

Policy briefing: From vision to delivery – Reforming Scotland's additional support for learning system

August 2026



Introduction

Children in Scotland is a membership organisation that amplifies the voices, views and experiences of our members and children, families and professionals across Scotland. We achieve this through direct services, meaningful participation, policy work, inspiring communications and sector-leading events and learning opportunities. 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 manages several national additional support for learning (ASL) services. Enquire is the Scottish information and advice service for additional support for learning, Resolve is a provider of independent mediation services, and the Children's Views service independently gathers the views of children with additional support needs in formal adult-led processes. Enquire and the Children's Views service are also partners in My Rights, My Say, a service that supports 12- to 15-year-olds with additional support needs to fulfil their right to be heard in decisions about their education.

Improving the delivery of additional support for learning is a policy priority for Children in Scotland, alongside our work on public service reform and whole family support. Our policy priorities interact and inform each other, ensuring we take a preventative approach to policy development, considering where upstream actions can deliver better outcomes for Scotland's children, young people and families. We are also aware that these policy areas are a key priority of the current Scottish Government.

This briefing is the third in a series highlighting key policy issues in the additional support for learning in Scotland, building on previous editions on school attendance and placing request processes. Following the 2026 Scottish parliamentary election, our briefing is taking a more holistic policy approach, reflecting on progress in previous years and examining the broader system delivering additional support for learning.

It closely considers a range of issues and challenges in the additional support for learning system as presented in the 2026 McManus Review, foregrounding the views,

voices and experiences of the children, young people and families we work with to demonstrate how these issues affect the educational experience of learners with additional support needs.¹ It considers the list of system requirements outlined in the [McManus Review](#) and builds on these to outline what steps need to be taken over the next five years to ensure Scotland has an additional support for learning system fit to address prevailing challenges.

The children and young people we engage with – including those involved with the [Inclusion Ambassadors](#) and the [My Rights, My Say Young Advisors](#) – regularly highlight the different ways that a lack of support or consideration to additional support needs in schools affects their lives. Additionally, we know that many of our members deliver additional support for learning in schools and other education settings. We regularly hear how complex systems and processes present additional barriers to children and young people accessing the support they need and are entitled to receive under current legislation.

Our belief in the right for all children to access suitable support in order to fulfil their rights to education is embodied by our Inclusion Ambassadors vision statement which sets out what the pupils with additional support needs that we work with expect from their education.²

“School should help me be the best I can be. School is a place where children and young people learn, socialise and become prepared for life beyond school.”

“Success is different for everyone. But it is important that all the adults that children and young people come in to contact with in school get to know them as individuals.”

“They should ask, listen and act on what the young people say about the support that works best for them.”

Inclusion Ambassadors vision statement



Where are we now with ASL policy?

In the previous five years, the Scottish Government and key stakeholders took forward a range of policy reviews and action plans with an aim to make improvements to Scotland's education system, several of which focused on improving the standard of additional support for learning underpinned by the 2004 Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act.

Perhaps the most significant of these was the Additional Support for Learning Action Plan which put into action the recommendations for improvements identified in

¹ Scottish Government, (2026), Additional Support for Learning: A Review of System Delivery for Learners.

² Children in Scotland, (2025), Inclusion Ambassadors: Vision and overview.

Angela Morgan's 2020 Review of Additional Support for Learning.³ The Action Plan was supported by the Additional Support for Learning Project Board, made up of a range of stakeholders, including Children in Scotland, who supported the delivery of actions. The final Additional Support for Learning Action Plan progress report published in March 2026 showed that 94% of actions had been completed within the lifespan of the Additional Support for Learning Project Board, with a commitment to continue progress on the final 6% of actions.

While it is important to recognise that improvements to the additional support for learning system will take time to be felt 'on the ground', our own data and evidence, as well as that published by other key stakeholders, suggests there is still a significant gap between policy and implementation. This is also reflected within the Scottish Government's own comments in the final ASL Action Plan Progress Report which stated 'despite these improvements, the current approach has not yet achieved the cultural shift or scale of change, experienced by children and families, that was envisaged by Angela Morgan'.⁴

The evidence included in our previous two ASL policy briefings has highlighted where issues in the ASL system, at both a national and local level, are contributing to insufficient support for some pupils with additional support needs and at its worst, presenting additional barriers for pupils in accessing their right to an education.⁵

Moreover, the issues in terms of support provision and understanding of needs suggest that the required culture shift referenced in the 2020 Morgan Review has not been felt in all education settings across Scotland.⁶ The fact that the ASN tribunal reported its highest ever number of cases in the year 2024-2025 provides further credence to this point (249, a 12.2% increase from the previous year).⁷

A 2024 inquiry by the Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee into additional support for learning considered the principle of presumption of mainstreaming, the impact of Covid-19 on provision and the use of remedies as set out in the 2004 Act.⁸ Whilst more concerned with scrutinising legislation related to ASL provision, the inquiry heard from a range of stakeholders responsible for delivering additional support for learning and children and young people themselves who shared their experiences of an ASL system that was too often not able to meet the scale and complexity of need among pupils in Scotland's schools.

With this considered, the inquiry did also highlight Scotland's commendable vision and ambition for additional support for learning, one that was shared across groups of parents, carers, professionals and children and young people.

A report into additional support for learning provision from Audit Scotland in 2025 made clear that the level of additional support needs in Scotland had and continued to rise since the 2004 Act came into force. The report demonstrated how a context of rising level and complexity of need has placed increased demands on the system and the need for improved data and funding approaches to ensure the ASL system delivers

³ Scottish Government, (2020), Support for Learning: All our Children and All their Potential.

⁴ Scottish Government, (2026), Additional Support for Learning: Final progress report.

⁵ Children in Scotland, (2025), ASL policy briefing: School placements.

⁶ Scottish Government, (2020), Support for Learning: All our Children and All their Potential.

⁷ Scottish Government, (2026), Additional Support for Learning: Final progress report.

