



# Inclusion Ambassadors

## Improving Additional Support for Learning: Evidence and Recommendations from the Inclusion Ambassadors (2020-26)

May 2026





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## Background

The Inclusion Ambassadors are a group of young people who are entitled to additional support for learning. The group exists to ensure that the voices, views and experiences of young people with additional support needs are heard in decisions about education policy. The group has been supported by Children in Scotland since 2019.

The project is grounded in a children's rights based approach. In particular, it reflects the right of all children and young people to express their views on matters that affect them, and for those views to be given due weight, as set out in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In 2020, the Scottish Government published the [Additional Support for Learning Action Plan](#)<sup>1</sup>, developed in response to the findings of [Angela Morgan's Review of Additional Support for Learning](#).<sup>2</sup> The Action Plan set out a national programme of work to address the issues identified in the review and to strengthen the delivery of additional support for learning across Scotland. A central commitment within the Action Plan was to improve how children and young people are involved in decisions that affect their education.

The Inclusion Ambassadors project was explicitly referenced within the Action Plan as a mechanism for supporting the participation of children and young people with additional support needs at a national level. Through this, the project was recognised as playing an important role in ensuring that the lived experiences of children and young people help to inform policy development, implementation and review in relation to additional support for learning.

Since its publication, the Action Plan has been subject to regular review and reflection, concluding in 2026. Over this period, the project has evolved and extends to supporting the participation of children and young people with additional support needs in a number of ways. This has included:

- Engaging directly with children and young people and sharing their views with national decision makers, through:
  - our work with the core Inclusion Ambassadors group to have their views heard and taken into account in national education policy making; and
  - our work with children and young people in primary schools and specialist educational settings.
- Delivering our learning and development offer, which supports professionals to engage with children and young people and embed the views of children and young people into local decision making on additional support for learning.
- Delivering the Success Looks Different Awards.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government. (2020). [Additional Support for Learning Action Plan](#).

<sup>2</sup> Morgan, A. (2020). [Support for Learning: All our Children and All their Potential](#).

As the Action Plan reached completion, Children in Scotland have reflected on the contribution of the Inclusion Ambassadors project over this period, as well as the wider ongoing development of the project across that time period.

This report brings together learning from across the project's different workstreams between 2020 and March 2026, reflecting on progress made, challenges encountered and what children and young people's experiences tell us about additional support for learning in Scotland.



## Work with the core Inclusion Ambassadors group

As of 2026, there are 16 members of the core Inclusion Ambassadors group, representing 15 local authority areas across Scotland. Over the lifetime of the ASL Action Plan there have been roughly 40 different members of the group.

Members of the group are encouraged to speak freely and openly, sharing their experiences of being a pupil with additional support needs in Scotland, including what works and what could make things better.

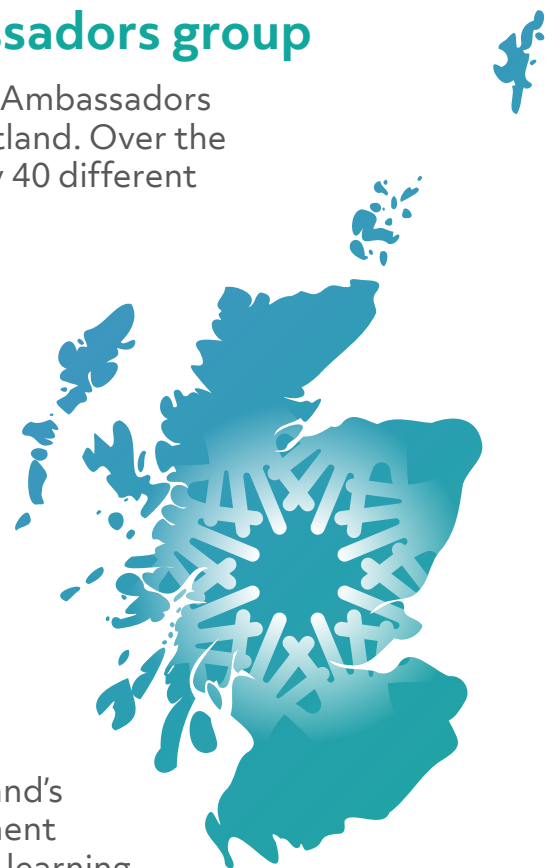
Meetings are planned to focus on the key topics and issues which members have identified that they wish to discuss. Members of the group are supported to share their views and experiences in a range of ways, including arts-based activities, games and discussions.

Members of the group have shared their positions directly with MSPs and other decision makers, and in evidence papers that are available on Children in Scotland's website. Their views have also supported the development of practical resources and inform Children in Scotland's learning and development offer to professionals and local authorities.

The Inclusion Ambassadors group have discussed a wide range of topics and issues relating to additional support for learning across the years, but the following three themes have been of particular interest:

- The support planning process
- Communication, relationships and behaviour in schools
- Exams and assessments.

Across 2025-26, the group have reflected on their contributions to the national discussion on these three core issues since the publication of the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan in 2020. This report will explore the group's views on these issues, and reflect on the learning of the wider project.



# Support planning

## What good support planning looks like

This section brings together the views of the core Inclusion Ambassadors group on support planning, drawing on engagement from across 2023 and a full day in person session held in September 2025. While some members of the group have changed over time, the same key themes and issues relating to support planning have remained important to the group.

The Inclusion Ambassadors recognise that support planning can play a significant role in shaping children and young people's experiences of school. When it works well, it can create clarity about the support a young person needs and ensure consistency of understanding across staff teams. It allows support to reflect a young person's needs, preferences and goals. The group have expressed that without effective support planning processes, support can be inconsistent, confusing or irrelevant, particularly when children and young people are not involved in the process.

The group continue to emphasise that young people should be involved in their support planning processes. They highlighted challenges like support provision that does not reflect their needs and is adult led, and the additional pressure that arises as a result of exams and assessments.

The Inclusion Ambassadors have clearly identified what good, person centred support looks like from their perspective. We have outlined these in our recent Principles of Support Planning resource, which offers a strong foundation to support ongoing improvement in the delivery of additional support for learning.

### Key learning

#### Feeling understood and supported

When support planning works well, it can have a positive impact on young people's confidence, wellbeing and engagement with learning. The Inclusion Ambassadors spoke about the importance of learning environments that feel safe, accessible and comfortable, and where adults understand their individual needs.

