



**Inclusion
Ambassadors**



Challenging inequality and leading change

A report on the work of the Inclusion
Ambassadors from 2020-21

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1. Introduction



According to the Scottish Government's annual census,¹ in 2020 approximately 226,838 pupils in Scotland were identified with additional support needs. This represents nearly one third (32.3%) of all pupils across publicly funded primary, secondary and special schools.²

Under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004,³ there is a legal requirement on those working in education to ensure they are aware of additional support needs and make appropriate provisions. However, we are more than aware that there can often be a gap between what should be happening and what really is happening. This can be down to any number of reasons – a lack of resources, funding shortfalls, or a gap in knowledge and understanding to name a few.

The Inclusion Ambassadors intend to address this by leading change and being part of the solution. Our work with the group provides key learning that can shape provision of additional support for learning moving forward, identifying what works, what needs to change and what would make things better.

It is important to remember that the Inclusion Ambassadors are a small group. However, we know from our work across Children in Scotland that their experiences reflect those of many across Scotland.

About the group

We believe decisions about education should be informed by those who will be directly affected by them and who can speak from experience.

The Inclusion Ambassadors are a group of secondary-aged pupils who have a range of additional support needs and attend different types of schools.

In the 2020-21 group there were 20 Inclusion Ambassadors who represented 13 local authority areas across Scotland.

The group share their experience of being a young person with additional support needs in Scotland. Over the last year the group have focused on the impact of Covid-19 on their education and how additional support provision could be improved to ensure school is a happy and safe place.

How are their voices heard?

The group aims to make education in Scotland better for young people with additional support needs and reduce the stigma, or negative thoughts, associated with additional support for learning.

¹ A census is where the government try to find out about people in the country and what there needs are

² <https://www.thescsc.org.uk/campaigns/additional-support-needs-asn/>

³ The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 is a law which outlines what the government must do to support young people with additional support needs

Members of the group share their views at regular meetings, hosted by Children in Scotland. Children in Scotland then communicate these to those who make decisions about education, including the Scottish Government. We also share them with other children and young people and the adults who work with them. When appropriate, key points or recommendations from meetings are made public through our communications activity.

Working with the group during Covid-19

In March 2020 Children in Scotland had to change the way we work with children and young people due to the coronavirus pandemic. Usually meeting face-to-face in our Edinburgh office, the global pandemic meant we had to move all of our work online. We have tried to retain regular contact with all of our groups, keeping in touch with activity packs as well as through online sessions.

Working with school staff and adults who know the young people, as well as regular conversations with the members of the group, helped find ways that work for everyone.

We know that the coronavirus pandemic has had a big impact on children and young people, particularly those with additional support needs. The Family Fund has surveyed families twice during lockdown and 89% said that their disabled or seriously ill child's behaviour and emotions were being negatively affected. A similar majority (82%) reported a negative effect on their mental health.⁴ The Alliance Scotland has also said people with disabilities that they work with have had issues with technology, including accessing school and schoolwork.⁵ With this in mind, we are aware the move to online has not suited everyone and have tried to make sure that meetings remained fully inclusive and accessible as possible.

What is in this report and who is it for?

This report shares the work of the Inclusion Ambassadors over the last year. It covers what they have said about the impact of coronavirus on their education and their views on other key issues affecting their lives. It highlights what is working well and, importantly, what needs to change to make sure additional support for learning provision is as good as it can be.

The report is broken up into the themes as identified in group meetings, followed by our recommendations for each. These recommendations are a combination of things the Ambassadors have asked for themselves and steps we believe would help.

The report is for those who make decisions about education, identifying what children and young people with additional support needs want in school. It can be used by those in government, teachers and decision-makers in schools and education bodies, and others who have a say in ASN provision and how it is delivered in Scotland. We also hope it will help both our Ambassadors as well as other children and young people by raising awareness and encouraging acceptance.

