some of their difficult behaviour; the reason behind being a truant; and, having a negative effect on their academic progress.

"It affects your school work because I feel in the classroom they're slagging me. You can't concentrate, because all you're thinking is who can I talk to, what shall I do, what can I do to make them like me, what can I do to make them leave me alone?" S4 pupil

There were mixed views about whether raising awareness of the issue through projects and classes at school would help. Some pupils thought that educating everyone about equality and tolerance would help while others were less sure. A number of pupils had received lessons covering disability awareness and thought these were a good idea. However, one of the issues that remained was that these sorts of lessons tended to concentrate on physical disabilities and sensory impairments - while it is those with learning difficulties, autism and social,

emotional and behavioural difficulties that pupils felt were most at risk from bullying.

What works

As pupils spoke about their experiences, a variety of thoughts and ideas emerged to help reduce any stigma associated with additional support needs:

- Primary pupils preferred going to Learning Support with at least one other person "You don't feel like the spotlight is just on you." *P6 pupil*
- All pupils preferred members of staff to be discrete about the fact they received support. For example, they prefer Learning Support teachers to ask if they can "borrow so and so" rather than explicitly referring to the fact they were going to Learning Support.
- Pupils, particularly secondary pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties spoke positively about the involvement of outside supports, such as counsellors, psychiatrists and youth clubs.
- One secondary school had moved its guidance and learning support facilities together to form a 'support base' that all pupils would access for support of one kind or another (whether it be for guidance, learning support or both).
- Pupils felt more comfortable when teachers and ANA's created a sense that the ANA was there to help everyone in the class, not just an individual.
- Pupils felt that peer group supports were often effective in tackling bullying. They recommended buddy systems, friendship groups and circles of friends.

Issues related to stigma and bullying - what would pupils like to see

- Development of a good school ethos where everyone feels they "fit in".
- Continuation of the valued support that current Learning Support teams offer.
- Initiatives to help reduce the potential stigma of receiving learning support.
- Support that is offered in a discreet and sensitive manner.
- Better age appropriate resources, particularly for secondary pupils with reading and writing difficulties.
- A rethink of how bullying is dealt with, with an emphasis on finding **effective** solutions.
- Education on equality, diversity and tolerance to explore issues relating to learning difficulties, autism and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties as well as physical disabilities.

Children in Scotland is Scotland's national agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies and services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents more than 400 members, including 90% of Scottish Local Authorities, all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and Europe.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Government, local authorities and practitioners. It also services groups such as the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People (with YouthLink Scotland). In addition, Children in Scotland hosts Enquire - the national advice service for additional support for learning, and Resolve: ASL, Scotland's largest independent education mediation service.