Young people shared that they feel positively about their learning when different staff across their classes understand how they are supported and put this into practice consistently. However, they also emphasised that support should feel appropriate and respectful, particularly when multiple adults are involved.

***“You should only get support when you want or are comfortable with it.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

We heard that support planning can help staff to understand the young people they work with every day, allowing more carefully planned strategies and tools for support, and reduces the need for pupils to explain what they need directly to school staff. The group described how this can be particularly important during busy or stressful periods, such as assessments or transitions in school.

## Being included in decisions

A consistent message from the group was the importance of being actively involved in discussions about their support. When young people are included, they feel more confident that decisions reflect what they feel they need, rather than assumptions made by adults.

***“It [support planning] should be involving the pupils to make sure they get what they need.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

***“There needs to be meetings with people you actually know and work well with.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

Some young people shared examples of positive experiences from college or university settings, where they felt that discussions about their support had been more direct and collaborative than support planning processes in school. We heard that where this process worked well, staff spoke with them, wrote down what they said, and changes were reviewed together. Being part of this process helped young people feel respected and trusted, giving them more choice in how support was provided.

The group also felt strongly that support planning should reflect the whole child or young person, rather than focusing only on academic work. They spoke about the importance of recognising their health and wellbeing at school, their identity and participation in the wider school community.

***“School shouldn’t be just about preparing for a career.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

***“It could encourage people to find their identity.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

## **When support planning does not work**

While recognising the value that support planning can have, the Inclusion Ambassadors described a range of challenges in how it is implemented in practice. One of the most common concerns was that their support plans were not always read or understood by all staff.

When teachers or cover staff are not aware of a young person’s required support, the agreed adjustments may not be put in place. This can lead to very different experiences across classes and can make young people feel that support depends on the individual adult rather than an agreed approach.

***“You’re always having to repeat yourself.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

Some young people also felt that support plans can be unclear and do not always include the specific tools and strategies that young people would like to be made available to them, with only a few notes rather than a clear explanation of what support should look like. This can make it difficult for staff to know what is expected and for young people to feel confident that support will be provided consistently.

### Reviews and meetings

Experiences of reviewing support varied widely across the group. Some young people reported regular check ins, while others said their support had only been reviewed once or not at all during secondary school. Several shared that meetings were arranged at times when they were unavailable, or that they were not invited to attend.

***“They always organise it [support planning meeting] for when I’m not available.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

***“[Adults say], ‘We’ll see what she needs’, but they haven’t.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

The group described meetings about support as sometimes stressful and not child-friendly. They said they would prefer discussions to take place in more accessible ways, such as informal conversations or one to one discussions with someone they trust. Young people felt that these approaches would make it easier to share honest views and explain what is working, and what could be better.

### Inconsistency and loss of support

Another key issue raised by members of the group was that there had been inconsistency in support. Some young people described situations where support was promised but did not happen, or where support staff were unavailable due to competing priorities.

***“They keep saying they’ll do things and then never do.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

***“During exams I lose supporting adults.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

The group also recognised that having too many adults involved can feel overwhelming. They emphasised that support should respect their independence and comfort, and that changes to support should be communicated clearly in advance.

#### **Key Inclusion Ambassadors resources**

- [Support planning summary paper](#)
- [Principles of support planning resource](#)
- [Nobody left out: why support assistants are vital for inclusion](#), Children in Scotland podcast – episode 17
- [Supporting effective transitions resource](#)
- [Inclusive learning environment poster](#)

## Relationships, behaviour and communication

Relationships, behaviour and communication between pupils and the adults who support them have been a key focus of improvement activity in Scottish education in recent years. This is reflected in the Scottish Government's Relationships and behaviour in schools: national action plan 2024–2027<sup>3</sup>, which brought together actions in response to long standing evidence of challenges in this area and the unprecedented interruptions to learning presented through the coronavirus pandemic.

The action plan also recognises the increasing complexity of support needs across Scotland's school population, and that where these needs are not met, this can place pressure on relationships between pupils, staff, families and schools. This aligns with findings from Morgan's 2020 review of additional support for learning<sup>2</sup>, which highlighted the relationship between unmet support needs, breakdown in communication and young people's experiences of distress in school.

The review acknowledged that distress based or dysregulated behaviour can be a response to a range of social, emotional and environmental factors, many of which sit beyond the classroom. It emphasised the importance of preventative, relational approaches that reduce distress rather than responding punitively when children are presenting dysregulated behaviour.

The Inclusion Ambassadors' understanding of relationships and behaviour closely reflects this approach. Across their work, the group has consistently articulated their belief that behaviour is communication, and that when pupils experience distress this influences their behaviour, and can be a signal that their needs are not being met. The group has previously shared learning on this topic through their [relationships and behaviour summary](#) paper and our [language and communication guide](#) for pupils and staff in school.

Across 2025–26, we revisited this topic with the Inclusion Ambassadors to reflect on progress and earlier learning, and explore whether their views had changed over time. The Inclusion Ambassadors' core messages about relationships, behaviour and communication have developed over this time period, to reflect the connection between support needs and behaviour. The group recognise that behaviour is a form of communication, and they have described how unmet needs often drive experiences of distress and dysregulation.

The group have emphasised the importance of relationship-based approaches that consider the individual needs of children and young people, calm environments and recognition of young people's effort.



<sup>3</sup> Scottish Government. (2024). [Improving relationships and behaviour in schools: ensuring consistent and safe environments for all, Joint action plan 2024-2027](#).

## Understanding communication and relationships

The Inclusion Ambassadors were clear that young people's behaviour might communicate many different needs, and that this can sometimes be misunderstood by adults as deliberate or chosen behaviour.

### Key learning

#### Distress and overwhelm

We heard how members of the Inclusion Ambassadors and other pupils in school can become distressed or overwhelmed during the school day due to noise levels, crowded spaces and the pace of school routines. They also highlighted that experiences outside school, including pressures at home, can carry into the classroom and affect how pupils cope emotionally.

We also heard that the way some adults and peers communicate within the classroom, including raised voices and shouting, can contribute to feelings of distress or overwhelm, particularly for pupils with additional support needs. These experiences can lead pupils to become dysregulated, which may then be interpreted by adults as disruptive behaviour, sometimes resulting in responses that feel unfair.