⁸ Scottish Parliament, Education Children and Young People Committee, 2024, Additional Support for Learning Inquiry.

improved outcomes and is financially sustainable. This is not to say that reducing funding and resource in the delivery of ASL is necessary, but that greater data and evidence is required to ensure that resource is having its intended impact in delivering better outcomes.

In this context of increasing demands on public resource, we can understand that there may be a desire to revisit aspects of Scotland's additional support for learning legislation and review definitions of additional support for learning in efforts to reduce pressure on support provision. We strongly support the view that changing the legal definition of additional support needs will not itself address the level of support needs presented by Scotland's learners.

The range of evidence and insights gathered across the lifetime of the ASL Action Plan suggests that despite positive work emerging from completed actions, there appears to be a prevailing gap in policy implementation. Whilst there is a considerable amount to be positive about in terms of inclusive practice in Scotland's schools, the current additional support for learning system is not yet delivering positive outcomes for children, young people and their families to the extent that education stakeholders and families want to see.

The range of existing evidence in Scotland on additional support needs provides us with a clear picture of the prevailing issues, what is important now is action to resolve these challenges. With a new Scottish Government now in place for the next five years, there would be value in turning our focus to better understanding this policy implementation gap and where the broader system and processes that deliver additional support for learning are failing to facilitate Scotland's vision for inclusive practice and realise the education rights of all learners.



McManus Review and a 'systems-led approach' to improving delivery

Published in March 2026, the Additional Support for Learning: A Review of System Delivery for Learners brought together existing evidence on the delivery of additional support for learning and how it is experienced by learners, families and professionals. In the review, Janie McManus aimed to demonstrate what the evidence tells us about how national policy is translating into practice and day-to-day experiences, showing 'the realities of a system that is being asked to meet need that have grown in scale and complexity'.⁹

The review recognised that Scotland holds exceptional vision and ambition for inclusive practice in education and that additional support for learning is no longer a marginal aspect of the education system but now a central feature of teaching, learning and relationships across all stages of education. As such, the review takes a systems-level approach focusing on system conditions rather than individual practice to highlight what needs to be strengthened to improve experiences of support on the ground.

⁹ Scottish Government, (2026), Additional Support for Learning: A Review of System Delivery for Learners.

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Considering a range of system-level factors including national policy expectations, local arrangements and decision-making, and how information moves through the system to shape how support is provided, McManus identifies key challenges in the system and related requirements to improve system delivery. These challenges are identified as:

- Increasing demand and complexity
- Adaption within stretched systems
- Timing and predictability of support
- Variation in local planning systems
- Limited visibility of progress
- Variation in experience across Scotland.

In its recognition of Scotland's positive ambition for additional support for learning taking a systems-level approach to identifying challenges in delivering reliable support, the McManus Review speaks to the current policy implementation gap. Moreover, we understand that the Scottish Government intends to take forward the requirements presented in the review, as was committed to in the 2026 Scottish National Party manifesto.

This adds further value and importance for Children in Scotland to explore what this implementation gap means for the children, young people and families we work with and lay out where action should be focused in the system to deliver better, long term and sustainable outcomes for children and families with additional support needs.



Our evidence and insights

Our evidence and insight derive from the views, voices and experiences of the children, young people and families we work with. We engage with them through our participation work and range of services providing information and advice to families across Scotland. We also present expert insights based on the substantial experience across our staff team.

Data from our Enquire helpline is based on that recorded between April 2022 and April 2026. This data is not intended to be representative of all the issues faced by pupils with additional support for learning in Scotland. The views of children and young people we engage with through our participation work is presented as direct quotes.

The evidence and insights are presented below under key themes which accurately reflect the key issues we identify within the current additional support for learning system which are actively contributing to poorer outcomes for the children, young

people and families we work with. These key themes overlap with the ‘challenges in the system’ identified in the McManus Review, demonstrating a level of policy coherence from the outset.

This policy coherence is explored in more depth in the ‘requirements and recommendations’ section where we provide detailed comment on the McManus Review’s ‘requirements for the system’ and outline our own recommendations for developing an additional support for learning system that facilitates Scotland’s vision for inclusivity in education and improves outcomes for children and young people with additional support needs.

Increasing demands on support and complexity of support needs

The increasing scale and complexity of learners’ support needs in recent years has been recognised in various Scottish Government and education stakeholder reports and reviews prior to the publication of the McManus Review in 2026.^{10 11 12} These publications often frame the demands in meeting this change in support needs as the most significant challenge facing the broader Scottish education system, as support needs once considered ‘additional’ now form a significant part of the typical mainstream classroom make up.

The views, voices and experiences of those we work with demonstrate that the additional support for learning system in its current form, and its related processes in place across Scotland, are too often failing to meet the diverse support needs of Scotland’s learners.

Changing profile, scale and diversity of support needs

We hear often from children and young people with additional support needs that the support they have been offered or are currently receiving can fail to fully engage with the individual profile of their unique support needs. We have heard how support offered to one learner may be applied to another without acknowledgement of the differences in the factors giving rise to their additional support needs, overlapping profile, learning styles or preferences.

Issues related to level of support provided to learners has accounted for 33% of all enquiries made to our Enquire helpline since April 2022 – more than any other issue. Moreover, lack of understanding of additional support needs has been a main issue in 23% of all enquiries made. Staff delivering our services and participation work hear that support provision is often too rigid or does not change over time in response to developmental stages, environmental demands and life circumstances.

“[Child is] Really struggling at school ‘academically, socially and emotionally’. Been on the CAMHS waiting list for 5 years. School says that the only support they can offer is a 15 min ‘emotional check-in’ with a staff member at the beginning and end of each day, because they don’t have funding for any more support.”

Case study extract from Enquire evidence bank

¹⁰ Scottish Government, (2020), Support for Learning: All our Children and All their Potential.

¹¹ Scottish Government, (2023), Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessments.

¹² Scottish Government, (2023), All Learners in Scotland Matter – National Discussion on Education.

