



## **Education, Children and Young People Committee**

### **The impact of the pandemic on children and young people with additional support needs and care-experienced young people**

#### **Children in Scotland Written Submission**

**November 2021**

#### **Background**

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 submit written evidence to the Education, Children and Young People Committee's inquiry on '*The impact of the pandemic on children and young people with additional support needs and care-experienced young people.*' Our submission and our oral evidence will focus on the impact of the pandemic on children and young people with additional support needs.

#### **Children in Scotland additional support for learning services and projects**

Children in Scotland has three national additional support for learning services:

- **Enquire** is the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning. Enquire raises awareness of children's rights to extra support in school, helps families and schools work together to ensure children get the support they need and provides advice to children and young people who might be struggling in school. Reach is the children and young people's part of Enquire which can help young people, parents and carers and professionals understand children's rights to be supported and involved in decisions, so they have an equal chance to flourish in their education.

- **Resolve** is an independent mediation service for parents and carers of children and young people with additional support needs. There is no charge for the service to parents and carers and it can be accessed when there are disagreements about any aspects of a child or young person's education that are not resolved locally. Resolve currently works in 15 local authority areas.
- **My Rights, My Say** is a support service which provides advice and information, advocacy (for children to prepare for and understand the consequences of their own and their parents' use of rights), legal representation for Tribunal references and a service which independently seeks children's views to inform decision-making. Children in Scotland provides two parts of the service.

Children in Scotland also supports the **Inclusion Ambassadors**, a group of 22 secondary school-aged pupils who have a range of additional support needs and attend a variety of school provision. Current membership of the group represents 16 local authorities across Scotland. Evidence from the group in this document is taken from a recent report published on the groups work<sup>1</sup>.

This submission is based on evidence shared with these services and from the Inclusion Ambassadors.

### **Key themes identified**

The following themes have been identified on the impact of the pandemic on children and young people with additional support needs based on enquiries, cases and meetings. Due to the nature of the Children in Scotland services and projects these themes focus on provision of support for learning and the impact of school closures.

We believe these are all issues that should be explored further to ensure a full understanding of the impact of the pandemic on young people with additional support needs. In each of the areas outlined we have heard evidence of a range of experiences, this could be down to variations in experience regionally or indeed on a case-by-case basis.

#### **1. Level of support and impact on learning**

The Inclusion Ambassadors have met regularly online over the course of the pandemic. They reported that levels of support dropped during school closures. Calls from parents and carers to the Enquire helpline during the period confirmed this view, reporting that the experience of a drop in the levels of support appears to have been the case across all phases of the pandemic (i.e., when schools closed, when they reopened and in the period since reopening).

Specific themes and issues identified on the Enquire helpline relating to school closures include:

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<sup>1</sup> [https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IA\\_Report2021\\_Final-pdf.pdf](https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IA_Report2021_Final-pdf.pdf)

- Absence of individualised home learning appropriate to children's needs.
- Inconsistency and confusion about eligibility for hub places under the 'vulnerable child' definition.
- Related to the point above, a lack of access to hubs for families who felt this was needed for their children due to their needs or circumstances.

Overall, there were mixed messages about communication with families during school closures. The Resolve service found that positive communication between schools and families during school closures was reported but Enquire saw that parents and carers often felt there was very little communication.

Parents and carers contacting Enquire on the return to school noted changes or reductions to support in school for their child or young person due to covid restrictions.

Parents and carers contacting Enquire have also reported the longer-term impact or concern about:

- Long term reduction in support/ or the level of support for their child
- Delays in identifying needs
- Failure to plan for support (and transitions planning not taking place for school changes or leaving school).
- How behind with their learning children were on the return to school.

Since schools returned in August 2021, the Resolve mediation service reported seeing a significant pressure on staff – in particular their time which means there is less time to speak informally with families. This has the potential to have an impact as - in Resolve's experience - this is often where small niggles are listened to and addressed.

## **2. Technology**

Across Children in Scotland's services and projects, 'technology' and access to it was a common theme during the period of school closures and remote home learning. Children and young people's experience of online learning has been variable – with some stating a preference and other reporting real challenges in engagement and support. Children have reported being included in online classes, but then being openly exposed as having an additional support for learning need causing feelings of embarrassment and withdrawal from the class.

Some children have reported preferring online learning as the pace and flexibility has been preferable, with some children saying that a blend of online and in person teaching would be the preferred option going forward. Indeed, some children have said they have struggled with the return to classrooms when a positive online experience was had.

A practical part of this concerned the use of Microsoft Teams and its functionality. Children and young people reported that Teams is not the easiest platform for them to use and engage through. However, some comments from the last Inclusion Ambassadors session suggested that this had improved in a few situations. Schools had got a better handle on how to use it and this was making it easier for people to check back on notes etc. The Inclusion Ambassadors group will be exploring this

further in the coming months and would be happy to share further evidence with the Committee then.