***“There could be a variety of reasons for patching class. People get overstimulated or overwhelmed by stuff.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

The group also reflected on how school rules and expectations can contribute to feelings of distress, particularly when they feel inflexible or are applied inconsistently. Where pupils felt their additional support needs or exemptions were not understood, they described responding emotionally to environments that felt unfair or unaccommodating.

#### Support needs not being met

Unmet support needs were identified by the group as a key reason that young people with additional support needs may show dysregulated behaviour in school. Inclusion Ambassadors described how difficult it can be to communicate that support is not working, particularly if staff do not listen or information is not shared consistently across teaching teams.

The group were clear that behaviour linked to disengagement or frustration is often an attempt to communicate that learning feels inaccessible or overwhelming.

***“If someone has a disability and they are struggling because the support has never been there or they have lost their support, they might act up [for] the support.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

***“Teachers think I’m being condescending when I tell them what I need.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

When pupils feel unable to access learning and do not receive the right support at the right time, they described quickly disengaging, which can then be misinterpreted by adults as misbehaviour rather than communication of an unmet need.

## Relationships with staff

Strong relationships with staff were consistently described as central to positive experiences in school. Where these relationships are weak or have broken down, the group described a higher likelihood of needs being misunderstood or overlooked, increasing distress and dysregulation.

***“When the teacher will say something to them [young person] and they get so angry that they don’t know what they are saying... when the teacher shouts at them like that, they can’t stay calm.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

The group described how repeated experiences of not being listened to can lead to loss of trust. Over time, this can make it harder for pupils to communicate their needs to school staff, and the group felt that this can make young people more likely for distress to be communicated through behaviour. The Inclusion Ambassadors group were clear that building trusting relationships early is one of the most effective ways to reduce distress and prevent escalation.

### **Key learning: building positive and collaborative relationships**

#### Building trust between school staff and young people

Feeling able to trust adults was described as essential. Trusting relationships allow pupils to communicate their needs honestly and feel confident that adults will listen and respond appropriately.

***“It’s good when they [staff] try to find solutions with you.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

The group highlighted the importance of working together with school staff, sharing that decisions about support and behaviour are most effective when young people are involved in the process. This aligns with their learning on support planning and reinforces the importance of relationship-based, participatory approaches.

#### Understanding and upholding support

The group have shown that their own principles of support planning highlighted in this report are critical to supporting positive relationships and behaviour in school. Once support needs are understood and agreed, Inclusion Ambassadors emphasised the importance of consistency. When support is not delivered as expected, pupils can feel let down, increasing anxiety and undermining trust.

***“Your support should be clearly communicated to all teachers.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

***“They might not like the teacher because they are forcing them to do too much work.”***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

Consistency across staff was seen as particularly important during transitions, assessments and periods of increased pressure.

## Positive communication

The Inclusion Ambassadors group tell us that positive communication is a powerful tool in promoting engagement and emotional regulation. Experiences of praise and recognition were consistently shared as examples of helping pupils feel valued beyond academic attainment.

*“I think it does change the way you act, helps create a bit of confidence.”*

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

We also heard that school staff shouting or using raised voices were strongly associated with increased distress. The group felt that such approaches can escalate situations and disproportionately affect pupils with additional support needs, even when not directed at them.

*“If someone has a track record of doing bad things their first instinct is to shout at them.”*

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

*“I remember a time that a teacher raised their voice so loudly it started to really upset me. A pupil support assistant had to take me out of class.”*

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Shouting was widely viewed as not rights respecting and as something that can undermine relationships rather than repair them.

## **Key learning: Whole school approaches that promote positive behaviour**

### Inclusive spaces and environments

Access to calm, supportive spaces was consistently identified as helpful in reducing distress and supporting regulation. These spaces allowed pupils to step away and manage emotions before re engaging with learning when they are ready.

The group described how small changes to the environment such as soft lighting, comfortable furnishings and quiet environments were particularly valuable. We heard that spaces which were designed in this way reduced experiences of sensory overwhelm and contributed to young people feeling safe, supported and belonging in school, with positive effects for relationships and engagement.

### Recognition and merit systems

Merit and reward systems were generally viewed positively when used fairly and consistently.

*“It’s good to get rewarded for a year of hard work, it reassures you.”*

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

However, inconsistent use of merit systems was described by the group as demotivating. The group stressed that recognition needs to reflect individual progress and effort, and to be embedded as a whole school approach that recognises different ways that young people can show positive behaviour.

## [Exclusions](#)

The Inclusion Ambassadors acknowledged that removing a pupil behaving disruptively may be an appropriate decision to prevent other pupils becoming overwhelmed and allowing other pupils to continue with their learning. They did, however, consider longer-term exclusions an ineffective way to respond to changes in behaviour and may not address the unmet needs that a young person is communicating. The group felt that this could isolate young people, cause further harm to their relationships with staff members, and would not support the promotion of positive behaviours.



### Key Inclusion Ambassadors resources

- [Relationships and Behaviour summary paper](#)
- [Language and communication guide](#)
- [Inclusive school environments – Beyond the classroom summary paper](#)
- [Pledge Pack resource](#)

## Exams and assessments

Exams and assessments form a significant part of many pupils' experience of Scotland's education system, particularly in the senior phase of secondary school. However, long standing concerns remain about how dominant exams are within education, and the impact this can have on wellbeing, inclusion and recognition of achievement.

Morgan's independent review of additional support for learning<sup>2</sup> and Hayward's review of Scotland's system of qualifications and assessments<sup>4</sup> have highlighted that a strong focus on attainment can disadvantage pupils who learn and achieve in different ways. This can be particularly true for pupils with additional support needs, whose progress and success may not be accurately reflected through formal exams and assessments.

The Inclusion Ambassadors have shared their views on exams and assessments consistently over our time with the group. They had a significant role feeding into the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment led by Professor Louise Hayward. While they recognise that exams have a role, they believe the current system does not always reflect fairness, inclusion or the full range of learner achievement. Their work on the Success Looks Different Awards and their contributions to engagement work on education reform reflect the group's hopes for more inclusive and individualised ways to recognise young people's skills and achievements.