Failing to take account of the range of factors that influence an individual's needs profile results in support provision becoming inadequate for learners and places greater demand on education professionals to amend provision accordingly. The additional support for learning system should better account for the realities of evolving and often hyper-individualised learner needs, prioritising early intervention and supporting education professionals to make most effective use of their relational skills to determine support provision. This would provide greater coherence with the child-centred and rights-respecting policy intention of the 2004 Act.

Support too contingent upon a single diagnosis

Our evidence tells us access to additional support provision continues to rely too heavily on formal diagnoses, despite efforts to move away from a diagnosis-led approach to understanding and planning for support needs. Diagnostic overshadowing or limited understanding of overlapping neurodevelopmental presentations among professionals can result in needs being misinterpreted and being unfairly attributed to factors like behaviour presentations.

All too often we hear about learners who may share a diagnosed condition, but who have differing neurodevelopmental presentations being offered duplicate support by default. This in part speaks to prevailing assumptions that can be made in education settings about specific conditions and the support that best meets their needs. We hear often from children and young people we work with about support they are offered coming in a 'one size fits all' approach, often based on whether learners have a diagnosed neurodevelopmental condition. Children and young people tell us they want support that is based on the individual's needs at a specific moment, regardless of their age, stage or neurodevelopmental condition.

Children's Views worker: ***Do you want to be in mainstream for maths as well?***

Young person: ***I want to be there for everything at some point. I've been in SfL for most things and it's too easy. It's just the place where they stick kids with support needs and don't teach them anything.***

CVW: ***Do you feel like mainstream classes are the right level for you?***

YP: ***It's pretty hard.***

CVW: ***Because of what you've got to learn?***

YP: ***No, because it's too chaotic. SfL was too calm, now mainstream is too much. Everything's either too much or too little.***

Conversation with a younger person, Children's Views Service

Heavy emphasis on diagnosis can lead to increased pressure on waiting lists and prolonged waits for assessments; if schools are reluctant to put support in place without a diagnosis, this can leave learners without appropriate supports in place, or even no support at all. Positive steps have been made to move away from diagnostic-led approaches to understanding individualised support needs, as exemplified through the

high standard of inclusive practice delivered in a number of Scottish schools.¹³ Despite this, prevailing assumptions about neurodevelopmental conditions and overlooking of individual preferences suggests that a broader culture-shift towards a needs-based approach is yet incomplete.

Needs escalating before support is planned

An additional support for learning system that is able to adequately meet the demands of a diverse and rising level of need would be one that prioritises early intervention and preventive approaches to identifying, planning and adapting additional support provision. Failing to address needs as they emerge does not happen in isolation, with the needs likely emerging and escalating for several learners concurrently. This has clear negative implications in placing increased pressure on the additional support for learning system, with more capacity required to plan and provide for needs that have escalated from initial presentation. This demonstrates the critical need to address challenges at the system-level to avoid placing additional pressure on professionals delivering additional support for learning across Scotland's education settings.

Enquiries from families to our services tell us that support is too often introduced only after support needs have reached what they consider a point of crisis. This implies that early indicators of emerging need have not been identified resulting in an escalation to an increased level of need. This also speaks to the inconsistent application of the GIRFEC national practice model, which is intended to be used as an ongoing assessment tool and not only at the point of crisis. We understand that this can be particularly significant for children and young people with co-occurring conditions or fluctuating support needs, where increasing educational or social demands may result in changing support requirements.

When opportunities for early intervention are not identified, we know this can result in situations that are distressing for learners as they communicate that their needs not being met in ways that could be considered disruptive. This can contribute to feelings of dysregulation and overwhelm in the classroom or broader education setting.

“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.”

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

Inclusion Ambassador

Approaches based on early intervention and prevention allow for support planning that is more flexible and responsive to individual learner needs. It supports a greater understanding of those needs and offers more coordinated provision should support needs escalate with increased educational demands and development. In turn, this would allow educational professionals to plan support that can meet the demands of diverse needs at the earliest opportunity and deliver a practice separated from neurodevelopment assumptions.

¹³ Children in Scotland, [Success Looks Different Awards](#).

Requirements for the system

In requirement 3, the McManus Review identifies stretched capacity and support provision led by what can be achieved in the short term, as the most significant barriers to early intervention. It calls for an intervention in the additional support for learning system to protect capacity that is aligned across education, health and social care, enabling the delivery of more preventive approaches.

Under current capacity pressures, we know opportunities to identify emerging needs and provide early support interventions are too often missed. Once learners' support needs escalate, they will likely require more support provision with this often happening for several learners concurrently. This has clear negative implications in placing increased pressure on the additional support for learning system, with more capacity required to plan and provide for learner needs that have escalated from their initial presentation. This demonstrates the critical need to address challenges at the system-level and ensure additional support for learning is aligned with other forms of support – including whole family support – that can play a crucial role in the early identification of needs.

Challenges related to the early identification of need is inseparable to issues present in the broader education system in Scotland. We know reduced class sizes would allow staff to develop more holistic understandings of individual learners, giving them greater awareness of emerging needs. Likewise, reduced class contact would allow staff to commit more capacity to planning for additional support needs in the classroom and working collaboratively to plan for specialist input when it is required.

Varying and inaccessible local planning arrangements and access to redress

The challenges presented by varying and inaccessible local support planning arrangements were highlighted in the McManus Review as a key condition of the system that contributed to unequal outcomes for children and young people accessing additional support for learning. The Review highlighted that varying arrangements and processes resulted in needs being interpreted and responded to differently across Scotland.

Children in Scotland has substantial experience and understanding of the challenges presented by varying additional support for learning local arrangements through our work providing information and advice to families who contact our services. We know well that processes differ greatly across Scotland's local authorities despite the national expectations outlined in the additional support for learning code of practice.¹⁴ Likewise, we also understand that the information for families to navigate these systems and the involvement of children and young people in local processes varies greatly.

Support planning, pathways and staged intervention

There is little consistency across local authorities in terms of support planning methods and processes, often with differing titles and thresholds of entitlement. This does not include the legally binding Coordinated Support Plan as outlined in the 2004 ASL Act and which are discussed at a later section in this briefing.

