



MEDIA RELEASE
Embargoed: 13.9.07

Friends are the most important part of school, say pupils

Ramps, Braille, specialist IT and extra staff are all important in making school life accessible to everyone, but what pupils with additional support needs rate the highest is "friendship" and "feeling included".

The findings come from a three-year study of children and young people in the Borders, set up by Scottish Borders Council in collaboration with Children in Scotland.

The final report, 'Access all Areas: what children and young people think about accessibility, inclusion and additional support at school' is launched today (13.9.07) in the Borders and will be used to inform the Scottish Borders accessibility strategy, and associated policy and practice.

Bronwen Cohen, chief executive at Children in Scotland said: "While current policy and legislation are important, they direct attention to the physical aspects of school life that are easy to fix. Ensuring children feel included in the social life of school – eating together, going on trips, taking part in games and activities – is more challenging. If pupils find it difficult to make friends in mainstream settings, this can have an impact on the success of other accessibility strategies."

Ian Reilly, Disability Discrimination Act Implementation Officer from Scottish Borders Council, said: "We have been really impressed with the quality of this study and critically all the schools that have participated found it extremely valuable as a learning tool. The message on the social needs for pupils with additional support needs will be acted upon. We already have 'buddy' support initiatives and will be looking to develop this further."

The majority of comments made by pupils have been largely positive about school. However, the report's key finding suggests there needs to be greater awareness of the social needs for children with additional support needs.

Suggestions for improvements include:

- Development of peer supports as well as new ideas to counter the disappearance of supports when older pupils leave school
- More initiatives to help develop friendships amongst pupils of similar ages
- More pupil input into setting up and developing peer support initiatives
- More additional support needs assistants and staff

Pupils also felt more could be done to improve the school environment in ways that would make social interaction more easy, for example:

- Much larger classrooms: "Classrooms are packed full, it's difficult to get around"
- Larger, quicker, more reliable lifts
- Wider corridors that are purely corridors, not storage spaces for equipment, coats and bags.
- Smaller, less busy schools
- Solutions to fire-safety issues, in particular alternatives to safe zones in fire evacuations and easier access through fire doors

Pupils outlined what they looked for in a teacher, stressing the need for encouragement, empathy and someone who creates a 'safe' learning environment:

"People need encouragement, and that's what I've found worked for me."
P6 pupil

"If you're sitting in a class you dinnae want to put your hand up and ask your teacher for help because you're too embarrassed. Everyone else has the question and you've not." S3 pupil

"In maths for example, Ms X takes time and says is everyone okay, does anyone need help or any thing – that's quite good." P6 pupil

Kathleen Marshall, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, who wrote the foreword for the report, said: "The Children in Scotland research shows the importance young people place on relationships with their peers. Young people with disabilities are no different from anyone else. It is as much about access to all areas of life as about access to buildings."

"The results of this research fit in well with research my office will be publishing shortly. It is a consistent message from the disabled young people of Scotland. We all must do what we can to make sure that their message is heard and acted upon."

Jonathan Sher, director of research, policy and practice development at Children in Scotland, said: "All local authorities have the statutory duty to make schools more accessible, but the Access all Areas project is a model for

the rest of Scotland in terms of properly consulting children and young people. Their perspective and advice is very valuable.”

“The Access all Areas project has been renewed for another three years to focus on heeding the insights and ideas of students, which is particularly important given that the Scottish Borders Council recently announced a major new school building programme.”

Notes for editors

- The results of the Access all Areas report will be discussed at this year’s Children in Scotland annual conference, held on the 1st and 2nd November, and organised in conjunction with Scottish Borders Council. For more details see www.childreninscotland.org.uk/hhw
- Access all areas was set up by Borders Council in collaboration with Children in Scotland with the aim of gathering children and young people’s views on accessibility, and to inform the Scottish Borders accessibility strategy
- A copy of the report ‘Access all Areas: what children and young people think about accessibility, inclusion and additional support at school’ is available free and can be downloaded from the Children in Scotland website: www.childreninscotland.org.uk/aaa
- Children in Scotland is Scotland's national children's agency, bringing together voluntary, statutory and professional organisations and individuals to improve the lives of Scotland's children and their families.

**For further information contact Chris Small, communications officer,
Children in Scotland,
Direct Dial: 0131 222 2419,
Email: csmall@childreninscotland.org.uk**