Over 2025-26, the group revisited this topic over two focused sessions, however it should be recognised that issues relating to exams and assessments are a key area of interest for the group and are often relevant in discussions on a range of topics, including support planning, communication, relationships and behaviour. These views build on earlier discussions, and are summarised below.

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<sup>4</sup> Hayward, L. (2023). [It's Our Future: Report of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#).

## Key themes

### Benefits of exams and assessments

The Inclusion Ambassadors acknowledged that exams and assessments can have value. They recognised that assessments are important for helping teachers understand young people's progress in learning and identify where young people might require additional support. They also recognised that qualifications can be important for accessing further education and careers.

***"I want to do midwifery, so this [exams] will help me get there."***

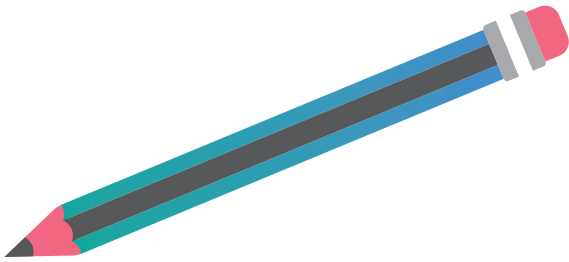
**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

Some young people also felt that the experience of preparing for exams helped them develop skills such as commitment and perseverance.

***"Exams are good for life experience. It teaches us dedication, if we want something we have to work for it."***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

However, these views have typically been outweighed by the group's concerns about how heavily exams shape their learning and wider school experience.



### Exams shaping learning priorities

The group felt that exams and assessments dominate the senior phase, and this is prioritised by school staff and young people across the school. Members of the group of all ages shared this concern, including those who had not themselves experienced exams.

Inclusion Ambassadors described how important areas of learning, including practical life skills and social development, are not always recognised through exams.

***"Sometimes things you learn they aren't for the real world. I don't know about bills or money or taxes, I don't learn that."***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

***"To learn. It's not just about what is going in class. Learning about social abilities and communication skills. Learning to make friends."***

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

They felt that this approach to recognising success does not reflect what the group consider to be the purpose of education or recognise the diversity of skills and talents that young people with additional support needs may have.

## Impact of exams and assessments on wellbeing

The Inclusion Ambassadors were clear that young people's behaviour might communicate many different needs, and that this can sometimes be misunderstood by adults as deliberate or chosen behaviour.

### Key learning

#### Stress and anxiety

A central concern for the Inclusion Ambassadors was the impact of exams and assessments on wellbeing. Many described pressure, stress and anxiety linked to preparation, revision and the high stakes attached to exam results.

*“Some nights I can't go to my [after school] clubs because of stress. I take my health seriously.”*

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

The volume of revision and number of exams over short periods were described as overwhelming by members of the group. Even those who had not yet sat exams spoke about their impression of the process based on what their peers have expressed.

*“I don't really know that much of exams, but it sounds like a ton of work.”*

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

The group felt this level of pressure could lead to burnout and disengagement, particularly for pupils who already experience stress and anxiety as a result of not having their needs met at school.

#### Feeling that achievement is overlooked

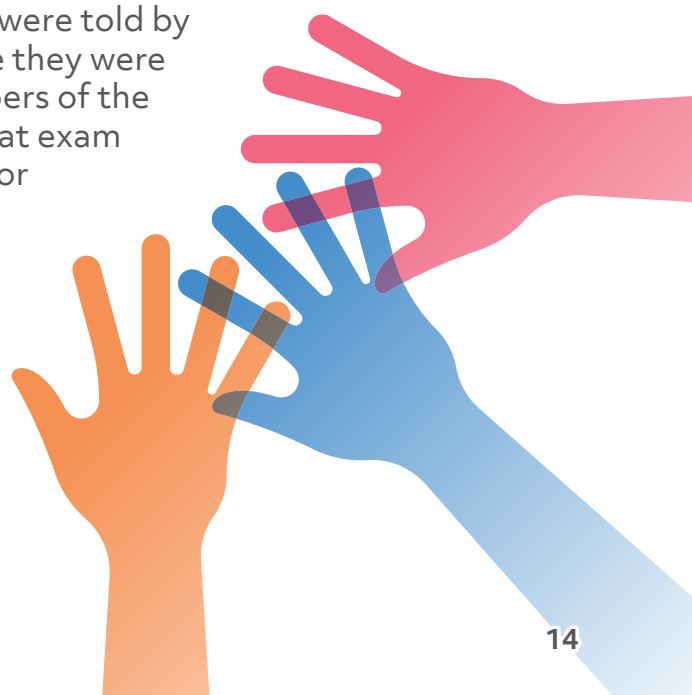
The Inclusion Ambassadors were clear that the focus on exams can make other achievements feel invisible. They shared concerns that pupils who do not sit exams, or who sit fewer subjects, may feel devalued.

*“I had to stop doing subjects I liked because the assessments were too hard.”*

**Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

Some described experiences where young people were told by school staff not to continue with a subject because they were not expected to pass their exam. This made members of the group feel unsupported and reinforced the idea that exam results define success, rather than learning, effort or making progress.

The group highlighted that their development of the Success Looks Different Awards was directly influenced by this belief that formal exams do not fully recognise the achievements of all pupils.



## Flexible and inclusive approaches

### Key learning

#### Rethinking assessment

When reflecting on their hopes for the future of exams and assessments, the Inclusion Ambassadors called for greater flexibility in how learning is assessed. They felt that regular classroom-based assessment from school staff who understand their progress should play a greater role in determining their qualifications, and that young people should have more choice in how they demonstrate their learning.