¹⁴ Scottish Government, (2017), Additional Support for Learning: Statutory Guidance.

As such, the landscape of support planning across Scotland is complex, varied and difficult to navigate. We hear often from families we work with that this can contribute to a lack of transparency about what support plans are in place for their children and how families can view and request these, for example, Individualised Education Plans, Child Plans etc. This likely contributes to the high percentage of contact the Enquire helpline receives related to issues on support provision (33%) and communication/relationships with education professionals (25%). This complexity is compounded by the similarly varied and too often diagnoses-led approaches to support pathways and aspects of multi-agency involvement, as highlighted in the section above.

We hear from families that the varied approaches to staged intervention across local authorities can be similarly confusing. Interactions between staged intervention approaches and other forms of support planning identified above can be complex and the experience of our staff tells us that the views of children in relation to staged intervention is often not given due consideration.

Variation in staged intervention approaches is mostly due to differing local authority processes, staff structures, roles and responsibilities. This can contribute to a feeling that there is a lack of transparency in approaches to staged intervention, reflecting what we hear from families about other forms of support planning approaches and documentation.

In our response to the recent fourth edition ASL Code of Practice consultation, we highlighted the need to review the support scaffolding at a national level. There could be a key role for renewed national approach to help streamline support scaffolding and staged intervention at a local level, delivering greater transparency for families and efficiency for education professionals. Greater consistency in approaches to staged intervention and support planning does not, however, equate to improved support provision, especially if resource and capacity to deliver support is limited. Consistent national approaches can only facilitate improved outcomes if the broader additional support for learning system provides the conditions for support to be implemented and sustained.

Varying and inaccessible local processes for decision making

The current challenges presented by varying local processes is perhaps best represented by the local variation in placement request processes. Around 30% of all contacts to our Enquire helpline since April 2022 have raised issues relating to placement requests, with our helpline staff advising families on ways to navigate significantly different local processes despite shared national duties and expectations placed on local authorities.

Our recent ASL policy briefing on school placements outlined the range of issues that said varying local decision-making processes create for families requesting alternative school placements for their children. Issues mostly relate to a lack of understanding and transparency about placement request processes due to a lack of accessible local information available to families and professionals alike. We have heard how thresholds between internal placing requests and local authority requests had not been communicated clearly, how miscommunications about expectations and overall transparency of decision-making had led to relationship breakdowns between staff and families. We also hear about how placement requests processes are often unaligned with transition processes, leading to learners missing out on key stages of their educational experience as they await decisions.

***“Parent living in [local authority] – has new address in [new local authority] and would like child to either stay at special needs school in their current local authority or move to a special school in new local authority. Told by new local authority – child needs to enrol at a mainstream school then internal process of applying for special needs school but cannot do that until she moves.*”**

“Parent has not heard back from new local authority for some time.”

Extract from Enquire’s evidence bank

While adapting decision-making processes to local circumstances is a reasonable expectation of the additional support for learning system, the lack of information and expectations beyond what is already available presents clear challenges to both families and education professionals. With issues relating to placement requests accounting for a significant majority of all cases taken to the ASN tribunal in 2024-25, the current system is lacking the conditions to allow decision-making processes to create positive outcomes at the sustainable levels required.

Differing levels of children and young people’s participation in planning

We are aware of mixed experiences of children and young people’s participation in support planning and decision-making processes related to their education. There is a substantial amount of good practice taking place in Scotland where learners’ voices are centred in decisions made about their support. We hear often from the Inclusion Ambassadors and Young Advisors about the importance of having their voices heard in planning effective support, building positive relationships with staff members and supporting overall inclusion in the school environment.

“I knew what was going on – my support planning teacher told me what support I would get.”

My Rights, My Say Young Advisor

“If they just listened [to pupils] it would help build trust. I found at my last school if I had an issue the staff would just huddle together and decide what was best for me rather than listening to me.”

Inclusion Ambassador

Despite the incorporation of United Nations on the Convention of the Rights of the Child into Scots Law in 2024, staff delivering our Children’s Views and My Rights, My Say services have reported several cases where the child’s right to be heard in regard to their additional support has not been respected. This is most often a result of the child or young person communicating in alternative ways and a perception from professionals that not communicating verbally means learners cannot share their views.

There are good examples of how processes and systems have adapted to better include and centre the right for children and young people to be heard in matters related to their education, as demonstrated by changes in the ASN tribunal system that has facilitated greater consideration of the child’s views and voice in decision-making. It would be valuable to consider how the broader additional support for learning system can better embed the right to be heard for all learners. Centring their views, voices and

experiences in national policy making, as is done through the Inclusion Ambassadors' Vision Statement for additional support for learning, can help promote wider culture change in rights-respecting practice for the range of stakeholders developing and delivering additional support for learning across Scotland. This not only supports good practice but importantly ensures the systems obligations to the UNCRC under the 2004 and 2024 Acts are respected.

Awareness of complaints, disputes and redress processes

Evidence from our Enquire helpline demonstrates that many parents who experience issues about dispute resolution or who lodge formal complaints are often met with a complex network of processes through which to submit complaints or seek redress. We have heard how local authorities and bodies responsible for handling complaints can be unaware of their own procedures or responsibilities. Complaints can be mishandled, further harming relationships between families and professionals and leaving disputes unresolved in the long term.

“Parent had Stage 2 complaint partially upheld, then took it to the SPSO who told the parent to contact Enquire for advice as the SPSO did not consider that they were best place to deal with the situation. Feels as though the SPSO are reluctant to get involved.

“Support had been agreed but due to lack of teaching resources it has not been provided. Parent stated their main frustration is that the school refers to lack of teaching assistants being the problem, but when this is raised with the council, they blame the school for how they have allocated the resources and state that the school have sufficient resources. I am angry at the lack of accountability and blame shifting.”

Extract from Enquire's evidence bank

Moreover, these challenges experienced in the additional support for learning system reflect many of the challenges across Scottish public service delivery and should therefore be considered in this broader context.

