



Education Reform

25th November 2021

About Children in Scotland

Giving all children in Scotland an equal chance to flourish is at the heart of everything we do.

By bringing together a network of people working with and for children, alongside children and young people themselves, we offer a broad, balanced and independent voice. We create solutions, provide support and develop positive change across all areas affecting children in Scotland.

We do this by listening, gathering evidence, and applying and sharing our learning, while always working to uphold children's rights. Our range of knowledge and expertise means we can provide trusted support on issues as diverse as the people we work with and the varied lives of children and families in Scotland.

Children in Scotland is pleased to respond to the consultation on education reform and to be part of various aspects of the focused work that is taking place across Scotland. This includes being a member of The Practitioner and Stakeholder Advisory Group (PSAG) work being undertaken by Professor Ken Muir. It also draws on our extensive experience of delivering services for children and young people who need additional support for learning. Linked to this, we draw your attention to a separate response submitted by Enquire, our advice service for additional support for learning. Our response below adds weight to the current key emerging themes from all of this work.

Education is a key aspect of children and young people's lives. We look forward to Scotland delivering on its commitment to our young people to be the best place in the world to grow up and learn. We are excited for this change.

Children's rights

We welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to change and progress in education, based on the OECD report's recommendations¹, specifically around the national curriculum, assessment and qualifications. We believe a child rights approach is essential moving forward.

We work extensively with children and young people, ensuring their voices are heard and considered by decision-makers, in line with Article 12² of the UNCRC.

We would also highlight the central importance of Article 29 to this education reform work. It adds a dimension to the right to education recognised in Article 28 which reflects the rights and inherent dignity of the child. It insists on the need for education to be child-centred, child-friendly and empowering.³ It is a powerful vision for all of our learners which supports the development of the learner's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities, cultural identity, and respect for the natural environment.

Education is a central aspect of children and young people's lives. It has been a real focus of concern for them over the past year and a half, throughout the pandemic. In our response we refer to various projects we have been working on with children and young people through the pandemic, including the Inclusion Ambassadors, the Education Recovery Youth Panel and our own children and young people's advisory group Changing Our World.

Children and young people's voices have also been shared through various reports such as *The Lockdown Lowdown*, *The Cost of Learning in Lockdown*, *The Impact of Covid-19 on Children with Additional Support Needs and Disabilities in Scotland*⁴ and *Covid In Colour*⁵.

Children and young people have shared their experiences and views on various aspects of education, including the impact of:

- The closing of schools in the initial lockdown and how this was communicated to them
- Home learning over the past year and a half, including the barriers some young people experienced, perhaps due to digital connectivity or experiencing additional support needs and the challenges in accessing support

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/education/scotland-s-curriculum-for-excellence-bf624417-en.htm>

² <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>

³ https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/CRC_General_Comment_1_en.pdf

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-children-young-people-families-evidence-summary-june-2021/pages/2/>

⁵ <https://www.interculturalyouthscotland.org/reports>

- The changes to exam and assessment processes and how this was communicated to them.

A key theme the children and young people we have worked with through the pandemic have shared is that they have felt very much in the dark with regards to decisions made in the education system over the past year⁶. This must change moving forward. They want to be listened to and for a wide range of their voices to be heard. They are key stakeholders and have a right to an equal space in this process.

Children and young people's future participation in education decision-making must be meaningful, ongoing and cover accreditation, assessment, curriculum, and the creation of new national bodies.

We have created our own Principles and Guidelines for organisations who want to include children and young people in decision-making, and are happy to share these.⁷

Vision

We welcome the activity underway to review Curriculum for Excellence, such as that taking place through the Curriculum and Assessment Board and related subgroups.

We believe the vision of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) now requires a review and update and agree with the reflections in the 2021 OECD report: 'The two decades since the formulation of CfE's vision have been marked by accelerated changes, including in educational research, giving rise to new insights into student learning, pedagogy, and the kind of knowledge, skills and attitudes students need to progress as learners. CfE has stood the test of time, but it will only remain relevant if Scotland uses these insights to continue its development.'⁸

We believe there needs to be a change in culture in Scottish education so that it becomes more child-centred, to support all children and young people, as reflected in Article 29 of the UNCRC. Curriculum for Excellence, and how it is implemented following the review, will be important to the success of any future culture shift.