***“Pupils should get more say in their assessments.”***

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

***“It sounds good to do a mix of subject based [assessments] and more skill-focused ones.”***

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

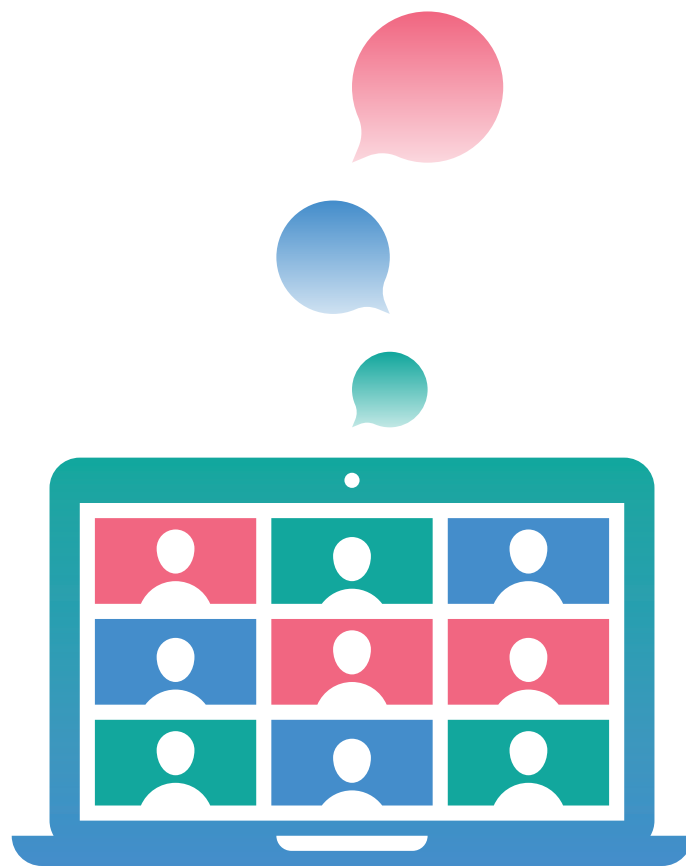
The group also questioned whether all pupils should sit exams at the same age or stage, suggesting that readiness should be considered on an individual basis to be more inclusive.

#### Support during exams

Some Inclusion Ambassadors shared positive experiences of adjustments they have been able to have during exams, including access to quieter spaces, breaks and technology that would support them.

***“I use a laptop, I find it easier and quicker to use to a laptop. I was allowed to use a calculator to help me in a non calculator learning. This helps me a lot, it helps me go quicker, means I can get through the exam.”***

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors



However, members of the group also expressed concern that access to these supports can depend on having a specific diagnosis. They felt that some young people might experience the same challenges and require the same support as others, but without official diagnosis they would not get the support they need.

*“I think it should be easier for people who do not have a diagnosis to get more support with their exams – her [friend] exams are too much one after the other. She struggles with the hall environment. She had too many assessments.”*

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

The group felt support should be based on need rather than diagnosis, and that schools should actively work to reduce barriers for young people in a fair and supportive way.



### Key Inclusion Ambassadors resources

- [Let's Talk Education: Inclusion Ambassadors' contribution to the National Discussion](#)
- [Inclusion Ambassadors' response to the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessments](#)
- [‘If I were head teacher for a day’ resource](#)



## Engaging with primary-aged children and young people

As part of the wider Inclusion Ambassadors project, Children in Scotland delivered a pilot project based in one primary school in 2024. The purpose of this pilot was to explore how the Inclusion Ambassadors approach to embedding participation could be applied in primary school settings.

We know from our work that the experiences of younger children with additional support needs are less visible in national discussions.

This initial pilot demonstrated that the adapted approach was able to support meaningful engagement with primary school-aged children, and the young people involved were motivated to share their views and experiences on additional support for learning.

Across 2025-26, due to additional funding from Scottish Government, we developed the approach from our pilot, with delivery taking place in two primary schools in different local authorities. We have been pleased to expand this opportunity to ensure that a wider range of children have the opportunity to share their views on additional support for learning.

Our work to adapt the Inclusion Ambassadors approach to suit the primary setting from 2024-26 has allowed the project to reflect on how children and young people's experiences of additional support for learning are represented across their wider

school experience. The activity has demonstrated the importance of facilitating meaningful engagement with children and young people of all ages, and emphasised our responsibility as adults to make space for young children to be heard in decision-making on issues that impact them.

Through our engagement with primary-aged children, it has also drawn attention to consistent themes and important issues for children and young people across primary and secondary stages of school. Across all ages, relationships with staff are key to getting the right support for young people, and stress and overwhelm associated with noisy and overstimulating learning environments are present across the school experience. It is also clear that young people's feelings about the curriculum change as they move through school, alongside having less opportunity for child-led and play-based learning, and school places greater focus on exams and assessments.

## Our approach

Both the 2024 pilot and the 2025–26 project were grounded in the Inclusion Ambassadors methodology and Children in Scotland's Meaningful Participation and Engagement guidelines. Engagement was child led and centred on play based methods designed to support comfort, creativity and confidence.

In the 2024 pilot, staff worked with 15 children across two age groups over a series of weekly sessions. In 2025–26, the approach was adapted to run over short blocks of consecutive days in each school, supporting accessibility and reducing disruption. Across both phases, children were selected by schools to reflect a range of needs and experiences. Details on the schools and participant numbers at each phase can be found in *Table 1* below.

*Table 1*

School (Local Authority Area)	Year of participation	Participant numbers
Williamston Primary School (West Lothian)	2024	15
Buchanhaven Primary School (Aberdeenshire)	2025	13
Avenue Ends Primary School (Glasgow)	2026	11

## Key themes

Specific learning from this phase of work will be explored in our upcoming report which will be launched [on our website](#) in early Summer of 2026. In this report, we have outlined key reflections from our delivery of the work, and looking forward to how Scotland can make sure that primary-aged children are supported to participate in decision making about additional support for learning.

Below we have highlighted key learning from this work and quotes from participating children.

- 1 Children in primary school have a clear understanding of their support needs and why getting the right support is important for their learning

*“You might not do well if you don’t have help.”*

Primary-aged child participating in the project

*“Teachers should listen to us – kids can tell teachers what we need.”*

Primary-aged child participating in the project

- 2 Strong relationships with staff and peers are central to experience of school. Children spoke clearly about the qualities they value in staff, including kindness, fairness, listening and helping them feel safe.

