



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Education Children and Young People Committee

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By email only—

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Dear Cabinet Secretary,

I am writing on behalf of the Education, Children, and Young People Committee regarding its roundtable on violence in schools which took place on 14 June. The Official Report of the meeting can be found [here](#).

The purpose of the roundtable was to understand more about the occurrence of violent incidents in our schools and hear from a range of different voices on the issue. In particular, the Committee was keen to understand how common incidents of violence in schools are, which factors contribute to such incidents taking place in our schools, and what could be done to help students, parents, and teachers.

As you have given a commitment to hold a summit focused on tackling violence in schools, the Committee wishes to bring matters arising from the roundtable to your attention and asks that you reflect on them to frame the forthcoming summit.

Framing

In approaching the summit, it is important to define precisely what is meant by violence in schools. The Committee heard in evidence that difficult behaviour can be displayed by any pupil and that some distressed behaviour can stem from communication needs not being met, particularly for pupils with additional support needs. This is an important distinction and one which should be noted in framing the discussion at the forthcoming summit.

Mike Corbett also highlighted the lack of independent research on the reasons that drive difficult and violent behaviour, particularly post-pandemic and called for

independent research to establish the key factors contributing to such behaviour (col 25).

Another factor highlighted by witnesses was bullying and the fact that incidents can cross over from the community to the school setting (col 13). Cheryl Burnett of the National Parent Forum of Scotland described bullying as one of the biggest concerns parents deal with on a daily basis (col 30).

The Committee heard from Beau Johnston, MSYP that young people feel they have not been sufficiently consulted about these issues (col 4) and asks that the Scottish Government gathers the views of young people alongside those of parents and teachers, as part of the summit.

Scale of the issue - data and reporting

A key theme arising from the roundtable is that of reporting and the reliability of the data. The Committee heard about the existence of a plethora of reporting systems and variations in reporting (cols 7-13). These inconsistent approaches fail to provide an accurate picture of violent incidents in schools. For example, Cheryl Burnett of the National Parent Forum of Scotland told the Committee that when a parent phones the school to report an incident, there is no guarantee of the incident being recorded. She said, "when we look at what defines a recordable, notifiable incident, we get into very murky waters" (col 13). The Committee also heard about a lack of recording of low-level indiscipline (col 22).

Participants in the roundtable also described the labour-intensive nature of filling out forms to report incidents. The Committee heard that this can be a repetitive process which wears teachers down. The EIS said that the forms are completed and sent to the local authority, but staff get no feedback as to what happens thereafter (cols 9-10). The Committee also heard about cultural factors which can lead to teachers feeling dissuaded from reporting violent incidents (col 11).

The Committee asks the Scottish Government to explore, as part of the summit, how to create common reporting standards, not just to ensure consistent recording of incidents but also to support parents, children, and teachers.

How to address the issue?

The Committee believes that the summit should reflect on how to build a good and safe learning environment in schools. The Committee heard about the vital importance of strong relationships, time, and resources to address these issues. The Committee recognises that there are currently pressures on budgets and teachers' time but the strong message from participants in the roundtable was that dealing with challenging behaviour is resource intensive.

Carrie Lindsay of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) spoke about the importance of taking bespoke approaches which fit with the individual circumstances of the young person (cols 42-43). Nick Smiley of the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP) referred to an exponential increase in the number of children identified with additional support needs (ASN) and the impact on resources, with the ratio of educational

psychologists to children with additional support needs rising from 85.8 children per psychologist in 2007 to 659.7 children per individual psychologist in 2022 (col 28).

NASUWT and the EIS also argued for additional resources to support teachers in working with pupils with ASN. The Committee plans to undertake an inquiry on ASN in the near future but would ask the Scottish Government to consider these issues as part of the summit, including what can be done to support staff working with children in early learning settings.

The Committee heard about a number of tools which are helpful in addressing issues around difficult or violent behaviour, including the importance of calming environments such as libraries and green spaces. Active schools and the importance of sports clubs and other activities for young people were also highlighted.

The Committee heard that youth work intervention is also an important tool. However, the Committee recognises that this is not appropriate in every case and that there is a need to ensure that vulnerable young people have safe places where they can receive support.

Cheryl Burnett of the National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFSS) highlighted the need to support parents. This points to the need for an approach which looks beyond the classroom environment and recognises the need to support parents and carers in working with their young people in addressing behavioural issues (col 42).

Witnesses also spoke of creating the right culture in schools, including the need to support teachers, and fostering a culture of relational approaches. The Committee notes that there are concerns among teachers about health and safety issues and feeling safe at work. These concerns sit alongside the recognition that children and young people who are exhibiting challenging behaviours also need support.

The Committee explored the extent to which children and young people's actions should, in some circumstances (e.g., when other approaches have not been effective), result in sanctions or consequences for the young person. The Committee understands that there are differing views around the role of consequences in supporting good behaviour. The Committee also understands that consequences are part of relational approaches, such as restorative practices. The Committee believes that it is important for the summit to explore these issues and to include a range of voices with a range of views.

Role of media and social media

The Committee heard that the media can play a role in amplifying instances of violent incidents in schools. Carrie Lindsay of ADES said that there is a perception about individual incidents of violence in schools which is quite serious, whereas such incidents are not necessarily as prevalent as they would appear in the media. This can become a social norm in the minds of young people who may fear that such incidents are happening everywhere (cols 4-5).

The Committee is concerned that some high-profile incidents have been featured on social media platforms. The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) said that the "intensification of issues seeping into schools from the community, arising, for

example, from disputes on social media and [result] in conflict in the school setting.” Furthermore, the Committee heard that social media is making bullying worse (col 26).

Unfortunately, the Committee had limited time to explore these issues in detail. The Committee asks that the Scottish Government ensures that the role of social and other media is considered as part of the summit. In considering these issues, it is vital that young people are involved in the discussion given that they have first-hand experience with social media platforms used by pupils in Scotland’s schools.

The Committee welcomes the forthcoming work that the Scottish Government plans to undertake on issues around violence in schools and hopes that the issues set out in this letter will help frame the event and ensure that it is productive. The Committee asks the Scottish Government to report back on the outcomes of the summit. This will allow the Committee to consider any next steps in considering this important issue.

Yours sincerely,

Sue Webber MSP
Convener