An additional support for learning system that was aiding better outcomes for learners with additional support needs would intentionally result in fewer disputes and complaints lodged between staff and families. It is important that when a family intends to make use of their right to make a complaint about a decision, information is readily accessible and consistent across Scotland to allow for efficient dispute resolution. Nation-wide processes would also support ongoing evaluation of the system, identifying where issues are persistent and allowing improvements to be focused accordingly. Moreover, this would enable the Scottish Government and other key stakeholders to evaluate which groups are not making reference to the ASN tribunal and how to address these barriers to justice.

Requirements for the system

Requirement 1 of the McManus Review intends to address the local variation in support planning and intervention thresholds, calling for a shared national approach to staged intervention, placing requests and the involvement of children and young people. The

Review also states in requirement 6 that all support scaffolding should be delivered in connected pathways through a single delivery model, bringing together targeted, specialist and universal support provision.

Clearly, varied approaches to decision-making and staged intervention across Scotland's 32 local authorities is creating unnecessary complexity for professionals and can be overwhelming for families. In many incidents, staged intervention, decision making and involvement of children and young people has become a tick box exercise and is not being used to effectively drive support or transparency for families. This can also be said for the diverse range of support planning methods and approaches in place across Scotland that are inflexible and often too descriptive in nature, too often contributing to the gap between what is offered and what is delivered for children and young people.

There would be value in a national approach or delivery model that provides a shared language and consistency across decision-making and support scaffolding at a systemic level but does not dictate standards of good practice. This could provide an opportunity to clearly set out how local authorities and education settings should operationalise children and young people's right to support as underpinned in the 2004 Act, based on what we know works for improving outcomes and not just what can simply process.

Local implementation of any national approach is key, requiring sufficient resource to deliver on decisions and support that is planned but also nurtured by effective leadership and a culture of collaboration that centres the views, voices and rights of children and young people.

Limited national visibility of progress and achievements for ASN learners

The McManus Review is right to identify the multiple challenges presented by Scotland's current poor national visibility of effective support provision for additional support needs and understanding of what positive progress looks like for many learners with additional support needs.

Inconsistent recording of support needs and provision

The review points to the stronger visibility of recorded processes and categorisation of diverse needs than of what the positive impact of support provision has been as a significant challenge. This limits the ability to understand what support provision is working well across Scotland and using this insight to inform planning and improvements.

Categorisation of support needs and thresholds related to these categories differs significantly between local authorities. Some localities will only record neurodevelopmental conditions of learners with specification of their individual support need, or the type of support learners are being offered. The findings of the Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved report highlighted the limitations of the current system of local data recording in most of Scotland's schools, SEEMIS, and how this system presented a missed opportunity for gathering valuable data to support more effective policy and practice interventions in additional support for learning.¹⁵

¹⁵ Children in Scotland, National Autistic Society Scotland, Scottish Autism, (2018), Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved.

The lack of consistency across the recording of support needs and, most importantly, effective provision limits our ability to develop a national picture of what is working for pupils with additional support needs. There is a missed opportunity here to develop our understanding of effective interventions, responding more effectively and efficiently to emerging needs among Scotland's learners.

Progress, success and achievement for learners with additional support needs

In the last five years, publications including the 2023 Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment have highlighted how the predominance of academic attainment in Scotland's education system has failed to fairly recognise the achievements of many learners with additional support needs.¹⁶ The reforms proposed in the 2023 review would have provided an opportunity for a systems-wide response to more fairly reflect the progress of children and young people with additional support needs but have since been shelved.

Children in Scotland staff delivering our services report incidents where learners with additional support needs who would not be considered to have complex needs, but who find mainstream classroom environments challenging, can be excluded from lessons and placed often alone in alternative provision. These learners' communication styles or support needs may be considered disruptive to other learners in the classroom and hence negatively impact their ability to reach the intended level of attainment.

Staff have also reported incidents where learners with additional support needs are perceived to have 'reached a ceiling' in terms of their ability in some subjects and assigned alternative tasks whilst other learners continue with subject learning. When young people were spoken to about this issue by Children's Views workers, they reported that none of the staff making these decisions had consulted them about their experience of the level of challenge.

Both incidents demonstrate how the predominance of attainment in mainstream schools can lead to learners with additional support needs being excluded from aspects of their education entirely. These learners are missing out on opportunities to focus on subjects or other aspects of learning that nurture their own interests and abilities, supporting them to achieve in ways that are personal to them.



Case Study: Success Looks Different Awards 2024-25

Secondary School Winner – Duncanrig Secondary School

"The Inclusion Ambassadors were particularly impressed with how strongly pupils' voices came through in Duncanrig Support Base's application. They were also inspired by the vibrancy and detail on display in the school wall displays that share pupils' achievements, testimonials, experiences and other creative pieces."

The Inclusion Ambassadors have told us that achievement is personal to them and is based on their personality, interests and individual development. To support the recognition of different forms of success and achievement for learners with additional support needs, the Inclusion Ambassadors developed the Success

¹⁶ Scottish Government, (2023), Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessments.

Looks Different Awards in 2022. The awards highlight good practice taking place across Scotland's schools to recognise achievements of all learners aside from just qualifications and attainment.

“They say ‘do your best’, but ‘your best’ is never good enough. They need to understand what my best actually is.”

My Rights, My Say Young Advisor

The Success Looks Different Awards demonstrate how achievement and success of learners with additional support needs can be effectively recorded and celebrated, providing learners and their families with educational milestones and a clearer sense of progress and development that is not tied to academic attainment. This facilitates a more effective way of capturing the holistic development of learners with additional support needs as intended in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence and required through the child's right to education that supports their individual development.¹⁷

An additional support for learning system that aids better outcomes for learners with additional support needs would facilitate the consistent recording of effective support interventions and progress in response to this support. It would also apply this strengths-based approach to supporting education settings to develop alternative methods of recognising the achievements of all learners beyond attainment, helping to embed a learning culture focused on holistic development which is responsive to the goals of the individual children and young people. An opportunity to begin implementing this approach was offered in the 2023 Hayward Review but has not been taken forward.