*“She helps me every time, in everything.”*

Primary-aged child participating in the project

- 3 The wider primary school learning environment is key for children. They want the whole school to be a nurturing space where don’t feel overwhelmed. They value quiet, calm spaces in the school building

*“I don’t like anywhere else in school [apart from the Support for Learning room] because it is too loud.”*

Primary-aged child participating in the project

*“The playground is where I can be with my friends. I like nature and being outside.”*

Primary-aged child participating in the project

- 4 Younger children described enjoying a variety of learning approaches, and recognised that children and young people learn in different ways. We heard that the youngest children were most engaged when given opportunities for child-led play. Children also want to be challenged in their learning, in an environment where they get the right support

*“I write very slow, so I sometimes miss things and don’t get to finish.”*

Primary-aged child participating in the project

*“It’s important to have fun at school, it helps motivate me.”*

Primary-aged child participating in the project





## Engaging with young people attending specialist educational settings

As outlined throughout this report, much of our direct work with young people comes in the form of group-based engagement through our core Inclusion Ambassadors group, which welcomes secondary-aged young people who are entitled to additional support for learning in their mainstream school or alternative provisions. However, we have found that this group-based approach to participation work has not allowed us to engage in a meaningful way with young people with more complex additional support needs.

Over 2025-26, the team at Children in Scotland have extended the work of the Inclusion Ambassadors project to address this gap and further develop our approach to engaging with children and young people who communicate non-verbally.

This work has been supported by additional funding from the Scottish Government for Children in Scotland to specifically look at developing support for children with more complex additional support needs.

Expanding the Inclusion Ambassadors network in this way has supported us to ensure that learning from the project reflects a wider range of lived experiences, and that young people with complex additional support needs have their views and experiences included in the national discussion.

### Our approach

Engaging meaningfully with children and young people with complex additional support needs requires a relationship based approach. The approach must be shaped by young people's own interests, support needs, and communication profile. It must also be delivered in ways that are accessible and non-intrusive. For this reason, the engagement work in 2025-26 focused on engaging with very small numbers of young people at a time, and in places where they felt comfortable, and with the support of adults who have an existing relationship with the child.

Engagement took place within school settings and involved a combination of direct communication with young people both verbally and using ACC (Augmentative or Alternative Communication) devices such as Talking Mats, observations, intensive interaction, and reflective discussions with staff and families. This approach recognised that children and young people with complex additional support needs may communicate their views indirectly and that understanding these views requires flexibility, time, and trusting relationships.

### Overview of activity in 2025–2026

During 2025–2026, we engaged with a small number of children and young people attending two specialist educational settings:

- Langlands School, Dumfries and Galloway
- Cedarbank School, West Lothian.

In total, we worked with five young people, involving the school staff who support them and their families where possible. This first phase of work was designed to engage with small numbers of young people to allow for focused, in-depth engagement and tailoring the approach to the individual. Engagement with each young person took place across two days in their school, allowing time for us to develop a rapport with the young person and observe how they respond to a range of curricular areas, activities and interactions.

Alongside work with children and young people, we also spoke with staff about their experiences of working in specialist settings. This allowed us to better understand the context of the school and begin to build a picture of staff's views and experiences.

We will continue to build on this workstream in 2026-27.

## What we have learned so far

This initial phase of engagement has highlighted both the importance and the challenge of meaningfully including the voices of children and young people with complex additional support needs. It has also reinforced the need for sustained, relationship based engagement over time.

Our learnings are based on engagement with a very small group of children and young people, across just two schools and two local authorities. For this reason, we have not provided a full thematic analysis or made specific recommendations at this stage. However, there are some high level themes that have begun to emerge from this early phase of engagement.

This early stage of engagement work supports what we already know from our engagement with the core Inclusion Ambassadors group, who have told us that relationships with staff are central to children and young people's experiences of school. This was seen to be particularly relevant in specialist provisions where young people benefit from routine and familiar adults who can support their communication, emotional regulation and transitions throughout the school day. Strong, trusting relationships helped staff to understand individual pupils' communication and respond sensitively to distress or uncertainty. Reflecting on this, school staff also highlighted that pupils' reliance on a small number of key relationships has the potential to pose challenges for young people when staff are absent or when change occurs.

***"It's great that [staff member] can come to help with transitions, but when she is needed somewhere else, that's when things go wrong."***

**School staff participating in Inclusion Ambassadors project**

We also heard from staff that enrolment across both schools has changed significantly in recent years. Staff described increases in pupil numbers alongside changes in complexity of need. Staff reflected that these changes have had a significant impact on how specialist settings support young people to learn. Pressure on space affected how classrooms were organised and how young people could move, access equipment or find areas to regulate. Changes to space and staffing also influenced curriculum delivery, with staff needing to continually adapt provision to meet a wide range of needs.

Staff spoke about balancing individualised, holistic approaches to learning with wider expectations around attainment, tracking and monitoring. These pressures shaped the daily experiences of young people, even where staff were working creatively and flexibly within the constraints they faced.



## Learning, development and capacity building

Across the years of the ASL Action Plan, the Inclusion Ambassadors project has supported the learning and development of practitioners and professionals in the sector. This has been driven by the core aim of the project, to support young people with additional support needs to be heard and taken seriously in education policy.

Over recent years, this work has involved two key strands of work, delivering online webinars, and more in-depth capacity building through learning and development.

Across the last five years we have delivered nine online sessions for professionals working with children and young people who are entitled to additional support for learning, sharing the views of the Inclusion Ambassadors group and practical guidance.

We have also worked in partnership with three local authorities to support the development of local models of the Inclusion Ambassadors approach:

- Glasgow
- Perth and Kinross
- Edinburgh

Across 2025–26, as part of the project’s reflective activity, Children in Scotland engaged with staff leads from partner local authorities to reflect on the impact of this work and identify how it has influenced additional support for learning policy and practice.

The learning and development work delivered through the Inclusion Ambassadors project has shown to be valuable to professionals and has contributed positively to local thinking and practice around additional support for learning. Staff highlighted the benefit of having external support to help develop participation focused work, particularly reporting that internal capacity is stretched.

At the same time, reflections from both local authority and Children in Scotland staff highlight that this approach to capacity building work requires time, consistency and dedicated resource to be delivered meaningfully. Building local models of participation is complex, relationship-based work that benefits from sustained support.

### Supporting local authorities to develop a local approach to the Inclusion Ambassadors model

This capacity building work involved Children in Scotland staff working closely with local education leads and school staff to build understanding of the approach and strengthen local capacity to embed meaningful participation in practice.

Overall, local authority staff reported that their involvement in the Inclusion Ambassadors work had a positive impact on both policy and practice. Staff highlighted that the approach supported increased opportunities to embed children and young people's views within additional support for learning, and that this has prompted practical changes in local practice.

