



ASSESSING OUR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION NEEDS

- THE WAY FORWARD?

A Response from Children and Young People

In Partnership with
Capability Scotland and ENABLE



Children in Scotland is Scotland's national umbrella agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that relevant policies, 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 over 300 members, including all the major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional associations and local authorities as well as many smaller community groups and children's services. Children in Scotland facilitates the National Early Years Forum, the Scottish Parenting Forum, the Special Needs Forum and a National Steering Group on children infected/affected by HIV/AIDS. In addition, Children in Scotland is involved in a number of projects promoting children and young people's participation. It has recently started a two-year project to increase and encourage the involvement of children and young people with disabilities in collective decision making. This work is funded by the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund.

Children in Scotland works in partnership with the National Children's Bureau and Children in Wales, and is a member of the European Forum for Children's Welfare (EFCW).

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In carrying out this consultation Children in Scotland
worked in partnership with
Capability Scotland and ENABLE

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Assessing our Children's Education Needs - the way forward?

A response from children and young people.

Introduction

Children in Scotland was asked by the Scottish Executive to find out the views of children and young people on 'Assessing our Children's Education Needs'. Our consultation aimed to discover key issues for groups of children and young people with special educational needs (SEN), relating to questions posed in the Scottish Executive's paper.

We worked in partnership with Capability Scotland and ENABLE. We also worked with the Scotland Yard Girls Group, Harmeny School, Woods Youth Centre and other children and young people. The Scottish Youth Parliament was approached for its views: this work was co-ordinated by Gabriella Swinyard, Education Convenor for the SYP.

Because of the time frame, we generally worked with established groups of children and young people and their group leaders/ teachers. Groups were approached on the basis of 'purposive sampling': i.e., they had certain characteristics that were likely to give them different perspectives. The mix of characteristics included:

- Rural/ urban
- Range of local authorities
- Mainstream schools/ special schools
- Range of disabilities
- Age

Altogether 39 children and young people took part (excluding the SYP), 22 male and 17 female. The groups covered an age range from 8 to 18 years and a geographical spread including Mid Lothian, Fife, Perth, Dumfries and North Lanarkshire. Children and young people with communication difficulties, learning difficulties (mild to severe), physical disabilities, sensory impairments, complex special needs and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties were all

involved. Some attended mainstream schools and others special schools.

To meet the diverse communication needs and also interests of each group, we adapted our methodology in carrying out consultations. Information was developed in a variety of styles, giving an overview of the purpose and context of the consultation as well as introductory information about the Record of Needs. This was sent out to groups, organisations and parents beforehand. For some groups, symbol systems and communication boards were also developed in partnership with school staff.

Different tools were used to create an atmosphere in which the children and young people felt comfortable and able to express their views openly. Drama, art and e-mail were used as well as more traditional ways of consulting, such as discussion groups.

Although different methods were used each consultation centred on certain key areas, common through all groups to allow a comparative perspective. These included:

- Children and young people's experience of the Record of Needs and/or annual reviews/ meetings
- What children and young people needed to help them take part in school
- How children and young people were involved in decisions at school
- The best way for children and young people to give their views

Because of the scale of the consultation and the nature of the methodology used, this response is not a systematic survey of children and young people's views. Instead the focus groups present their views and experiences raising questions about current practice and policy. This information can feed into in-depth consideration of particular issues for the Scottish Executive.

The consultation was carried out following Children in Scotland's ethical guidelines. These are available on request. The children and young people who took part are not named in this response.

Of the 39 children and young people asked, 6 had heard of the Record of Needs, 33 had not.

The statement above gives an indication of the restrictions on children and young people's knowledge of the subject as well as how information about the process and awareness of their rights etc. is limited.

However, most children and young people were aware of an annual review meeting or something similar, looking at their education. Children and young people provided us with a wealth of information on their experiences of meetings, what they needed at school and the best ways of putting their views forward.