Gap between policy and practice

⁶ <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/changing-our-world/changing-our-world-manifesto-campaign-work/>

⁷ <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/principles-and-guidelines-for-working-with-young-people-published/>.

⁸ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/bf624417-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/bf624417-en>

Central to the future success of CfE will be action to address the distance between its vision and the reality of how it is applied: the gap between policy and practice.

Based on our direct work with children and young people and in schools we know our learners have a wide variety of experiences, including those with additional support needs. This includes very positive experiences of learning, as well as many examples of where the needs of young learners are not fully considered and supported within their education.

The workforce will need support to bridge this policy implementation gap. Initial Teacher Education will have a key role in developing a workforce with the necessary and desired values and skills. There is also a need for a place for practitioners to turn to for ongoing clear advice, guidance and support. There are currently various organisations with a role in this. Important and supportive guidance comes from sources including Education Scotland, Scottish Qualifications Authority, General Teaching Council for Scotland, The Care Inspectorate, Scottish Government and teaching unions. Through our work on various education groups we have heard anecdotally that education staff find this confusing,

Importance of wellbeing

Children in Scotland believes wellbeing is at the centre of all learning. We welcome the existing emphasis on health and wellbeing in CfE and the Scottish Attainment Challenge and recognise that this focus is more important than ever.⁹

We would like to see a further commitment to wellbeing as a key pillar of learning through more proportionate funding in the wellbeing strand of CfE and a greater emphasis on relationships within educational settings. We would welcome the direct inclusion of wellbeing in the vision so that this strand is given adequate weight.

Quality participation

In order for the vision for Curriculum for Excellence to reflect adequately what matters for children and young people in Scotland, its development should involve co-design with children and young people themselves.

The Inclusion Ambassadors are a group of secondary-school aged pupils, supported by Children in Scotland, who have a range of additional support needs. They attend a variety of school provision across 16 local authorities. We successfully carried out a co-design approach when developing the

⁹ https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Manifesto_V2.1_March-21.pdf, pages

Inclusion Ambassadors' Vision Statement,¹⁰ which now leads the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan. Through this work we could see the significance to children and young people of being involved in this national level work and how important it was to them to ensure the final vision reflected what they had shared and want to happen in the future.

The Inclusion Ambassadors are clear about the positive impact of feeling involved and valued in decisions about their own education.¹¹ How well pupils are listened to can be improved by implementing the Inclusion Ambassadors recommendations:

- 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 you have discussed things with them and tell them what you are going to do about what they have told you.

Relationship-based practice

Many of the young people we work with have told us how important having good relationships with educational staff is to them. "If teachers are prepared to stick by you, believe in you, it makes a huge difference. You can turn your whole life around."¹²

We were commissioned by General Teaching Council for Scotland in 2018 to engage with children and young people in reviewing the values contained in their Professional Standards. During this research, we asked children and young people what they want from their teachers. They told us they wanted to have good relationships with their teachers as this would support their wellbeing and in turn help their learning: 'if a teacher respects me I want to do well and show I deserve respect'. Our report shares children and young

¹⁰ https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Inclusion-Ambassadors_Vision-Statement_new.pdf.

¹¹ Inclusion Ambassadors, n 4.

¹² © What Kind of Schools Do Children Want? - Children and Young People's Evidence Bank Source: <https://evidencebank.org.uk/evidence/education/what-kind-of-schools-do-children-want/>

people's suggestions on practical ways teachers can implement relationship-based practice.¹³

In 2020-21 the Education Recovery Youth Panel members shared that teaching approaches greatly impact the learning environment, with the group discussing the teacher's role in creating an environment where everyone's opinion matters. Relationships between teachers and pupils are pivotal to their experiences, with teachers having a 'can do' attitude instilling a positive mindset in learners, reflecting that if teachers feel supportive and positive this will be passed on to learners. The young people highlighted that mutual respect and honesty was needed. They hope for an environment of understanding, kindness and communication, highlighting that the support you receive affects the way that you learn.¹⁴

The Inclusion Ambassadors' 2020-2021 report details how they have spoken at length about the importance of good communication and relationships that are built on trust.¹⁵ One Ambassador told us:

"Having a teacher I trust...it just 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."