In one local authority, the establishment of a local Inclusion Ambassadors group created a new communication route between young people and senior education structures. This offered a clear pathway for children and young people's views to inform strategic discussions about inclusion, strengthening the link between lived experience and decision making.

In another local authority, where the work was at an earlier stage, staff reflected that it was too soon to understand longer term impact. However, they noted positive early feedback from children and young people involved, as well as from school staff supporting participation, suggesting that the approach was being well received on the ground.

## **Practical challenges and enabling factors**

Staff across local authorities spoke openly about the practical challenges of delivering participation focused work within busy systems. Pressures on staff capacity were the most frequently-identified issue, both in terms of directly supporting the Inclusion Ambassadors work, and sustaining engagement, alongside wider responsibilities. Staff changes and turnover were also highlighted as a challenge, particularly for work that relies on relationship building and continuity.

We also heard that opportunities to develop resources or outputs, and to communicate learning widely across local authority teams, can be limited. Existing systems and processes were described as complex, meaning that new approaches need time to align with current ways of working in order to be sustainable.

These reflections were shared in a constructive and thoughtful way, and staff consistently emphasised their commitment to inclusive practice and to hearing children and young people's views, even where capacity and structural pressures make this difficult in practice.

## **Wider influence on additional support for learning**

Beyond the direct impact of local groups, staff reflected that engagement with the Inclusion Ambassadors project had influenced thinking more broadly about additional support for learning. Several described a shift towards a more deliberate 'listening' approach, with increased emphasis on actively seeking and considering children and young people's views at senior levels.

This was reflected in changes to communication routes, inclusion focused frameworks and training offers, where pupil voice was increasingly positioned as a core component of good practice. Staff felt that this provided a strong example of rights respecting practice and helped raise the profile of participation within wider education discussions.

In some cases, this learning was seen as transferable beyond additional support for learning, offering insights that could inform inclusive practice across other areas of education policy and delivery.

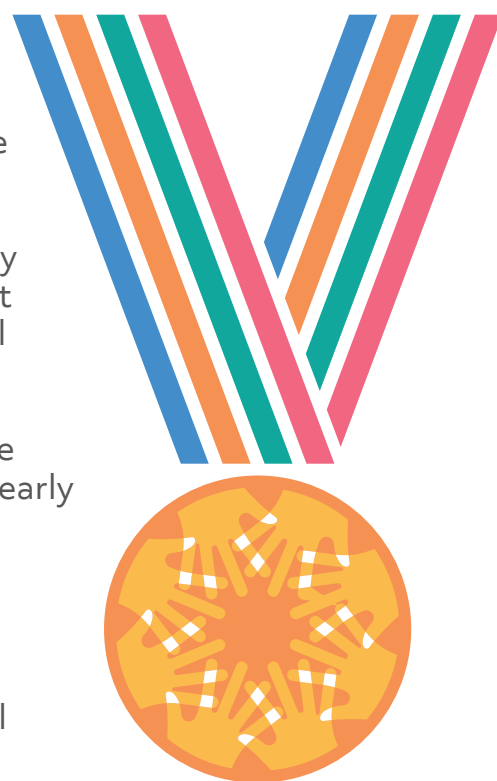


## Success Looks Different Awards

The Success Looks Different Awards were co-created with the Inclusion Ambassadors and launched in 2022. The awards aimed to respond to the Inclusion Ambassadors' frustration that, in their experience, secondary schools often recognise success only in terms of exam results. They felt that more should be done to recognise all the different ways that pupils learn, grow, and achieve outside of formal exams.

We worked with the Inclusion Ambassadors to develop the Success Looks Different Awards to showcase schools and early learning settings who are going above and beyond in their commitment to celebrating different kinds of success.

The awards also aimed to directly support commitments under the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan to ensure better recognition and understanding of additional support for learning.



### Development of the Awards

During 2022-2025 we delivered three iterations of the Success Looks Different Awards. These showcased a variety of inclusive and creative practice from across Scotland. Across all three years, the Inclusion Ambassadors have had a key role in the design and development of the awards, as well as selecting the award winners.

Across the three iterations, significant developments emerged over time. In year one, there were three award categories; Primary School, Secondary School, and Special School. In year two we added an Early Years category in recognition of the key role ELC has to play in additional support for learning.

Year three of the awards built on the success of previous years, with significant changes made to the application process to allow the Inclusion Ambassadors to hear more directly from children and young people. Where previously applications were submitted by teaching staff, now schools and early learning settings were encouraged to support their pupils to take part in the application process themselves. The fantastic photos, drawings, videos, and writings submitted from schools across Scotland were considered by the Inclusion Ambassadors, with four more winners selected.

### The impact of the awards

The Success Looks Different Awards set out to celebrate the existing good practice across Scotland and to inspire others to examine their own practice. For the Inclusion Ambassadors, it was an opportunity to realise their belief that schools should be proud of more than just their exam results.

Schools that have engaged with the Success Looks Different Awards speak highly of their engagement and the impact it has had on their learning settings, both for pupils with additional needs and their families, and the wider community.

*“Taking part in the awards has had a positive impact on our whole school community, particularly through raising awareness and celebration of difference in the first instance.”*

Sharon Blair, Support for Learning teacher at Williamston Primary School  
(2023 Winner: Primary School)

*“Being recognised as part of the Success Looks Different Award has been a source of pride for pupils, staff, and families...winning the award is a talking point for visitors, partners, and prospective families. It has strengthened the school’s reputation for compassionate, high-quality support.”*

Sabrina Alexander, Depute Head Teacher, Buchanhaven Primary School  
(2024-25 Winner: Primary School)

We have also supported applicants and winners to continue to develop their work – through engagement in our primary school work; creating space for winners to share their work by writing articles for Enquire’s blog<sup>5</sup> and filming video content for Navigate, Enquire’s online hub focused on care experience; and presenting at the Cross Party Group on Children and Young People.

The Success Looks Different Awards have also been recognised by the national media, among ongoing conversations about additional support for learning and the rights of children with additional support needs.

There continues to be significant interest in the awards from education settings across Scotland who are interested in engaging with the awards. However, by year three, we felt the awards had grown too large to continue to be delivered within our existing work plan. We will continue to explore opportunities for further development alongside the Scottish Government.