In considering children and young people's views, the expected differences by geography and type of impairment were not found to be significant distinctions. Age did seem important, particularly because young people participating in Future Needs Assessments had more knowledge of the formal process (see discussion in **Transition Points/ Future Needs** Pg. 7).

This response reflects the balance of information received, whilst being loosely structured around the Summary of Questions within the consultation document 'Assessing our Children's Educational Needs'.

“A lot of people try to enhance education for people like us. It’s great people like you go to this length to consult us. It is important people should consult us.”

(Young person aged 16)

What was evident from our consultation was that given the right environment and support, no matter how complex their needs, children and young people had views and wanted the opportunity to share them.

Legislative Principles

There was a unanimous view from all groups that children and young people should have the right to express their views about schooling. (For more detail, see '**Children's Views**' Pg. 12)

Only one group (the Scottish Youth Parliament) explored the need for separate legislation. The main thrust of responses collated by the SYP referred to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

'States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'

In whatever assessment process is put in place following this consultation, it was suggested that this right should be specifically underpinned by legislation. It was felt that without this there was "always room for people to bend the rules".

The SYP members are aware of proposals for a Children's Commissioner. They saw a Children's Commissioner as being able to advocate for children and young people, particularly if there are disagreements over issues between young people and adults (be they professionals or parents).

Definition and Criteria

The main response was again from the SYP. A few people commented on the use of the word 'special'. 'Additional', as in 'additional needs', was felt to be more appropriate. Using the phrase 'additional needs' was also seen as beneficial because it could include children and young people who are presently not involved in the Record of Needs system and who may thus miss out on additional support. A pupil in somebody's class from a travelling family was given as an example.

Amongst the SYP respondents there was widespread support for all children and young people having some sort of record. For example:

A: “Everyone has a school record, the Record of Needs could be incorporated in this, not a separate thing so you are branded as different.”

B: “...just yours would be a bit bulkier.”

The young people felt that this approach would avoid any stigma and would ease situations where children and young people with one need objected to being grouped with others with a different need. It was also thought that everybody would be more open about their records and the support they needed in this kind of inclusive system.

There was recognition that a system of this type may be difficult to resource (in both time and money). This was however, felt to be the ideal solution and “if you don’t ask, you don’t get”.

Pre-school / Staged Assessment

No comments were made on these areas

Transition Points / Future Needs

Some young people were very aware of the importance of education in their later life. When asked about what they needed at school there were comments about “getting qualifications for jobs” as well as “advice about going out in the adult world”.

Most young people who had reached the appropriate age were able to tell us about their Future Needs Assessments (FNA). Their knowledge and input into this system seemed far greater than that of the Record of Needs. For a small but significant number of young people the FNA was the first time they had been actively involved in making decisions about their education. In this case many of the young people found the whole experience mystifying and incomprehensible. Children and young people who had had previous

input into decisions about their schooling showed a better understanding of their FNA. This was particularly so when school staff had spent time explaining different aspects of the process to support young people's understanding and involvement.

Monitoring Progress

The most common way of monitoring children's needs and progress was through some sort of annual review. Children and young people's experiences of these meetings are discussed in more detail under **Children's Views** (Pg. 12).

Some other groups spoke of more frequent, more flexible methods of gauging how they were getting on at school. These included 'levels' where a child or young person's day was gauged on a scale of 1-3; meetings at the end of the day so each child/ young person could say something about their day; and more regular, smaller types of review (involving the child/ young person but not necessarily parents or other professionals).

When an effort had been made to include 'child-friendly' elements in a system (like those mentioned above), children and young people appeared to have a better understanding, greater involvement and seemed more able to express their opinions.

Several groups had a keyworker/ form teacher or some other member of staff who took on more of a pastoral role. In many cases children and young people cited this person as someone they could express their views to on educational and social matters. They could also provide explanations and information. How frequently this connection was used depended on personalities and on there being enough time to build up a trusting relationship. Continuity was seen as important – it was even suggested that pupils should keep the same form teacher from S1-S6.

