

Cross-Party Group on Autism
22 April 2024, 10am until 12pm
Minutes

Attendees:

MSPs:

Alexander Burnett (Convener)
Daniel Johnson (Deputy Convener)
Stephanie Callaghan
Annie Wells
Oliver Mundell

Invited Guests/Speakers:

Charleen Morton
Ruth Moyse
Fergus Murray
Kaydi & Nicole Scottsville

Secretariat:

Suzi Martin, National Autistic Society Scotland
Stephen Caulfield, National Autistic Society Scotland
Mark McDonald, Scottish Autism
Jean Foggarty-English, Scottish Autism
Marion McLaughlin, APO Representative

Non-MSP Attendees (names are drawn from the Zoom attendee list, so surnames are only presented where these were present within usernames):

David Anderson, East Ayrshire NASWUT
Diana
AutisticRadio.com
Robyn
Sofia – SEMA
Jules
Ross Wright
Carrie Watts
Ruth Moyse
Gillian Shuttleworth
Charleen Morton
Kabie, ARGH
Jay Brownlee
Catriona
Anna Nicholson
Sally Cavers, Inspiring Scotland
June Grindley
Angie Ferguson
Claire Kennedy
Khiah
Frances Foreman
Jerry Edwards

Richardibbotson
Leo Bollins
Rob Holland (NAS)
David Simmons
Hannah Gray
Jonathan Revell
Matt Barclay
David Yeoman
Lorraine Harris
Melea Press
Fiona Clarke
Louise Moth
George Watts
Ryan and Julie Cuzen
Dorry McLaughlin
Lauren – Mindroom
Maurice ELAS
Louise Carson – Hope for Autism
Kate
Daisy Thomson
Tom Wightman
Ewan Carmichael
William Rae
Sam Nicholson
Edward Fowler
Louise Bennet
Ability Shetland
Erica Judge – Inspiring Scotland
Donna
John Grafton
Maria Chan – Aberdeenshire HSCP
Julie Cunningham
Callum McCrosson
Lesley Parker
Cherie Morgan
Anne Love
Kerry's S23
Lavina Dowling
Lewis
Kerry
Ramon Hutchingson

Convener's Welcome

The Convener welcomed attendees to the CPG, and thanked everyone for attending.

The theme for this CPG was the *Accessing Education: Exclusions and 'Presumption to mainstreaming'*.

The Minute from the previous meeting (held in November 2023) was approved as read, with no objections.

The Convener mentioned that all of the speakers addressing the meeting were Autistic, representing a major milestone for the CPG.

The Accessibility group has ceased to meet due to low attendance and a view that adjustments have been made which have greatly improved accessibility. Should a need to revisit this emerge it will be reconsidered.

Meet the Member

Scottish Ethnic Minority Autistics (SEMA)

Sofia explained that she had a late diagnosis and created a website for Black and Brown mothers who are seeking support for themselves and their children.

SEMA are currently translating 'What Autism is' into nine different languages. SEMA have also provided training for community groups in Stirling and Edinburgh.

SEMA has provided resources for mental health practitioners and have been part of the stakeholder group on the LDAN Bill.

Sofia stated that SEMA still have lots to do and all support is appreciated. A podcast was being released on Friday, 26th April which would talk through Sofia's journey and the evolution of SEMA.

Diversified

Kaydi was joined by her mother Nicole who gave some background around Diversified which is based on Kaydi's own experiences of being neurodivergent and autistic in the education system.

Kaydi could no longer attend school when she was 13 years old, her needs were not met in any capacity and she moved from placement to placement in different services.

Kaydi is now seventeen years old and is now an advocate for other young people as young people's voices have not been heard in the education system.

Diversified is a charity which helps autistic and neurodivergent young people, they run social groups, holiday groups and also run an out of schools service called

'Aspire' which is a service for young people who don't attend school or only able to attend school part time.

Experience Supporting Autistic Young people and Families

Charleen Morton, chair of National Autistic Society in Dundee.

Charleen explained she is an autistic mother and has 3 autistic girls who were late diagnosed. Charlene is now working with Parent to Parent which works with autistic people who are going through the diagnosis process and supporting post diagnosis.

Charleen gave a few examples of her own family's experiences and spoke about the system of internal exclusions taking place frequently where the young person is put in a room on their own and do not access any education.

Mandatory training for all teachers is desperately needed to help them understand and help them deal with situations in a much better manner. Individual learning is also required.

AT-Autism

Ruth Moyse - Director & Associate of Research on Exclusion

Ruth gave a presentation around participatory research that she carried out with pupils who attended mainstream school then stopped attending. Ruth expressed that this is a growing problem with persistent absentees, especially girls, and nobody understood why.

A study was carried out involving eight girls where attendance started to drop in secondary school. The study identified many missed opportunities for interventions.

There were multiple examples of informal absences that did not show up in the official statistics. Ruth mentioned that these autistic young people are stigmatised, experiencing high levels of stress, low self-esteem and poor mental health.

