

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

8th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Wednesday 1
December 2021

PE1870: Ensure teachers of autistic pupils are
appropriately qualified

Note by the Clerk

Lodged: 21 June 2021

Petitioner Edward Fowler

**Petition
summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to
introduce legislation requiring teachers of autistic pupils to be
appropriately qualified to improve educational outcomes.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1870>

Introduction

1. This is a continued petition that was last considered on [22 September 2021](#).
2. At that meeting, the Committee decided to write to the Scottish Government to seek an update on progress that has been made against the 'Additional Support for Learning Action Plan' and to write to key stakeholders to seek their views on both the petition and the Scottish Government's submission of 24 June 2021.
3. The Committee has received 10 written submissions in connection with this petition.

Background

4. The petitioner states that they have brought forward this petition to ensure that 'teachers who teach children with autism have an appropriate autism qualification'.

5. The petitioner points out that teachers of hearing-impaired and visually-impaired pupils must be suitably qualified to do so.
6. He states that he 'would like the education authority only to employ teachers with an appropriate autism qualification to teach pupils with autism.'

Stakeholder submissions

7. Since this petition was last considered, the Committee has received stakeholder submissions from Scottish Autism, the National Autistic Society Scotland, the Scottish Council of Deans of Education and Annette Masson, who had previously [petitioned](#) the Scottish Parliament on this issue back in 2009. The Committee has also received two submissions from the Scottish Government.
8. Scottish Autism states that it was involved in the production of the '[Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved](#)' report which was published in 2018 and says that the more recent [Morgan review](#) also addresses enduring concerns about 'discriminatory practices that result in a significant loss of education for far too many autistic learners.'
9. Scottish Autism goes on to state that the current policy of mainstreaming is not delivering an adequate level of education for many autistic learners, noting that 'we do not yet have a satisfactory system where specialist provision for autistic learners sits comfortably alongside, or within, mainstream provision'.
10. Their submission goes on to outline Scottish Autism's frustration at 'the seemingly perpetual cycle of reviews, evaluations and working groups', calling instead for 'increased accountability from providers and local authorities for implementing change and improving outcomes', alongside 'sustainable and appropriate funding'.
11. Scottish Autism suggests that there are several routes to change available including:
 - Teachers of pupils with a visual or hearing impairment or both have to meet a defined range of competencies set out by the Scottish Government. Scottish Autism suggests that this 'could be a viable approach to improving teaching and learning for autistic pupils', noting that this would require a 'systematic change in terms of professional registration' alongside 'changes to regulation, inspection, and the performance management of teachers.'
 - Another option suggested would be the provision of specialist autism practitioners to support school staff with 'comprehensive profiling and support strategies to meet autistic learners' needs'.

- The third option identified by Scottish Autism would be to require a whole school approach towards supporting autistic learners on the understanding that 'what are essential components to good teaching practice for an autistic person would be beneficial to the rest of the school population' and that 'adaptations to environment and culture can make schools more welcoming and accessible learning environments for everybody'.
12. Scottish Autism goes on to note that 'there is currently a lack of alternatives for young people who cannot thrive in mainstream school' and that inclusivity can only be achieved with 'a sound understanding of autism, comprehensive individual profiling, flexible teaching practice and low-stress environments.'
 13. In its submission, the National Autistic Society Scotland also highlights its joint work with Scottish Autism and Children in Scotland in producing the [Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved report](#) in September 2018, which analysed the views of 1417 parents of their autistic children's school experience. The report found that many autistic children were excluded from school, placed on a part-time time-table or missing out on school for reasons other than common childhood illnesses, with 72% of parents surveyed suggesting that 'staff having a better understanding of how their child's autism affects them, including their communication needs, would have made a difference to their child'.
 14. The National Autistic Society Scotland also highlights the creation of the Autism in Schools Short-life Working Group, which was designed to improve autism awareness and training within schools and educational settings.
 15. It points out that in December 2020, the Deputy First Minister and then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills announced that 'all new teachers will receive a common baseline of content on autism during their initial teacher education (ITE) programmes.'
 16. Whilst acknowledging that this is positive development, the National Autistic Society Scotland suggests that 'in order for these improvements to be monitored, however, it will be crucial for the Scottish Government to track the roll-out of the new training, as well as recording important statistics, such as the number of autistic children in education, rates of exclusions and more.'
 17. In its submission, the Scottish Council of Deans of Education provides further information about the course materials recently introduced to Initial Teacher Education and highlights that [the Scottish Universities Inclusion Group](#), a sub-group of the Council, which is currently overseeing the embedding of the Autism Course Materials within Initial Teacher Education.
 18. The Council goes on to note that whilst it may be worth considering a requirement for teachers working with autistic learners who have complex needs

or those who are in a specialist advisory role to have a specialist qualification, 'this contrasts with the requirement that all teachers should have a specific qualification in Autism'. The Council suggests that 'as higher education institutions who are committed to improving educational outcomes for autistic pupils, we do not consider that legislation is currently required.'