Requirements of the system

Requirement 5 in the Review calls for a more consistent approach to how information on support needs, support provision and progress is recorded across Scotland. It also highlights the need for improved ways to evidence progress for all learners beyond attainment, reflecting the success of those who achieve in other ways.

The recording of support needs and effective provision across local authorities in Scotland is currently too varied. This stifles our ability to gauge a national-level understanding of the support needs of Scotland's learners and, importantly, our understanding of what forms of support are most effective. This information could be used to inform evidence-led decision making and enhance our understanding of how additional support for learning is progressing in Scotland.

The Scottish Government's National Measurement Framework for additional support for learning will be a valuable addition to the additional support for learning system should it encourage a needs-led approach and place focus on what is working well for learners with additional support needs, above information on diagnoses or neurodevelopmental conditions. This framework should provide clarity on recording processes at a local level, with clear links made to ongoing improvement. Opportunities to ensure better compliance with new recording processes could be provided through ongoing inspections review work undertaken by HMIE, as part of a greater focus on additional support for learning in school inspections.

¹⁷ Education Scotland, [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence](#).

There is a clear need for positive recognition of all learners' achievements to be fulfilled on a national scale, ensuring success and progress of many learners with additional support needs holds a parity of esteem with attainment and qualifications. Key opportunities to operationalise this through the recommendations of the 2023 Hayward Review have not been taken forward.

Unsustainable pressure on workforce capacity

The McManus Review outlines systematic issues creating unsustainable pressures on school staff in delivering additional support for learning, noting increased support needs in terms of breadth, scale, and diversity. Children in Scotland evidence aligns with insight from the review regarding the challenge this presents for both staff and pupils, highlighting a lack of capacity and adequate teacher training.

We have heard how stretched systems and a lack of specialist services outpace professional learning and capacity. Staff are left to absorb more tasks, often having to react to immediate school circumstances and upskill in an unplanned manner. In addition to this, we know that day-to-day school pressures significantly limit teachers' capacity to access training, creating a system where support is determined by local flexibility and understanding.

Members of the Inclusion Ambassadors have described incidents where learning support staff were sometimes required to scribe for children and young people but were not always adequately trained to perform this task, leading to discrepancies in spoken and written work.

We hear from staff that the demands of teaching roles have changed significantly, but initial teacher training is not adapting accordingly or equipping staff to support learners with additional needs. We know this gap in training is predominantly experiential; many teachers may have received baseline training, but this is insufficient in the current context. Disparity in teacher training and experience has similarly been raised by young people. The Inclusion Ambassadors have described inconsistency in teacher knowledge of additional support needs, and the My Rights, My Say Young Advisors have identified a similar skills gap.

"I don't think a lot of teachers are trained in special needs. I think teachers who are going to work in support facilities, or who are going to work with children who need support, should be specially trained. It should be a legal requirement to study it."

My Rights, My Say Young Advisor

We hear across a range of Children in Scotland workstreams that teaching staff and support staff feel that they are unequipped to support their learners' needs. Children in Scotland staff have offered and delivered input to teacher peer support groups on working with learners with complex additional support needs. Members of the group have reported feeling unequipped to adequately support these learners. Despite the vital work of this group to supplement current teacher training, almost all group members reported attending sessions as unpaid overtime.

These growing pressures on the education workforce have a significant impact on both staff and pupils. For staff, unmet training needs and growing workload pressures may

impact confidence and lead to teacher burnout.¹⁸ We know that stretched knowledge and capacity has been acutely felt in terms of support planning, where staff are expected to plan for and deliver support that would previously sit within specialist services. This issue is consolidated by taking place in a broader education system that has experienced real term reductions in spending in recent years, thus creating a context of higher need and lower capacity or resource.

Young people have shared experiences of inconsistent and delayed support in school, issues in updating and reviewing support plans, and a lack of person-centred and individualised support, meaning that plans do not necessarily align with learners' evolving needs.

"I think it's got worse. There have been less staff, more people leaving, especially PSAs. They're leaving and not being replaced. It's changed my support because there's less support for me and more people who need support but less staff to support them. I see pupils who are younger than me who don't get the support I got at that age."

Inclusion Ambassador

Training and knowledge development among teaching staff must be accompanied by ongoing support and supervision – an essential aspect of ongoing development for anyone working with children and young people, and one that appears to be declining for teaching staff. Supervision has a key role to play in supporting staff to implement learning from training and deliver practice that is bespoke to their education setting and individual learners. Capacity building and professional development alone cannot guarantee this.

An additional support for learning system that ensures equitable access to children and young people's education rights today would facilitate national approaches that shared expertise across all staff supporting learners, disentangling knowledge from individual practitioners and ensuring meaningful support remains in place if staff move on. It is key that change is viewed in context with wider education policy and curriculum reform which centres inclusive education.

Requirements for the system

In its second requirement, the McManus Review proposes the development of new approaches that sustain professional learning for education professionals and embeds knowledge of supporting learners' diverse needs in initial teacher education, in addition to more capacity for collaborative working across roles and better access to specialist support when required.

Children in Scotland has heard how teachers feel unequipped and unconfident to provide for support needs and that the requirements of their role have changed significantly in recent years, with professional development too often completed in unpaid spare time.

This limited resource in the classroom extends in terms of access to specialist support. We know there is currently an over-reliance on additional support for learning staff. The capacity of staff in specialist roles is often focused on learners with the most significant

¹⁷ Education Institute of Scotland, [Workload Campaign Briefing: Member Survey Results on Additional Support Needs](#) (December 2025).

support needs, diverting their ability to engage with whole school early identification and preventative approaches that could prevent scale of needs from escalating to unmanageable levels.

There is a clear need for increased staff capacity dedicated to delivering additional support and specialist provision. This requires investment in professional development delivered in a planned and methodological approach from initial teacher training to continued professional training for school staff, accompanied by ongoing supervision and support. Investment and increased resource must reflect a broader cultural shift among education policymakers that situates additional support for learning as a foundational aspect of Scotland's broader education system and in securing the sustainability of the system as a whole.