Ruth also highlighted the Synergy programme which started in Greece a decade ago and focused on looking at how the staff could adapt rather than seeing the children as being the element where change was required.

Ruth outlined some recommendations from the girls she worked with:-

- They want to have their concerns validated (listen)
- Avoid assumptions
- Be curious (investigate and question)
- Take action (show them that they matter)
- Prioritise well being

Autistic Teacher Perspectives

Fergus Murray, Co-founder of AMASE

Fergus has been a science teacher for around 10 years, (completed their own education

in England but has worked in independent schools in Scotland).

Fergus commented that teacher education is not adequately preparing teachers to work with autistic and neurodivergent young people, but they know how challenging it is to fit any more in.

Fergus commented that most teachers have a better idea now of what autism is and how to accommodate it compared with the past, but some teachers have a long way to go.

Fergus stated that there are 3 broad factors that lead to exclusion:

- The attitude of teachers
- Behaviors of other pupils
- Physical environment.

Fergus commented that years ago they were involved in developing a set of autism resources for initial teacher education in Scotland which was called 'We Were Expecting You', which was a positive development but much of their feedback was ignored and ended up with much less useful set of resources.

Schools are still being built with little regard for the sensory needs for neurodivergent students. Most of these issues could be fixed if it was compulsory for every school to employ autistic people to conduct sensory audits. Mainstream Scottish schools are not yet ready to effectively include every autistic learner.

Exclusion: Not What It Seems

Nicole and Kaydi, Diversified

Nicole and Kaydi gave a presentation which discussed Kaydi's own experiences as well as the many people they support looking at four key areas:

Being Present

Children and young people should learn in an environment which best suits their needs, fully engaged in school through inclusive ethos, culture and values and should receive a full time education including flexible approaches.

Participating

Their voices should be heard in decisions about their education including decisions on where they learn. Young people should be able to participate and engage in all aspects of school.

Achieving

Children and young people should be achieving to their full potential and have access to a varied curriculum tailored to meet their needs.

Being supported

All children and young people should benefit from the ethos and culture of the school, inclusive learning and teaching practices, be given the right help and supported to participate in all parts of school life.

Q&A; and Comments

These comments were all made in the chat during presentations and addressed during the Q&A.

First Set of Questions

Question – what would be the top two things that could be done by the Scottish Government to help autistic learners if you were a first minister for a day?

Reply from Charleen - mandatory training for teachers and support staff. More support for the pupils to get their voices heard.

Reply from Ruth – need to focus on staff wellbeing and help re-frame their thinking.

Reply from Nicole and Kaydi – autistic young people have to have a voice as they are not being heard. The training needs to change and needs to be delivered by autistic people themselves.

Question – How can school inspections be improved?

Reply from Charleen – having people that truly understand autism or are autistic doing inspections. Understanding through lived experience is critical.

Reply from Ruth – agreed with Charleen, really important that there are inspectors who are neurodivergent themselves or have lived experience and have understanding of the social model of learning.

Reply from Nicole and Kaydi – they need to truly understand the challenges that young people have and provide some accountability for schools.

Question – What can be done about bullying?

Reply from Ruth – for so many years the young people have been removed from classes and taken to social skill classes to be taught how to communicate properly. By removing them, the teachers are saying ‘you are not communicating properly – go away’ but also sending the same message to peers. We need to have inclusive classes for everyone to learn to appreciate each other and recognise the differences.

Reply from Nicole and Kaydi – cited research in 2020, around neurodivergent young people. It’s not a one size fits all, but from a neurodivergent experience a lack of understanding among peers is actually one of the huge barriers and Kaydi feels strongly about this.

Reply from Charleen – totally agree with Nicole, it’s being around peers who give you confidence, make you feel understood and accepted which then in turn gives you confidence to deal with things. Peers support is a huge thing.

Question – My child will struggle with sitting a traditional exam. But according to the SQA, an exam paper must be completed to achieve a result. How can my child show the SQA that he has the knowledge to receive marks and gain the award. I would like to thank Charleen because

she mirrored out experience completely and it's upsetting, but now we realise it's not just us.

Reply from Nicole and Kaydi – highlighted Kaydi's difficulties sitting exams for different reasons. Highlighted others in the chat are advising to speak to Enquire or Govan Law who are specialists in these difficulties. Also speak to MSP's who can speak to SQA on your behalf.

Reply from Charleen – Cited her work with Parent to Parent which is a support and advocacy agency which is a charity organisation, going into schools to make sure things are put into place for exams. Encouraged Diane to speak to the local council to have this addressed.

Convener's Reply

The Convener thanked everyone for attending and specified that any questions should be directed via e-mail to Stephen Caulfield (NAS).

The convener pledged to put a question to the Scottish Futures Trust in terms what they do around plan and design for new schools.

Any Other Business (AOB)

None.

ENDS.