They ask that:

- School staff (such as teachers and support staff) facilitate good two-way communication between adults and young people, including clearly explaining why decisions have been taken.
- Staff 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 trust young people to make decisions about their lives and support. They should work with them to identify solutions in class.

Early Years

Children in Scotland's membership encompasses a range of organisations and professionals working in early learning and childcare, including local authorities and early years practitioners. We also administer the Early Learning

¹³ Children in Scotland (commissioned by GTCs), Review of the Professional Standards: The Experiences of Children and Young people (September 2018), accessed here: <http://www.gtc.org.uk/web/files/the-standards/Children-In-Scotland-Review-of-Professional-Standards.pdf>.

¹⁴ https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cee5bd0687a1500015b5a9f/t/60b8b6db1d83850f7a742e10/1622718176064/YS+Education+Recover+Report_V2.pdf

¹⁵ The Inclusion Ambassadors, Challenging inequalities and leading change: a report on the work of the Inclusion Ambassadors from 2020-21 (2021), accessed here: https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IA_Report2021_Final-pdf.pdf

and Childcare Inclusion Fund on behalf of Scottish Government. The fund supports children with additional support needs (ASN) in Scotland to access their funded ELC entitlement.

We wish to emphasise that Early Years must be considered in any education reform, including young children and their parents' voices being heard. Under the UNCRC, all children have a right to have their voices heard about decisions that affect them in line with their understanding and stage of development. They are key stakeholders and decisions around assessment will impact directly on their future. This will help to identify future needs of learners in Scotland and develop Scottish education into being inclusive and accessible for all.

Play

Children in Scotland supported Upstart Scotland's 'Play Not Tests' campaign and firmly believes that play-based learning rather than a focus on assessment in the earliest stages of school is the most appropriate form of education for children at this stage

We believe play could take on a much more prominent role in learning, not just in the early phase but as young people progress. We have been involved in the Scottish Government's Curriculum and Assessment Board subgroup looking at Curriculum for Excellence's Experiences and Outcomes from a child rights point of view. We know that play rarely is mentioned outwith the Experiences And Outcomes of Early level. The importance of play is clearly articulated in the Play Strategy¹⁶ and a greater emphasis on it, alongside support for arts, leisure and sports-based activities and hobbies, could have a clear benefit to wellbeing and development.¹⁷ We recommend that consideration is given to how children and young people can have increased access to extra-curricular hobbies, as part of their wider educational experiences, learning from other countries that have invested in these, such as Finland¹⁸.

Curriculum and assessment

We know through our work with children and young people how important the curriculum and assessment are to get right in order to ensure Scotland's children and young people have a positive educational experience and all have an equal chance to flourish.

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/play-strategy-scotland-action-plan/>.

¹⁷ https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Manifesto_V2.1_March-21.pdf, pages 21-23.

¹⁸ https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Manifesto_V2.1_March-21.pdf

We wish to highlight our colleagues at Enquire's consultation response which outlines some of the issues children and young people with additional support needs experience.

We would highlight the UNCRC General Comment 1 on the Aims of Education, which states that 'The curriculum must be of direct relevance to the child's social, cultural, environmental and economic context and to his or her present or future needs.'¹⁹

The proposal to establish a new agency to replace the SQA will not on its own be enough to implement positive change and achieve this aim. To ensure that the time, effort and resource invested pays off, the proposed changes must be based on the right values and approaches that understand what children and young people want by involving them in shaping these future systems, structures and priorities.

For example, we are aware of the essential work of the Race Equality And Anti Racism In Education Programme (REAREP) and its four different work streams, including curriculum reform. We absolutely welcome this race focus and its aim to affect a cultural change for learners and the workforce in Scottish education²⁰.

Subject choice

We have heard directly from the children and young people we work with that they want to avail of a broad range of subject choices. Our children and young people's advisory group Changing our World and the Inclusion Ambassadors have told us having a broad range of subjects to choose from is important to them. We will be sharing their thoughts in future published communications. This is one area on which the new agency must focus.