As a longer term goal it was suggested that it would be beneficial for young people to input into teacher training. It was felt that by 4th year, pupils had enough experience. As one young person described:

“I know there are lots of people who would like to have a say in what does and does not work. It’s important for all areas of education – mainstream but also private schools because things are done differently.” (Young person aged 16, at a grant maintained special school)

Another suggestion was to use a questionnaire asking how children and young people felt about their education and how they had been involved/ consulted.

A few children and young people commented on how they welcomed the opportunity to express their views on education without having to worry about the consequences (i.e. talk to somebody not directly related to school).

Information and Advice

“They should get information given to them.”

“Use words we understand.”

“Don’t patronise me.”

The children and young people we consulted were entirely dependent on adults for accessing information and advice. Teachers or parents were generally the people who provided information. As mentioned earlier, some children and young people gave examples where schools had developed ways of making information and systems more accessible. These included informal methods, for example, providing a keyworker or setting aside time to talk over issues, as well as more formal methods such as smaller, more frequent meetings. In some schools these methods had been further supported through learning about making choices and children’s rights. During our consultation process there was no evidence of this work being carried out systematically and consistently in all schools. Our findings indicate that in promoting child participation in decision making, good practice seemed either to be part of an overall ethos adopted by the school or down to an individual teacher or parent. Our consultation

highlighted a need for an enormous amount of work to be done in this area.

Appeals

Although none of our groups looked directly at the appeals process, a number did explore what they would do if they disagreed with a decision that had been made about them.

The majority of children and young people said they would like to dispute a decision they felt was wrong.

If this situation occurred during a meeting some children and young people felt confident enough to try and stand up for themselves and say it was wrong. However even when children and young people had been brave enough to challenge decisions they felt that adults did not always listen to what they were saying. One young person describes this as:

“You can tell when they are [listening] and when they are not. Quite a lot of teachers do not listen deeply.” (aged 12)

There was a consensus that most children and young people would find disagreeing with adults and parents in a meeting difficult. One young person distinguishes him/herself from others:

“I have the courage to do that but most people do not”.
(aged 12)

Children and young people either felt they needed someone to speak for them in this situation or they would prefer to talk to a particular person on their own, outwith the meeting.

It was important to “make sure the right people were there to talk to”.

A number of children and young people were able to name the person they would want to talk to. Sometimes this was a family friend, a member of staff they felt particularly comfortable with or a

parent. Other people were less specific and spoke of keyworkers/ form teachers and guidance teachers. A number of young people pointed out that form teachers/ guidance teachers were not always the easiest people to talk to and could “lack people skills”. If guidance teachers or whoever were going to become a channel for children and young people to express disagreement it was seen as important that their role was “tightened up”: i.e. clearer job descriptions and training given.

In some cases, even when children and young people were able to identify someone to talk to, there seemed to be difficulties in initiating the conversation. As one young person said:

“It can be awkward at times.” (aged 14)

One young person (aged 14) had spoken about her experience of going to meetings:

“These people just come and get you. They come to class and they ask if they can borrow you.”

When questioned further about how she lets people know how she feels, the young person replied:

“I just wait until they say can I borrow you and I speak to them.”
(inferring she would not initiate a meeting)

Students seemed to have more opportunities to initiate discussions, when they attended schools that had more frequent ways of talking to pupils about their concerns and how they were feeling. Even if it was simply an informal chat at the end of the day, having a recognisable time for these sorts of conversations seemed to assist children and young people in raising issues. Children and young people were also very appreciative of teachers who noticed they were upset or a bit down and made the effort to ask them about it.

It could be argued that the role of keyworkers/ form teachers etc and the day to day running of a school is outside the remit of this consultation. Our consultation highlighted, however, how important it is for children and young people to have access to somebody to

discuss matters as and when they arose. Further, children and young people showed a preference for more informal avenues to do this. Very few children and young people identified their annual review as somewhere they would feel comfortable raising a concern.