⁴ <https://www.familyfund.org.uk/news/health-and-wellbeing-of-disabled-children-at-risk-under-pandemic-as-government-announces-extra-10-million-funding-for-children-with-complex-needs>

⁵ See Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland's Response to the Education and Skills Committee Inquiry (15th May 2020), found at https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ALLIANCE_ESC_Inquiryresponse.pdf

2. Executive summary



Reflecting on their own experiences, the Inclusion Ambassadors have identified key areas in which they feel improvements could be made. The recommendations are made around themes such as being heard, support, communication and relationships, Covid-19 and education, and exams.

These recommendations are explored in more detail in Section 4 of the report: What have the group told us?

Not feeling listened to

The Inclusion Ambassadors are clear about the impact of feeling involved and valued in decisions about their own education. How well pupils are listened to can be improved by:

- **All school staff, including the Head teacher, teachers and support staff, should ask young people with additional support needs about the support they want. This should take place in a situation and an environment that the young person is comfortable in and feels able to speak out.**
- **When talking about support, adults should take notes of discussions to help remember what young people tell them. This simple act shows their voice is being being taken seriously and helps young people know they are being listened to.**
- **Ensure the outcome is communicated. Follow up with young people after you have discussed things with them and tell them what you are going to do about what they have told you.**

Levels of support

The Inclusion Ambassadors have highlighted varying levels of support. They recommend schools and local authorities:

- **Ensure there are enough specialist staff to meet the support needs of children and young people.**
- **Provide tailored, appropriate and consistent support to pupils.**

Communication, trust and relationships

The Inclusion Ambassadors speak at length about the importance of good communication and relationships built on trust. They ask:

- **School staff (such as teachers and support staff) should facilitate good two-way communication between adults and young people, including clearly explaining why decisions have been taken.**
- **Staff should work to create a relationship of trust between themselves and pupils. This can be done by taking an interest in their lives and asking about things outside of school.**
- **Teachers and other staff in schools need to trust young people to make decisions about their lives and support. Work with them to identify solutions in class.**

- **All staff within schools should make sure they are passing on important and relevant information about young people and the support they need. This then needs to be communicated to pupils so they know this is happening.**

Feeling nervous about contributing in class

The Inclusion Ambassadors shared experience of feeling anxious or nervous in class. They asked for more sensitivity and awareness of how those with additional support needs might feel in a class setting. Specifically:

- **Staff should be aware of how pupils are feeling and that this might change day by day.**
- **Staff should get to know pupils and find out what ways of working suit them best – people will want to contribute in different ways with some feeling anxious about answering in class.**

Covid-19 and home learning

Experiences of home learning as a result of Covid presented mixed reactions from the group. However, the Inclusion Ambassadors were in agreement of the need to understand and appreciate the differing needs and reasonable adjustments that may be required to be made to effectively learn remotely.

- **Staff should not single out pupils with additional support needs or put them on the spot.**
- **If home learning returns, school staff need to talk to young people about the support they are getting. Their needs still need to be met.**
- **If working online is a barrier to some pupils, ask how you can help or what would make things easier.**
- **Make sure that all children and young people have enough time to socialize and see friends when in school – this has a big impact on how they feel about school.**
- **Ensure there is flexibility for all young people to learn and work in ways that suit them.**

Covid-19 and safety measures in school

Whilst a return to in-school learning was welcome, the Inclusion Ambassadors expressed some concern over how safety measures were being employed and enforced. They recommend:

- **Staff (and pupils) ensure the rules in place to keep people safe are followed. These need to be enforced, within reason and as appropriate.**
- **Encourage friends to sit together in class where possible.**
- **Schools should prioritise socializing even when the bubble system ends. Make sure young people have time for everyone to see their friends in school.**

Exams

The uncertainty around the exam process this year, and the eventual awarding process, was a concern for the Ambassadors. Going forward, they recommend:

- **Consult with young people about the exam system going forward. Ensure it meets the need of young people with additional support needs and that they are supported through any alternative or replacement processes.**

3. Approach



Prior to March 2020, our meetings with the Inclusion Ambassadors took place in person. The group would meet in Children in Scotland's offices in central Edinburgh to discuss a range of issues. However, as previously mentioned, all of our participation and engagement work with children and young people has moved online due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Conscious that working online may be particularly difficult for young people with additional support needs, we initially engaged with school support staff to discuss what they thought would work. Our first online session focused on how the members of the group wanted to work together online.