Some children supported by My Rights, My Say reported how they disliked attending school before the pandemic. While other young people have reported feeling more comfortable asking for support while working remotely, suggesting there may be some benefits to using technology. The Resolve service has reported similar findings, with families being more confident to ask questions or report issues if they don't need to do it in person.

Children using My Rights, My Say have engaged well with the service using video conferencing platforms throughout the pandemic. Removing the option of face-to-face meetings has meant more emphasis being placed on identifying and being flexible about the communication preferences for children and young people. Feedback from children My Rights, My Say has worked with has given the service a greater awareness of the benefits of engaging with children and young people online. Remote work will continue to be an option for future work as long as it supports children and young people to access My Rights, My Say.

*"I feel that working remotely has widened our knowledge and understanding, given children and young people access to opportunities and methods and also challenged our ability to adapt to those methods. A real positive for me is that young people have not been as negatively impacted by remote working as we may have assumed. It is the adults involved in the process that have had to challenge themselves and rethink what engagement actually is."* **Children's Views worker**

However, this preference has not been replicated by members of the Inclusion Ambassadors. They have expressed a real desire to get back to face-to-face meetings of the group particularly because of the social element but also because of the impact working online has had for the amount that can be effectively covered during each session.

Overall, it is felt that the increased use of online engagement has been a positive thing for children and young people with additional support needs, but it must be one of the options for consideration in the future - the needs and preferences of the individuals must be considered in any decision making about the provision of learning and engagement activity.

### **3. Friends, socialising and change**

Children in Scotland heard from members of the Inclusion Ambassadors group that they lost out on opportunities to socialise while at home during school closures and we know from work with the group that this is a particularly important to them. It was a key part of the recent vision statement the group produced which was one of the agreed actions in the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://childreninScotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IA\\_Vision-Statement\\_Final.pdf](https://childreninScotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IA_Vision-Statement_Final.pdf)

The initial bubble situation was a challenge to them when schools re-opened. Young people felt they were missing out on opportunities to see friends. At the recent sessions, the Inclusion Ambassadors reported that they are starting to feel like this situation has improved slightly and they are getting to see friends more within school.

Both Enquire and Resolve had heard similar reports from parents and carers.

Parents contacting Enquire talked about the impact of school closures on their child in relation to:

- The negative impact on children and their families of the loss of support from school and routine.
- The impact on their child of returning to school after the long absence.

The Resolve service had a number of referrals that involved children and young people who had school anxieties prior to covid, and the pandemic had made them virtually housebound/bedroom bound. Parents of children with social, emotional and behavioural needs reported a change in their child's behaviour at home following the pandemic restrictions.

#### **4. Delays in planning and decisions**

Both the Enquire and Resolve services identified issues with delayed timescales related to co-ordinated support plans (CSPs) and Tribunals which link to the level of support theme above.

Parents and carers reported the following to Enquire:

- Delays in timescales for CSPs as a result of the effective suspension of duties within the Additional Support for Learning Act.
- The pushing back of the placing request response deadline meant that families were finding they had even less time to prepare and plan for transitions with their children.
- Due to the extending timescales for appeal to refused placing requests some children may have to transition twice if they do not hear back before the start of the school year.<sup>3</sup>
- Children who needed but missed out on enhanced transitions faced attending a school they had not seen or visited before.

Enquire heard from families asking if their child can repeat a year because of how much they are struggling to learn at home or because transition plans and support have been so significantly impacted.

Resolve worked with families who found that extended Tribunal timescales caused extra distress during the pandemic and in several cases the child or young person was out of school during this time due to a disagreement over the placement.

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<sup>3</sup> The legislation on placing request timescales and the transition planning duties under the Additional Support for Learning Act caused concerns for families before the pandemic so this deadline extension exacerbates this situation.

## 5. Transition from school

Transitions are often challenging for children and young people but can be even more so for young people with additional support needs. Due to the school closures, Enquire advisors have heard from families:

- Where transition planning meetings have been cancelled or rescheduled for much later in the year.
- Where a young person was due to leave school, but the school closure has had huge impact on planning and preparing for their post-school destinations.

Children in Scotland has recently given its support to Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP's Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill. In our response to the previous consultation on this Bill, we welcomed the weight and importance that proposals like a Transitions Plan, Transitions Strategy and Minister would give to the wider important and worrying challenges around health, education, social care transitions. At the time, though, we had reservations that these steps may not bring about the desired changes for disabled children and young people. However, we believe that the landscape disabled young people and their families are now facing has changed significantly.

**For more information on this response please contact Sally Cavers, Head of Inclusion, [scavers@childreninscotland.org.uk](mailto:scavers@childreninscotland.org.uk)**