Children in Scotland is pleased to support the Scottish Government's focus on Personal and Social Education (PSE) through the PSE Delivery and Implementation Group. Over the last year members of our young people's advisory group Changing Our World have been focusing on what they see as the inconsistencies of PSE delivery across Scotland and how important the subject is to support all children and young people's life skills and knowledge. They make suggestions on how to improve learners' experience in what is taught and how it is delivered, such as more student input. They want it to be more relevant to their lives and be more inclusive to all children and young people.²¹

¹⁹ www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/CRC_General_Comment_1_en.pdf

²⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/groups/race-equality-and-anti-racism-in-education-programme-stakeholder-network-group/>

²¹ <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/changing-our-world/changing-our-world-manifesto-campaign-work/>

Wider definition of achievement

In their Vision Statement the Inclusion Ambassadors assert 'success is different for everyone'.²² The future of assessment must be wider than what is often referred to as the current 'high stakes' final exam approach. Scotland's curriculum and assessment structures and procedures must support all of our learners to achieve. Please see below for more information.

Assessment processes

As we articulated in our response to the 2015 Scottish Government consultation on the National Improvement Framework and in our 2018 response to Scottish Government's call for evidence on standardised assessments, Children in Scotland understands the key role that assessment has in teaching and learning. It provides a barometer to measure progress and to identify areas for improvement. However, we remain concerned about any focus on standardised assessment, particularly in P1 and are unclear about the benefit this would have for children and young people's learning. Our position remains that we do not believe an adequate case was or has been made to justify the introduction of new standardised assessments in P1, P4, P7 and S3.

Over the course of the project, the older group members of the Education Recovery Youth Panel had deep discussions around what they would like decision-makers to consider as highest-priority for their learning.²³ A thread throughout many of the group discussions was around clarity over final grades and assessments and the stress many felt in the alternative arrangements in May and June 2021.

They also spoke about the increased need for access to digital devices in the classroom to support learners who might not have access at home and to support with learning difficulties such as dyslexia. This would also apply to carrying out assessments.

The uncertainty around the exam process this year, and the eventual awarding process, was also a concern for the Inclusion Ambassadors.²⁴ Many were pleased when a decision was made as one member said,

²² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/young-ambassadors-for-inclusion-vision-statement-for-success/>

²³ Children in Scotland and Young Scot, *The Education Recovery Youth Panel*, report found at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cee5bd0687a1500015b5a9f/t/60b8b6db1d83850f7a742e10/1622718176064/YS+Education+Recover+Report_V2.pdf.

²⁴ Inclusion Ambassadors ^2

“People who had exams were glad they had been cancelled as this was stressful”.

Children in Scotland was also concerned over the appeals process, particularly for those young people with additional support needs. We supported a no detriment to appeal policy and for all appeals to be heard case by case as outlined by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland.²⁵

Going forward, the Inclusion Ambassadors 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.

We would draw your attention to Changing Our World's recent campaign around the exam/assessment process. They call for a flexible system that supports all children and young people's needs and offers options for learners. They also call for children and young people to shape the future of assessments in Scottish education²⁶.

They also shared their views with Scotland Can on the same topic:

<https://www.wecan.scot/the-fallacy-of-the-covid-catch-up/>

In addition, please see the resource made by Coll, a former member of Changing Our World (now at university), where he shared his views in more detail:

<https://www.wecan.scot/we-dont-need-this-education/>

Learner support

Through our direct work with groups of children and young people we know some children benefit from one-to-one tailored support and many young people feel that they are not getting the support they need, or indeed are entitled to under Additional Support for Learning legislation.