One benefit of working online has been more regular meetings. This has been helpful in terms of relationship building. We have also kept our meetings shorter whilst ensuring time for fun to encourage relationship building across the group.

In our online sessions we have a flexible approach and encourage members to contribute in a way that works for them, such as keeping their cameras off or using the chat function. We work at a pace that suits the group and ensure everyone feels able to contribute.

While the group has achieved much online over the last year, we are hoping to return to working in person again soon. The Ambassadors have shared this is important to them.



4. What have we been doing?



Since the beginning of the pandemic we have held six meetings with the Ambassadors online with sessions beginning in Autumn 2020. We initially took a short break as we knew the complexities of adapting to home learning.

At these meetings we focused on a range of topics including:

- The impact of coronavirus on learning
- Being happy and safe in school
- A vision statement for Scottish education.

The impact of coronavirus on learning

We spoke to members of the group about how changes to school due to the coronavirus affected them. We spoke about challenges, as well as any positives, of learning at home and how they felt about returning to the school environment. We also spoke to the Ambassadors about how they felt about changing between home-learning and in-school learning over the last year, or in some cases, balancing both.

Being happy and safe in school

We discussed with the group what would make them feel happy and safe in school. Their views were used to create resources to promote awareness, including a letter inviting decision-makers to meet with them so they could be heard directly and a pledge pack for schools to use to demonstrate what actions they will take in response to the Ambassadors' ideas and recommendations. View, download and share the Pledge Pack [here](#).

Vision statement

The Inclusion Ambassadors contributed to the Independent Review of Additional Support for Learning, launched in March 2020 and chaired by Angela Morgan. The review was intended to assess how well Scotland was doing in supporting children and young people with additional support needs.

Responding to the review the Scottish Government prepared an Action Plan. Published in October 2020 it outlined all the things that they are committed to doing. As part of the Action Plan, the Inclusion Ambassadors were asked to prepare a Vision Statement. The Vision Statement will set the direction for supporting children and young people with additional support needs in Scotland. It was published in August 2021. View, download and share the Vision Statement [here](#).

Recruitment

In Spring 2021 we held an open recruitment for new members of the group as some members had now left school. We recruited 15 new members of the group and held a first meeting with the new Inclusion Ambassadors group in June 2021.

5. What have the group told us?



The main aim of this report is to share what the Inclusion Ambassadors have told us about their experiences of Additional Support Needs provision. We have organised this into the themes that came up in discussions.

4.1 Not feeling listened to

The Ambassadors told us that they often do not feel listened to by school staff. This is an issue many raised before the coronavirus pandemic and has continued during the last year. We heard that young people felt that the additional support they needed on return to face-to-face schooling was pushed aside. Members of the group felt frustrated and unclear as to why they were not being listened to.

Members reported that not being listened to meant that they must often repeat the same issues to numerous members of staff. We heard that this can be “tiring and annoying”.

The group suggested some simple solutions:

“Just talk to us”

“Listen and see what you can do”

“Listen to our needs and problems”

Members of the group have told us being listened to would make them feel happy and safe in school. It would also help build trust between pupils and teachers.

One member did acknowledge the variation between schools, stating that at their previous school they felt that when an issue was raised staff would “huddle together and decide what was best for me”. However, the same member said their current school is better at listening to pupils.

While it sounds simple, it is really important that schools take the time to listen to pupils. They know what support they need and how school can best support them.