Mixed experience of multi-agency coordination

Challenges in multi-agency coordination are highlighted in the McManus Review, assigning focus to the significant delays in accessing specialist support. Variations in assessment and progression criteria between services can create inconsistency in support and put further pressure on schools to manage complex needs without specialist input. For families, this can make the system harder to navigate, in turn creating uncertainty about decision making, communication with external agencies, and the nature and timeline of the support they can expect.

The 2020 additional support for learning review identified use of coordinated support plans (CSP) in multi-agency support as part of the implementation gap in additional support for learning, establishing the Short Life Working Group (SLWG) on Co-ordinated Support Plans in response.¹⁹ Children in Scotland experiential evidence suggests that coordinated support plans (CSP) are not always being used where they should be, and in some cases issues in multi-agency coordination is acting as a barrier to additional support for learning delivery.

Since April 2022, the Enquire service received 213 (4%) contacts specifically relating to CSPs. Issues ranged from communication between families and services, CSPs not being followed, support being agreed but not provided, and plans not being implemented where required. Underuse of CSPs is also suggested in broader data, despite this being specifically highlighted in the SLWG final report in 2021.²⁰

While it is not expected that every child who is looked after will need a CSP, these numbers are arguably lower than may be expected given that looked after children are automatically considered to have additional support needs unless assessed otherwise. Inconsistent use of CSPs relates to wider experiences reported by the Enquire service. Many families who contact Enquire have children with complex and/or multiple long-term additional support needs where the young people receive significant support from education authorities and other services. Despite this, many parents/carers have not heard of a CSP at the point of contacting Enquire. Additionally, helpline staff have heard examples of parents being given incorrect information by professionals about who is entitled to a CSP and who can request one, highlighting a need for more robust professional knowledge, clarification and transparency.

¹⁹ [Short-life Working Group on Co-ordinated Support Plans \(CSPs\): Final Report – gov.scot](#)

²⁰ [Short-life Working Group on Co-ordinated Support Plans \(CSPs\): Final Report – gov.scot](#)

Through the Enquire service, we hear examples of miscommunication between schools and local authorities regarding responsibility for support, with both parties assigning responsibility to the other. This leaves children in challenging situations and families with no means of redress.

Regarding the type of support required, in 2026 (from January to June), the Enquire helpline has reported an increase in the number of calls related to families experiencing homelessness or in temporary accommodation, with disconnect between local authority services and schools serving as a barrier to children accessing education. In some cases, this has resulted in young people being out of education provision for six months, impacting academic progress, social development and mental health and wellbeing.

Members of the Inclusion Ambassadors have commented on coordination between schools and organisations, young people and families.

“More joined up thinking between organisations that help you + the schools”

Inclusion Ambassador when asked what support is needed

CSPs strength lies in their legally binding nature, helping to ensure that children and young people whose access to education requires multi-agency coordination and structured support from a range of professionals. There is also a key role for education professionals to lead cultures of collaboration in their practice of coordinating support across agencies. Legislation provides a valuable foundation for this but, as we’ve demonstrated, does not necessarily facilitate effective collaboration on the ground.

It is essential, however, that the additional support for learning system provides appropriate support and capacity to ensure that CSPs are actionable and meaningfully applied. This is particularly true for education settings where several learners may be on CSPs. It does not serve children, young people, families or the professional workforce if the systems in which they operate lack the capacity or resources to deliver on the support outlined in the CSP. Ineffective systems and processes that present barriers to the implementation of CSPs risk undermining their legally binding nature: redress for support not provided in CSPs cannot be realised if capacity and resource to actualise it are absent from the system at large.

Children in Scotland welcomes the McManus Review’s requirement for increased capacity for planned support aligned across education, health and social care and specialist services. Additionally, services should be equipped to recognise multiple complex factors such as diverse neurodevelopmental profiles, and the pace of changing family circumstance (for example families in temporary accommodation, or experiencing homelessness), and respond to identified needs while assessment pathways are ongoing. This may allow for more responsive support, rather than requiring families to wait for a formal diagnosis or needs to escalate to crisis point before structured support is available.

Across systems-led efforts to improve multi-agency working, it is important to consider who is best placed to lead support provision and deliver different forms of support for individuals. We know in recent years, schools have taken a lead role in the delivery of a range of support provision we would consider as whole family support,

and while this is commendable in demonstrating schools' commitment to the wellbeing of their learning communities, this is not necessarily the role of schools as education providers. Other agencies delivering whole family support or other health and wellbeing interventions may be better placed to deliver bespoke support and a system of effective multi-agency support should allow this to happen.

Requirements for the system

In requirement 5, the McManus Review states that more reliable multi-agency support is required to address confusion and variation in coordinated support provision across Scotland. It states that multi-agency support stakeholders need to work to shared pathways, with specialist support accessed and planned for in a coordinated way.

We know that CSPs are used inconsistently, with many learners who should have a CSP not currently on one, and support planned for is often not delivered. This raises issues in terms of transparency and accountability for support provision, but most importantly, means a child or young person is not receiving the support they are entitled to.

Inconsistency in the use of CSPs may be a result of a lack of staff confidence, capacity and resource to deliver on agreed support. It is also a result of complex local coordination processes between different agencies, each directed by unique demands, expectations and responsibilities.

Greater clarity around how CSPs are used is required with our expectation being that a national approach or delivery model could provide this clarity at a systemic level. We know that expectations to coordinate agencies are typically placed on education staff, however, this should not mean that schools are required to lead the delivery of all aspects of support. This is especially true when other agencies are better placed or experienced in delivering a type of support.

Within a more collaborative and effective approach to multi-agency collaboration, there is a clear role for whole family support in the delivery of holistic support that enables children and young people to best benefit from their education. Greater integration of whole family support provision into multi-agency collaboration will also aid the shift towards early intervention and prevention in additional support for learning which we have demonstrated is necessary to reduce demand on the system and delivering better outcomes for children and young people.