We found very few examples of systems in place within schools to help children and young people dispute decisions they disagreed with. Children and young people sometimes mentioned their parents as people they would turn to in this situation. There were no suggestions as to what should happen if children and young people disagreed with their parents as well.

Developing some sort of 'youth charter' was proposed as a way to protect the rights of young people as well as adults in controversial situations.

Timescales

The majority of children and young people did not know about the Record of Needs. Even including those that did, none of the children and young people we spoke to seemed to see the Record as a process. They tended to see their reviews in isolation and not as part of an on-going process. They had very little, if any, knowledge about timescales for the recording process.

Children's Views

During our consultation children and young people talked a lot about their experiences at school and their views on their education (on which they have many). For most children and young people their main opportunity to express these views was at a review meeting held approximately once a year. It was difficult to confirm whether this was a Record of Needs review as 33 children and young people out of 39 did not know what a Record was. From their descriptions, however, it would seem likely.

All the children and young people asked thought they should be able to go to meetings if they wanted to

Some children and young people regularly attended reviews, others had been once or twice, and others not at all. 21 children and young people who got the opportunity to attend meetings were asked whether they chose to go.

Of the 21 children and young people asked to attend meetings, 11 did attend, 8 choose not to and 2 were not sure

Of the 11 who did attend one young person (aged 14) “would not dare to say [I] don’t want to go” and another (aged 16) said she went for “three minutes”. It was interesting to note that of the remaining nine, five had recently been involved in a programme exploring and learning about Children’s Rights.

The general view of these meetings (from people who chose to go and those who chose not to) was that they were “boring”. Other comments about young people’s experiences of meetings included:

“It’s embarrassing.”

“It’s boring but I just battle on.”

One young person felt people were “criticising” her and felt “overwhelmed by all the adults”.

Another said he got “frustrated” and “really down” when people kept going on about the same thing and never listened to him.

(Comments from young people aged 13, 10, 16 and 12 respectively)

A few children and young people made more positive comments about meetings. One young person spoke about feeling “quite comfy” at meetings and being able to say what he wanted. Another was happy to be part of meetings because he could make people aware of his views.

A number of children and young people expressed quite strong views about who should be at these meetings. For most children and young people it was important that parents went. Professionals should be limited to those who really know the child/ young person. For each child/ young person this list of professionals varied. Most felt their teacher should attend, but opinions varied over people like social workers, doctors, speech therapists, physiotherapists, classroom assistants etc. The general sentiment was to keep numbers low. When asked who went to their meetings many children and young people spoke of “a lady” or “a man” but had no idea who that person was or why that person was there.

A couple of children and young people expressed concern over the continuity of professionals attending meetings. They felt that if a key person could not attend a meeting, the meeting should be postponed rather than someone who did not know the child or young person coming in that key person’s place.

Children and young people very much wanted people they knew and trusted to support them at meetings. The idea of having some sort of ‘representative’ at the meeting was much favoured. Most children and young people were able to identify a particular person for this job. In most cases it was the same person they suggested talking to if they disagreed with a decision. Again, this person was sometimes a form teacher or keyworker; other times it was a family friend or parent. The particular role of the representative varied from person to person. For some people the representative would simply provide moral support to enable the child or young person to speak; some people wanted to attend the meeting but their representative to talk for them; some wanted a mixture of the two. Other people did not want to go to the meeting at all but wanted the representative to put their views forward for them. The representative was also seen as somebody who could explain things the child or young person did not understand.