! Recommendations:

How well pupils are listened to can be improved by:

- **All school staff, including the Head teacher, teachers and support staff, should ask young people with additional support needs about the support they want. This should take place in a situation and an environment that the young person is comfortable in and feels able to speak out.**
- **When talking about support, adults should take notes of discussions to help remember what young people tell them. This simple act shows their voice is being taken seriously and helps young people know they are being listened to.**
- **Ensure the outcome is communicated. Follow up with young people after discussing things with them and explain what you are going to do about what they have told you.**

4.2 Levels of support

Members of the group told us that they did not get enough support from their schools before the pandemic. For some this has been cut down since schools returned. Some members expressed frustration that they were not getting enough support or that it was getting worse, as they got nearer important exams and assessments.

“They’re not thinking about people who struggle more ... I really don’t get it”

“[Support is] less and less as we get closer to prelims and exams which seems counterintuitive”

Young people told us they thought that staff absence, in some cases because of coronavirus, was part of the issue with some members saying their schools had struggled to get replacement teachers. However, this issue is not specific to the last 12 months. As we have stated, members of the group have spoken about this issue before coronavirus caused changes in education.

“Some teachers are in, some are off. It’s back and forth”

“Lots of my teachers are off and new teachers come in. It’s really hard to get other subject teachers to come in and teach the class”

It is also important to highlight that some members of the group get more support than they want or feel comfortable with. In the words of one young person:

“I constantly have teachers coming up and asking, ‘How are you doing with this?’ It marks me as different”

All members of the group feel that schools who want to support pupils with additional support needs well must take everyone’s needs into account and treat pupils as their needs require.

“Don’t read something then go off hoping it’ll work for everyone”

The group have shared how they think these issues could be tackled. They want to highlight the impact that a lack of staff can have and the benefit of having specialist staff who are trained to work with specific additional support needs.

They have also spoken about an awareness of how roles providing additional support in schools are perceived by people. They have suggested that these jobs be made more attractive so that people apply for them.

Recommendations:

- **Ensure there are enough specialist staff to meet the support needs of children and young people.**
- **Provide tailored, appropriate and consistent support to pupils.**

4.3 Communication, trust and relationships

It is clear from our work with the group that relationships with staff are important for making members of the group feel happy and safe in school. They have told us that good communication and trust are both key for this. Encouragingly, it is clear that many

experience this in school with members of staff that support them, including head teachers, classroom teachers and pupil support assistants.

“Having a teacher I trust ... makes it a lot easier. If you don’t feel like doing work that day you can go to them and say why. You don’t then sit there doing nothing and have people moan at you for it”

Members of the Inclusion Ambassadors have regularly told us about the importance of good two-way communication. They have told us that when they talk about issues they are having in school they want to know what has happened as a result. One member of the group highlighted where this had not happened and so they were not sure if their concern has been acted upon or dealt with:

“(I) don’t even get told when they’ve spoken to the person”

The group were also clear that there needs to be good communication between staff within school. They want pupil support assistants, teachers and other staff to talk about the support young people need and how they are feeling but have spoken about how information is not always passed on. It is important young people know these conversations are happening and they do not feel like people are talking behind their back.

“I found at my last school if I had an issue the staff would just huddle together and decide what was best for me rather than listening to me. If I raised an issue about a teacher, I would just get shot down and told it was a me problem”

The group have been clear that good communication between pupils and teachers can help build trusting relationships and how important this is to their school experience. Specifically, they have told us that having a teacher they trust makes school life easier. They told us this relationship is helpful when they are struggling to do work as they know they have someone to talk to. When they do not trust a teacher or have good communication with them they might not raise any issues and then get in trouble for not finishing their work.

The group have told us that being put under pressure or on the spot can damage their relationship with teachers.

We have also heard that young people with additional support needs want to be trusted more by their teachers, including trust in their ability to make decisions for themselves.