<sup>5</sup> [Enquire](#)

## The winners

2022	<b>Primary school and early years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Winner: Braehead Primary School, Stirling</li><li>• Runner up: Hillpark Secondary School, Glasgow</li></ul>
	<b>Secondary school</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Winner: Alva Academy, Clackmannanshire</li><li>• Runner up: Hillpark Secondary School, Glasgow</li></ul>
	<b>Special school</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Winner: Cedarbank School, West Lothian</li><li>• Runner up: Harmeny Education Trust, Edinburgh</li></ul>
2023	<b>Primary school and early years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Winner: Woodlands Nursery Centre, South Lanarkshire</li><li>• Runner up: Wallacetown EYC, South Ayrshire</li></ul>
	<b>Secondary school</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Winner: Williamston Primary School, West Lothian</li><li>• Runner up: Park Mains High School, Erskine</li></ul>
	<b>Special school</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Winner: Fairview School, Perth</li><li>• Runner up: East Park School, Perth</li></ul>
2024-25	<b>Early years</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Winner: ELU Hamilton</li></ul>
	<b>Primary school</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Winner: Buchanhaven Primary School</li></ul>
	<b>Secondary school</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Winner: Duncanrig Secondary School</li></ul>
	<b>Special school</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Winner: Parkhill Secondary School</li></ul>

### Learning from Success Looks Different

Each year, the winners of the Success Looks Different Awards have been chosen by the Inclusion Ambassadors themselves. Using criteria they designed, Children in Scotland staff support the Inclusion Ambassadors to review applications, discuss their merits, and select their winners.

The criteria have remained the same since the awards began. They are:

- Evidence of celebrating individual successes and positive relationships
- Evidence of creativity and doing something different
- Evidence of sharing success with the wider community
- Evidence of respecting and promoting children's rights
- Recognition through awards or certificates.

Since the awards began, there have been clear and consistent themes arising across all winners and in fact, most applications. While each year these have been explored in depth, it is valuable to consider them across the whole lifespan of the awards. In doing so, three key themes emerge: relationships, creativity, and sharing success.

### [Relationships](#)


Often our winners are showcasing programmes, resources, clubs, and qualifications available to their pupils, but what makes these so valuable is how they are utilised and adapted to suit their specific pupils. Understanding children and young people – their needs, interests, and strengths – is what can create real opportunities for success. Building relationships takes time and enthusiasm, and a whole-school dedication to inclusion.

### [Creativity](#)

The Inclusion Ambassadors have often been impressed by schools and early learning settings that are taking new and innovative approaches to inclusion. Over the years we have seen a huge variety of creative practice, including designing bespoke learning programmes; creating fun physical spaces both indoors and outdoors; and making use of new technologies.

### [Sharing success](#)

All Success Looks Different winners have had an enthusiasm for sharing success across their school communities and beyond. To make success truly look different, we must encourage everyone to recognise, respect, and celebrate all kinds of achievements. Whether sharing on school noticeboards, through online parent and carer forums, or engaging with the local community, all of our winners made all their pupils' achievements worthy of celebration, and aimed to celebrate in ways that work for their individual pupils.



You can find out more about the winners across the three years of Success Looks Different by accessing the reports and webpages

- [Year 1 report](#)
- [Year 2 report](#)
- [Webpage](#)



## Summary and next steps

This report has articulated the significant amount of work undertaken with the Inclusion Ambassadors across the lifetime of the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan. This has all taken place during a period of significant focus on reform of additional support for learning and strengthening children and young people's participation in education policy and in practice.

The report has highlighted the views of the group on key topics for them, across these key areas, the views of the group have remained largely consistent across these topics. The report also highlights the key developments in our work with the Inclusion Ambassadors, demonstrating how we have supported practice and how we have developed innovative new strands of participation and engagement activity.

Across the time we have worked with the group we have shared the views of the Inclusion Ambassadors with policy makers and practitioners, and they have fed into a range of different strands of work. Their views have also had a role in the delivery of the ASL Action Plan.

It is really important to recognise that the significant growth and development of the group would not have been possible without the increase in funding from the Scottish Government. This has been directly supported by the ASL Action Plan. It is also important to recognise that the ASL Action Plan has created the conditions for change. It aimed to centre the views of the Inclusion Ambassadors within key Scottish Government policy and looked to continue to support continued development of approaches to engagement with children and young people who are entitled to additional support for learning.

However, we also know that there continue to be challenges in ensuring that the policy-making process responds to the views and experiences of children and young people. We will continue to work closely with the Scottish Government, and other key strategic partners to develop this and ensure that children's rights to be heard in decisions that affect them are realised.



## Looking ahead: priorities and next steps

Going forward we will continue to develop our work with the Inclusion Ambassadors, this will include developing our work with the core group and aiming to ensure their views are heard in national policy making.

Within our work focussed on engagement with children and young people attending specialist educational settings, we will engage with additional schools across 2026-27. By building on this early work, we intend to develop a clearer national picture of the experiences of young people with complex support needs and to ensure that their views help inform future discussions about additional support for learning.

We will take a similar approach to our primary school work, continuing to demonstrate the value of engaging with younger children on additional support for learning. We will also continue to embed good practice across Scotland through our training and capacity building offer.

We also feel there is significant potential to expand on the work of the Success Looks Different Awards. There is desire to celebrate good practice across Scotland and we know this adds significant value by demonstrating the changes that are possible. However, we believe there would need to be significant adaptation to the awards to ensure they can deliver at a scale that adds value. We will work with the Scottish Government to consider how these awards can be reimaged.

## **Delivering on the views of the Inclusion Ambassadors**

As we have recognised throughout, the Inclusion Ambassadors have been clear on what needs to change in relation to additional support for learning. We also continue to develop a clear evidence base around the needs of younger children and children with more complex additional support needs. We will work to ensure these experiences are heard.

However, to deliver on this in practice there must be a clear shift in how well influential and action-focussed participation is embedded in policy making, with a shift towards demonstrating how the views of groups like the Inclusion Ambassadors are informing decision making. There also needs to be ongoing support for the workforce to embed the rights-based, relationship-based approaches that the group consistently call for.

By continuing to listen to, learn from and act on children and young people's views, Scotland can strengthen additional support for learning in ways that are grounded in lived experience and children's rights.



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