Most children and young people thought a one to one meeting or 'chat' with their representative before the meeting would allow them to talk about issues and discuss their opinions:

“Speaking to one person is easier.” (Young person aged 15)

The representative could then present these views at the review meeting or support the child or young person to do this. In some schools this type of system was already in place and seemed quite effective. Representatives did need to be flexible with their approach, however, and be ready to adapt their plan as necessary; as one young person related:

“When Mr X, my form teacher sits down and asks us is there anything you want to bring up [at the review meeting] I can pour it all out, particularly because I like him and there are not other grown-ups. Mr X said I could say it [my views] at the meeting but when I got there I could not say it.” (Young person aged 16)

We did not find any examples where children and young people chose their representative, although it was obvious from people's responses that not all felt comfortable or able to talk openly with representatives provided by the school. There could also be a potential conflict of interests:

“Another thing that gets me down is all teachers always say we are here for you, you can come and express yourself, we can help – but can they?” – when this young person (aged 12) had followed this advice and tried to give his views to a teacher he had been told he had “an attitude problem”.

When children and young people did attend meetings they had views about how they should be run. These are some of their points:

- it was difficult to concentrate throughout the meeting
- it was important for adults to use words the children and young people understood and for someone to be available to explain anything they did not understand
- it helped to be prepared for the meeting and to know what to expect
- any communication aids children and young people use should be available
- it helped if meetings had a clear structure and people finished talking about one thing before going on to the next; it was confusing when people got side tracked.
- what children and young people think are their educational needs may be different to what teachers think they are. Children and young people need an opportunity to discuss their own issues.
- it helped to have plenty of time to think about the questions
- sitting in a circle can be better than around a table
- it helped being in a known environment with juice or a cup of tea available

One issue that came out strongly from the consultation was how hard it can be for children and young people to become part of the conversation during a meeting. One young person described:

“I felt nervous and did not really want to speak out, but my father was beside me and I felt I could butt in.” (aged 12)

It was easier if adults created opportunities for children and young people to speak but equally if this was done insensitively children and young people could feel they “didn’t have much choice” about answering questions. It was felt that meetings and reviews should be child-friendly and set up in a way which helped children and young people put their views across.

Where children and young people chose not to attend meetings, there was very little evidence of alternatives being offered. Some children and young people still got the opportunity to present their views in a one-to-one meeting before the review but, for many, choosing not to go to a review was treated as opting out and they were not involved any further.

There was also very little evidence of systematic methods of feedback. One school did have a system where the child or young person and his/ her carer would chat over a coffee, after the meeting. It often fell to parents or teachers to inform children and young people of what had happened at the meeting but this was often an ad-hoc arrangement that did not always take place and again was open to conflict of interests.

Children and young people tended to want to keep the number of meetings they attended to a minimum. For example:

“I have a Future Needs meeting. Do not need another meeting”
(Young person aged 14)

Another young person (aged 16) said he would rather have one big meeting with every one there to discuss him (rather than lots of small meetings) in order to get things done.

Children and young people came up with a number of alternatives to meetings:

- Smaller discussions with less people which were seen as ‘chats’ rather than meetings
- Using a keyworker
- Computers/ e-mail
- Questionnaires
- Making a tape recording of your views
- Creating a graffiti wall

Children and young people felt it would be best to have a range of alternatives for them to choose from. This would allow them to pick the option they felt most comfortable with and let them speak most freely. One young person described this succinctly:

“There should be ways and means rather than spending time being intimidated [at meetings]”. (aged 16)

Sharing Information

One of the issues raised by a couple of young people was that teachers did not always get enough background information about pupils. Assumptions were made about a person’s level of ability and adults did not always make an effort to understand how much someone could do.

One group that was asked specifically about confidentiality felt the rules that were in place worked well. They felt it was important that information was shared amongst the teachers and school staff (carers) who worked with them and their parents.

The point was also made that where children and young people with SEN were integrated into mainstream schools, the mainstream class needed support and information too.

Although the Record is predominantly an educational document when asked what they needed at school, responses included

“Friends, leisure activities.”
“Day trips – you get to know people better and socialise with them.”
“Chocolate”
“My wee brother to play with me.”