Recommendations:

- **School staff (such as teachers and support staff) should facilitate good two-way communication between adults and young people, including clearly explaining why decisions have been taken.**
- **Staff should work to create a relationship of trust between themselves and pupils. This can be done by taking an interest in their lives and asking about things outside of school.**
- **Teachers and other staff in schools need to trust young people to make decisions about their lives and support. Work with them to identify solutions in class.**
- **All staff within schools should make sure they are passing on important and relevant information about young people and the support they need. This then needs to be communicated to pupils so they know this is happening.**

4.4 Feeling nervous about contributing in class

In discussions with Children in Scotland staff, the Ambassadors shared feelings of being nervous about contributing in class. For some, this was due to their relationships with peers. Where members of the group reported being bullied, they felt less willing to answer in class. For others the anxiety was around the actions of the teacher putting them on the spot, especially if they did not know the answer.

“Calling on people in class that don’t know the answer is a rubbish way to engage students”

Recommendations:

- Staff should be aware of how pupils are feeling and that this might change day by day.
- Staff should get to know pupils and find out what ways of working suit them best – people will want to contribute in different ways with some feeling anxious about answering in class.

4.5 Covid-19 and home learning

In the past year, the group have shared their differing experiences of learning from home due to the coronavirus pandemic. For some, it worked well and for others it was more difficult.

“I think it can be both because it’s hard to concentrate but at the same time you can be free and you can pick what you want to do at certain times”

The group shared some positive aspects from the last year. For some young people having more freedom was good as they could take breaks when needed, work in ways that suited them or do things like listen to music to help them concentrate. It was also mentioned that not having to be up and out for the school bell meant they felt less tired.

We can and must learn from this going forward and support children and young people to work in ways that suit them all the time.

However, while many of these things worked for some members of the group, others found it harder to concentrate at home and missed the routine of being in class. One member found communication online difficult and said it was hard to understand people’s tone over email.

It was also clear that working online had different effects on how much support people received. Some members of the group told us that they experienced a reduced level of support, making completing the work difficult. Interestingly, others felt it was easier to ask for help from teachers when working online as they did not have to ask in front of everyone.

We also heard that issues with technology made learning from home difficult. Not everyone had access to the right technology. We know from our work with the group that schools have quite restrictive ways of working online by being limited to certain software platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, and having certain functions switched off. For example, some members of the group could not turn their camera on as this function has been disabled by the school. All of this affects how much people can engage remotely.

It was clear that members of the group missed social aspects of school and extra-curricular activities. We know that socialising is a key part of school for members of the group. This needs to be given priority.

! Recommendations:

- **Staff should not single out pupils with additional support needs or put them on the spot.**
- **If home learning returns, school staff need to talk to young people about the support they are getting. Their needs still need to be met.**
- **If working online is a barrier to some pupils, ask how you can help or what would make things easier.**
- **Make sure that all children and young people have enough time to socialize and see friends when in school – this has a big impact on how they feel about school.**
- **Ensure there is flexibility for all young people to learn and work in ways that suit them.**

4.6 Covid-19 and safety measures in school

When pupils returned to school as restrictions eased, things were very different. Mask-wearing, keeping to an agreed bubble and maintain social distancing all became commonplace.

We heard that for some people this was difficult as the masks made communication more challenging and social distancing made it harder to get the support needed.

However, members of the group were aware of the need for these safety measures now and felt schools needed to do more to enforce the rules that are in place so that people do feel safe. People not wearing masks could make other people feel anxious. Schools needed to make sure this was happening.

We heard how the bubble system within schools made it hard for some young people to see friends. Members of the group thought this system could be improved by making sure that friends were put in the same bubble. It is important to recognise though that this has been very difficult for schools. If it does continue, it is important decisions are communicated clearly.

They also want to see more pupil input in class and for staff to consider letting friends sit together in classrooms as this could help some pupils work better. It is important to consider this a priority given the importance the group have collectively placed on socialising in school.

! Recommendations:

- **Staff (and pupils) need to ensure rules in place to keep people safe are followed. They need to find a way to enforce the rules, within reason and as appropriate.**
- **Encourage friends to sit together in class where possible.**
- **Schools should prioritise socializing even when the bubble system ends – make sure young people have time for everyone to see their friends in school.**

4.7 Exams

We know that the ongoing uncertainty around exams and assessments has had a big effect on young people with additional support needs. Specifically, being out of school and losing support has made it hard to prepare for exams.