An effective additional support for learning system for our current context would see fewer cases related to CSPs escalating to the ASN tribunal, where substantial funding and resources are committed by local authorities in support of tribunal cases. This in part speaks to the lack of available resource to deliver on support in addition to ineffective collaboration between agencies – it also signals a requirement for the system to rebalance investment towards delivery of support as it is agreed. Doing so requires bold leadership from policymakers and education leaders, ensuring that long term improvements are not lost among short term demands placed on the system.





Children in Scotland recommendations for systems change in additional support for learning

Children in Scotland supports the view that there are clear challenges and issues in the current formation of the additional support for learning system that are failing to alleviate poor outcomes for children and young people with additional support needs and their families.

It is our view that ‘upstream’ interventions that facilitate change to the broader additional support for learning system in Scotland are required to allow early intervention and prevention to become a central facet of delivery. Systemic changes are necessary to ensure the prevailing policy implementation gap and incomplete culture shift are addressed, allowing Scotland to deliver its bold vision for inclusive practice in education.

These recommendations, outlined below, are interdependent. As such, they must be delivered in tandem through a coordinated approach and a longer-term view that allows progress to take place before drawing pre-emptive conclusions on policy impact. Scottish Government must be bold in its approach, allowing outcomes to improve as the system evolves and placing trust in the reform process and the range of stakeholders involved.

In our [2026 Manifesto](#), Children in Scotland called on the new Scottish Government to:



“Deliver a renewed Additional Support for Learning Action Plan which aims to realise the [Inclusion Ambassadors Vision Statement](#). This plan should have an increased focus on access to specialist support, resolving issues around placement decisions and greater connection to ongoing work around attendance; and behaviour and relationships”.

Building on the collaborative and coordinated approach taken to deliver the previous additional support for learning action plan, a renewed plan should clearly outline the system change interventions required to improve Scotland’s additional support for learning system. This action plan should include a holistic approach to evaluation that takes a longer-term view of progress informed by the experiences of children, young people, families and education professionals. Outcomes should look beyond attainment and qualifications as the indicators of progress and reflect the vision statement created by the Inclusion Ambassadors.

The proposed changes to the additional support for learning system will not happen in isolation and will be influenced by changes taking place elsewhere as part of Scotland’s public service reform agenda, particularly in relation to whole family support and the broader tackling child poverty approach.

Similar to work taking place under this agenda, ambition and the scope of change is significant. This requires the allocation of appropriate resources and funding in the short to medium-term to deliver a system centred around prevention principles,

that is financially sustainable and responsive to the changing support needs of Scotland's learners.

Actions to address challenges in the additional support for learning system can't be separated from broader reforms to Scotland's wider education system – this is particularly pertinent in a context where around 40% of Scotland's total learners are considered to have some form of additional support need. Any action plan seeking to develop an additional support for learning system must take account of the broader challenges and meaningful opportunities in Scotland's education reform work. Doing so is a requirement if Scotland is to meaningfully embody our positive vision for inclusive practice, deliver the intended outcomes of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence and fully realise children's rights to education.

ASL policy and implementation

1. Policymaking related to systems change must hold the Inclusion Ambassadors' Vision Statement at its heart, foregrounding the views, voices and experiences of children and young people with additional support needs and ensuring their rights are respected throughout the reform process.
2. All systems change interventions to additional support for learning must be centred around facilitating greater early intervention and identification of support needs. Realisation of this culture shift is critical to alleviate current pressure and to secure the long-term sustainability of the system, improving outcomes for children and young people by connecting them to appropriate support at the earliest opportunity.
3. The increased capacity and resource required to deliver and promote uptake of enhanced professional development for education staff – from initial teacher education and continuing throughout careers – must be added to the system to avoid placing additional demands on education staff and support the realisation of a workforce model able to meet learners' diverse needs in the long term.
4. Development pathways for education staff to take up specialist additional support for learning roles must be established to increase overall capacity of specialist additional support for learning staff and nurturing the future education leaders that Scotland requires to ensure that additional support for learning remains responsive to the evolving support needs of learners.
5. Scottish Government should undertake a detailed review of support planning and decision-making processes currently in use across Scotland considering how these are working in service of the additional support for learning system and improving outcomes and experiences for children, young people and families. This review must centre the rights of children and young people underpinned in the 2004 Act to access the support they require.
6. Scottish Government's ongoing National Measurement Framework must be needs-led and place focus on what works well in supporting Scotland's learners. Realisation of the framework should account for additional resource required to support alignment between the national framework and recording processes used in schools and other education settings e.g., SEEMIS.

Policy coherence and public service reform

7. Systems change in additional support for learning must work in the context of the Scottish Government's broader education reform work, recognising the foundational role of additional support for learning in realising the goals of Scotland's education system. This requires the Scottish Government to act on the opportunities in the education reform agenda that can support positive practice in additional support for learning and improving outcomes and experiences for all learners in Scotland's education system, e.g., reducing class sizes and the recommendations of the 2023 Review of Qualifications and Assessments.
8. Systems change should support greater integration of additional support for learning with broader public services in Scotland as part of the public service reform agenda. Targeted investment in services delivering whole family support will support the realisation of improved outcomes for children and young people with additional support needs and their families, helping to alleviate pressure facing the current additional support for learning.
9. Scottish Government must increase spending in additional support for learning to support the systemic change required in the short to medium term to ensure the sustainability of the system. This will deliver preventative spend for the Scottish Government in the long term.

Culture of collaboration

10. Scottish Government should situate the development of effective leadership and broader culture change in additional support for learning as part of work already taking place under Scotland's Public Service Reform Strategy.
11. As it works to deliver systems change, the Scottish Government should support better use of the range of existing evidence and insights available in Scotland's broader public services, including that of the third sector.
12. Scottish Government must be brave in committing to a long-term view of progress in additional support for learning reform: achieving progress in systems change will lead to improved outcomes. It is important to recognise that many of the outcomes of additional support for learning systems change will be structural and cultural which are hard to measure through focused indicators of progress and will take time to have positive impacts.