(Children and Young people aged 16, 16, 12 and 10 respectively)

Social aspects of being at school were obviously important to children and young people and were seen by them as being part of their

educational needs. Responses to Children in Scotland's adult consultation have highlighted the need for a more holistic approach and this is borne out by children and young people. They do not divide their lives into separate boxes for health, education and social well being. When asked what they need at school one of the most common answers was friends. Children and young people unite these different aspects of their lives and see themselves **'whole'**; policy needs to reflect that.

Good Practice

None of the children and young people we spoke to talked about good practice directly. From the snapshot this consultation has provided, however, there seems to be huge variation in practice, particularly concerning how much and in what way children and young people are involved in their Record of Needs.

It was conspicuous how few children and young people knew about their Record of Needs. Related to that, it was unlikely for children and young people to see their annual reviews as being part of an on-going process of educational assessment. A number of schools had developed or were in the process of developing ways of making what are essentially adult-orientated systems, accessible for children and young people. Because children and young people have diverse support needs and a range of abilities, schools were working on a number of different ways to ensure this 'accessibility' is appropriate for their pupils. From our consultation it was clear that children and young people who attended schools with this type of system had a better understanding of 'how school works' and their education. In addition these children and young people had had more practice at expressing their views and were therefore more confident about doing this and had a more developed idea of what their views were. This observation was equally true for a number of children and young people with complex special needs and learning disabilities whom we consulted.

Children and young people seemed most 'empowered' when they had grown up in a culture promoting choice and encouraging independent thinking. It seemed most beneficial when children and

young people learnt about decision making, their rights and how to express their views in a gradual, structured way throughout their schooling, with work tailored in a relevant way. A few young people who had suddenly been involved in educational decisions at age 14 (through their Future Needs Assessment) seemed bewildered by their experience and struggled to answer questions in an informed way.

Summary

Only 6 children and young people out of 39 had heard of the Record of Needs

Legislative Principle

- All children and young people thought they should have the right to express their views about schooling. Some thought this right should be underpinned by legislation.

Definition and Criteria

- 'Additional needs' was preferred to 'special needs'. It was seen to cover a wider range of support needs.
- It was suggested that all children and young people should have some sort of record which could be as detailed as necessary.

Transition Points / Future Needs

- Young people seemed more aware of their Future Needs Assessments than their Record of Needs. For some young people the FNA was the first time they had been involved in decisions about their education.

Monitoring Progress

- Most children and young people were aware of some sort of annual meeting looking at their education. It was generally described as "boring".
- Children and young people found it extremely useful to have a key worker/ form teacher etc to talk to in a more regular, informal way about school issues.

Information and Advice

- There was very little information or advice suitable for children and young people about their education. They were dependent on what their parents or teachers told them.

Appeals

- Most young people said they would like to dispute a decision they felt was wrong. There were very few systems in place to support this, even in an informal way.

Children's Views

- Most children and young people had the option to attend their annual review. Approximately half the number we spoke to took up this option. If they chose not to attend, there were rarely any alternative ways for young people to put their views forward.
- Children and young people had strong views about who should be at their reviews. Generally they were keen to keep numbers low and to include only people who knew them well.
- Children and young people liked the idea of having a representative at meetings who could present the child or young person's views or support the child or young person to do so themselves. Children and young people would want to chat to their representative before the meeting to prepare and, for some, afterwards for feedback.
- Children and young people would like to choose their representative. There could be a conflict of interests when form teachers etc filled this role.
- Meetings need to be more 'child-friendly'. Children and young people could find it difficult to take part and sometimes felt they were not being listened to.
- Children had other ideas about how to put their views across. They would like a range of different alternatives (meetings being one of them) so they can choose the best way to say how they feel about school.

Sharing Information

- Children and young people's view of their education was much more holistic than the current Record caters for. Friends and other social aspects were equally important.

Good Practice

- There seemed to be huge variation in practice concerning how much and in what way children and young people were involved in their Record of Needs.
- In environments that supported their understanding and participation in decision making, children and young people were more confident about expressing their views and had a better developed sense of what their views were. This was equally true for children and young people with complex needs.