In Autumn 2020, older members of the group told us they were glad when the exam grading system was changed to being based on teacher assessment, reporting that the uncertainty with appeals and grades being marked down had been stressful.

We also know that members found this year's replacement assessments difficult with no reduction in the volume of work required.

In addition, members told us about specific issues caused by the restrictions in schools. Often people were needing to move as rooms were double booked and this disrupted their learning and exams.

“We find a room and you might be halfway through and have to move. It’s all over the place. They’re trying their best [but]they need to come up with a plan...”

Recommendations:

- **Consult with young people about the exam system going forward. Ensure it meets the need of young people with additional support needs and that they are supported through any alternative or replacement processes.**



6. The impact of being involved in the group



The main aim of the Inclusion Ambassadors group is to make sure young people with additional support needs are heard in decision-making.

We are pleased that members of the group have shared the positive impact of being involved. They have told us that they enjoy the group because **“people listen to each other”**. They feel membership of the group is beneficial because it is **“not a waste of time, we actually do stuff”**. They value the chance to make a change but also to socialise and meet new people.

Members of the group have told us how they value being listened to and having their voices heard. They also told us about how they feel more confident. One member of the group now feels able to travel on their own while another has seen their confidence grow to such an extent they were on school radio and were interviewed for a forthcoming BBC documentary.

When asked how they would describe the group to others, the Ambassadors had plenty to say:

“Your voices are going to be heard, compared to just being on your own wanting to do something but you can’t”

“Helped me gain more confidence in myself, I feel more independent now. My mother would never have let me go on a train by myself, but she did to come here”

“It’s brought my confidence right up, I did a PowerPoint for school on this and an interview on radio”



7. Next steps



Over the next year the group will continue with a number of different areas of work.

We will continue to share the Ambassador's views with government and other adults that make decisions about education in Scotland. This might be through Government consultations or directly with MSPs.

The group will discuss the Vision Statement that they have produced for the ASL for Learning Action Plan, along with other related work. This will include talking about the language used. This will include talking about the language used when referring to young people with additional support needs and developing resources looking at the impact of a good pupil support assistant.

The group have also developed a Pledge Pack for schools. A culmination of work over 2020-21, it will assist schools and other educational establishments to adopt more inclusive practices. Published in August, we hope to share case studies, including from the Ambassadors' own schools, of pledges and activity.

The group will continue to have regular meetings and discuss their support needs in school. Meetings will continue to be online, though we hope to see the return of face-to-face meetings soon.

Finally, over the next year the group will be inviting a range of adults that make decisions about education in Scotland to meetings to discuss their views and identify what changes can be made.



8. Where to look for support



Young people and their families tell us that they want to know more about their rights and who they can ask for help and advice. Children in Scotland support a number of different services that can help. You can find out more about these below.

Enquire

Enquire is an advice service that provides families with advice and information and aims to raise awareness of children's rights to extra support in school. They have a [website](#), numerous helpsheets and operate a confidential advice line.

Resolve: ASL mediation

An independent mediation service for parents and carers of children and young people with additional support needs, Resolve:ASL provide help when people cannot agree on an issue and do this without taking sides.

Resolve currently work in 14 local authorities across Scotland. Click [here](#) to find out more.

My Rights My Say

In Scotland, all children have the right to have their views considered when decisions are made about the support they get with their learning.

My Rights, My Say is a support service to assist children to use their rights and make sure their voices are heard. It is independent, confidential service and easy to use. You can find out how to contact the service [here](#).

Reach

Reach gives children and young people advice and support on their rights in school. The service is aimed directly at children and young people and can help them understand their rights. It shares young people's stories so you can find out what has helped other people. Click [here](#) to find out more.

9. Find out more about the group



You can keep up to date with what the group are doing [here](#).



For more information about the group, please email **Parisa Shirazi**, Policy, Projects and Participation Officer

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We would like to say a big thank you to our wonderful Ambassadors and the staff who support them. We could not do this work without them.