²⁵ <https://cypcs.org.uk/news-and-stories/commissioner-sqa-must-restore-fairness-to-the-grading-system-cypcs/>

²⁶ <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/changing-our-world/changing-our-world-manifesto-campaign-work/>

As stated above, relationships must be at the heart of learning, and based on understanding the individual needs of learners. As one young person told us though our work with GTCS on Professional Standards: “Makes you feel more confident when you’re getting the help you need.”²⁷ This requires a diverse workforce with the time to get to know children, appropriate skills and qualifications and the resources available to meet children’s needs.²⁸

The Inclusion Ambassadors have been very vocal in advocating for this, providing the following advice to schools:

- “Take everyone’s needs into account”
- “Treat people as their needs require”
- “Don’t read something then go off hoping it’ll work for everyone”
- “They’re not thinking about people who struggle more...I really don’t get it”

Through their 2020-2021 report, the Inclusion Ambassadors have highlighted the varying levels of support they have experienced.²⁹ Children in Scotland staff who support the group have also noticed inconsistent standards and experiences across Scotland and differences in type of provision from their discussions with the ambassadors. The Ambassadors 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.

We have reflected this call in Children in Scotland’s Manifesto for 2021-2026 where we call for a return to specialist provision for children with additional support needs to 2010 levels. This includes support for learning teachers, speech and language therapists and educational psychologists³⁰.

The impact of Covid-19 has also shown the increasing importance of digital forms of education. We know that for some children this can make it easier to engage and the Inclusion Ambassadors have told us they would like to access more support in this area when completing assessments (we will be doing more work with the group on this issue in January 2022 and share our

²⁷ <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/web/files/the-standards/Children-In-Scotland-Review-of-Professional-Standards.pdf>

²⁸ https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Manifesto_V2.1_March-21.pdf

²⁹ ^ 2

³⁰ https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Manifesto_V2.1_March-21.pdf

findings publicly). However, we also know digital exclusion is an issue for many children and families.³¹

Transitions

We believe there must be an improvement on how we support transitions throughout children and young people's learning. Transitions from nursery to school and from primary to secondary and onwards out of secondary school can prove challenging for children, young people and families. This can be particularly difficult for children with additional support needs.

These transitions should be underpinned by a focus on relationships and wellbeing to ensure all children and young people's needs are met and they are ready to enter their new learning environments.³²

We look forward to the Bill going in front of Scottish Parliament in 2022.

Roles and responsibilities

We are not able to comment in detail on this issue. This is not an area we have considered in detail with children and young people. However, we believe that this proposal presents opportunities that should be taken.

We wish to highlight the consultation response by our colleagues at Enquire, which outlines some of the issues children and young people with additional support needs experience with regards to the roles of various education bodies.

A cohesive approach

We would like to stress the importance of a cohesive approach to leadership from the Scottish Government. Children In Scotland staff are involved in various working groups on this theme. We can see education cuts across so many of Scottish Government's Directorates. There must be a more cohesive approach to reform in education and an end to silo working.

Stakeholder trust

We know from our work that children and young people do not feel suitably engaged in decision-making. We have heard this directly from Changing our

³¹ See Inspiring Scotland's report, Digital Exclusion in Scotland (June 2020), found here: <https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Digital-Exclusion-in-Scotland-final-full-report-1.pdf>

³² https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Manifesto_V2.1_March-21.pdf, pages 21-23

World, the Inclusion Ambassadors and the members of the Education Recovery Youth Panel.

Children and young people are the key stakeholders in education and so must be genuinely and meaningfully involved in decision-making from the granular level in the daily experience in the classroom to national level.

Whatever reform takes place, these bodies must be answerable to children and young people – their key stakeholders. Decision-makers must learn from the recent experience surrounding the assessment and appeals process made in summer 2021 and ensure that previous failures in engagement with children and young people are not repeated.³³ We heard clearly from the various groups of young people we worked with over the period about the stress the process caused for many.

Role of the third sector

Through reform, professional learning in Scotland could be diversified and we could make use of the expertise of the wide range of voices in Scotland.

We believe that there needs to be a more meaningful voice for providers beyond schools, such as Youth Work, Community Learning and Development, home link workers and other forms of learning outside formal education.³⁴ We would welcome all types of education providers working in partnership, as this would support education more widely and achieve better outcomes for all children and young people.

If you have any questions about this response please contact, Amy Woodhouse, Head of Policy, Projects and Participation, awoodhouse@childreninscotland.org.uk,

³³ For further detail on our organisation's position, see: <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/no-detriment-on-appeals-call-for-urgent-change-to-exams-certification-process-ahead-of-scottish-parliament-education-debate/>.

³⁴ See Cis Manifesto.