Cabinet Secretary submissions

19. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills wrote to the Committee on 27 October 2021 and reiterated the point that the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 'requires education authorities to identify, provide for and to review the support for pupils who need support to overcome barriers to learning, including autism.'
20. The Cabinet Secretary goes on to highlight the use of staged intervention as a means of 'identification, assessment, planning, recording and review to meet the learning needs of children and young people', noting that 'all local authorities have a staged intervention and assessment process in place which enables practitioners to assess and meet learners' needs.'
21. The Cabinet Secretary also highlights the [Scottish Government's Autism Action Plan](#) which aims to improve the support offered to autistic learners in school, highlighting delivered actions including:
 - The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) revised their accreditation programme for Initial Teacher Education providers in December 2019 to make specific reference to autism alongside other neurodevelopmental conditions. In January 2021, the GTCS published revised Professional Standards for all teachers, which included reference to additional support needs across all five standards, including specific reference to autism.
 - New content on autism, woven through Initial Teacher Education course programmes, developed through a review of evidence, informed practice and consultation with the autism community.
 - The Autism Toolbox was refreshed and updated in late 2019. This is a free resource for practitioners and includes a variety of resources and guidance to help support autistic children and young people.
 - In March 2021 Education Scotland published several resources to support practitioners in delivering inclusive education, which included an Introduction to Autism and Inclusive Practice.
 - In June 2021, an Implementation Group, chaired by the Scottish Government, was set up to monitor progress against the autism action plan and to consider and lead further work to support autistic children and young people.

22. The Cabinet Secretary wrote again to the Committee on 1 November 2021 providing information on the publication of [the joint Scottish Government and COSLA updated Additional Support for Learning Action Plan](#) and [progress report](#).
23. The Cabinet Secretary also noted that the next updated action plan would be published in Spring 2022.

Petitioner submission

24. In his submission of 16 November 2021, states his continued belief that ‘teacher training in autism is the only way to ensure that young people with autism receive the best quality education and care’ and that ‘the autism teacher’s qualification would give them knowledge, understanding and skills to maximise the opportunities open to children and young people who have autism.’
25. He notes that such training would ‘help autistic children reach their potential not just academically but would include their mental and emotional wellbeing’ noting that ‘more and more autistic families are becoming disillusioned by the school supports and want to see their children being understood in education’ suggesting that, too many are excluded, on part-time or flexi-learning.’
26. The petitioner suggests that the Scottish Government’s approach (for example, to staged intervention) is reliant on ‘the person making the identification, assessment and planning having the specialist autism knowledge to put in place the required supports.’
27. He also suggests that the actions set out in the Scottish Government’s autism plan are insufficient to meet the needs of autistic children and young people, noting that nearly three quarters of autistic children have other medical or psychiatric conditions alongside autism.
28. He also notes the high proportion of cases involving children and young people with autism reaching the Additional Support Needs Tribunal.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe

The following submissions are circulated in connection with consideration of the petition at this meeting—

[PE1870/A: Patricia Hewitt submission of 20 June 2021](#)

[PE1870/B: Scottish Government submission of 24 June 2021](#)

[PE1870/C: Petitioner submission of 10 September 2021](#)

[PE1870/D: Annette Masson submission of 13 September 2021](#)

[PE1870/E: National Autistic Society Scotland submission of 12 October 2021](#)

[PE1870/F: Scottish Autism submission of 19 October 2021](#)

[PE1870/G: Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 27 October 2021](#)

[PE1870/H: Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 1 November 2021](#)

[PE1870/I: Petitioner submission of 16 November 2021](#)

[PE1870/J: Scottish Council of Deans of Education submission of 25 November 2021](#)

All written submissions received on the petition can be viewed on the petition [webpage](#).