

**Ensure teachers of autistic pupils are appropriately  
qualified**

**PE1870**

**23 December 2021**

**NASUWT evidence to the Scottish Parliament Citizen  
Participation and Public Petitions Committee**

The NASUWT's submission to the Scottish Parliament Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee sets out the Union's views on the key issues which should be explored by the Committee in its scrutiny of petition PE1870: Ensure teachers of autistic pupils are appropriately qualified.

The NASUWT's evidence is informed directly by serving teacher and headteacher members and also by the work of its representative committees and consultative structures, made up of practising teachers and school leaders working in the education system.

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**NASUWT**  
**The Teachers' Union**

## **Introduction**

1. Petition PE1870 calls 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'.
2. Effective consideration of this proposal raises important issues in relation to the form and content of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, the roles and responsibilities of teachers and school leaders, and the challenges faced currently to supporting children and young people with additional support needs (ASN). These matters are considered in further detail below.

## **ITE Curriculum**

3. Teaching is a uniquely challenging occupation. Balancing the learning and emotional needs of 30 unique individuals at any one time against maintaining professional expertise in a subject area is a significant challenge. Too many ITE providers do not consider with sufficient care the management of students' workload. ITE programmes are often characterised by needlessly detailed planning and record-keeping requirements that increase burdens and force many students, particularly those with family or caring responsibilities, to drop out. As a result, those who in other circumstances may have become effective practitioners are lost to the education system.
4. Therefore, notwithstanding the merits or otherwise of the proposal set out in the petition, the NASUWT has concerns about any proposal to reform the content of ITE programmes through approaches based simply on adding additional content to ITE programmes that are currently overloaded and unreasonably workload intensive in many cases.
5. It is entirely legitimate for stakeholders to express views on the skills, knowledge and understanding that ITE should seek to develop. However,

it is important to acknowledge that curricular space on ITE programmes is finite and that their design involves inevitable choices about content to be included and excluded, as well as about the depth to which those areas included in programmes should be studied.

6. Therefore, it is always incumbent on those proposing additional content to ITE programmes to identify those aspects of current programmes that could be reduced in scope, or forgone completely, in order to create the curricular space that inclusion of their proposed additional content would require.

### **Additional Support Needs Training at ITE**

7. The NASUWT receives feedback from members indicating the variability of training experience between ITE providers in many areas, including ASN, equalities, and behaviour management. It is agreed that student teachers are entitled to high-quality baseline training which prepares them to assist pupils with a range of additional needs, including those of autistic children. However, it is equally important that the Committee recognises the limitations inherent within that training. It is impossible for any institution to cover all potential ASN within their syllabus.
8. The NASUWT is not in favour of an identified prescriptive list of conditions which ITE students must address, as this will not support teachers to assist all their pupils, many of whom may have complex and nuanced needs. This is especially true in the context of the policy aim of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC). Any list would necessarily be limited in range and could exclude other conditions that may be regarded legitimately as at least as important as those included on such a list.
9. Training at ITE on ASN cannot be viewed in isolation. It is but one element of support to complement a range of whole-school and targeted approaches to help support the mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing of children and young people. It is important to also recognise

that while striving to ensure consistency across a provider, improved ITE training on ASN will not provide a quick fix on its own to guarantee that appropriate ASN support is available to all schools, teachers and learners across Scotland.

### **The NASUWT's ASN Survey**

10. In April 2018, the NASUWT published the results of an ASN survey which examined member experiences in relation to the presumption of mainstream. Ongoing feedback from members indicated that there was an increasing focus on inclusion and that the demands being placed on teachers and schools were also increasing, with more and more learners with complex needs being taught in mainstream classrooms, while cuts to specialist services exacerbated the difficulties teachers face. The survey sought evidence about the nature and extent of these issues.

11. The following stark statistics were revealed in the survey:

- 58% of respondents said that the local authority required their school to implement burdensome policies and procedures;
- 56% of respondents stated that they had received training or professional development on ASN within the last two years, compared to 68% of respondents from England and 61% of respondents from Northern Ireland;
- 43% of teachers identified training on local authority ASN policies to be ineffective, and just under one third of respondents (31%) reported that training on engaging parents was ineffective; and
- less than half of respondents said that their career-long professional learning (CLPL) included discussion about their ASN support needs.

12. As a teachers' trade union, the NASUWT clearly has concerns not only for the impact on pupils' learning, but also for the wellbeing of the teachers who deliver that learning. The issue of reduction in ASN support has been

consistently raised at the Union's local and national conferences. The impact on teacher workload is clear. Without support, teachers are left to manage classes on their own, often struggling to cope.

13.A multifaceted approach is required to ensure pupils can access appropriate support both within and outwith schools. This includes: appropriate CLPL; teachers being able to access sufficient time for learning, professional dialogue with colleagues, and reflection; workload that is manageable; appropriate levels of support staff to be made available; and advice and guidance from central support services. The national dialogue about the support available for our young people led by Angela Morgan through her Review was, therefore, welcomed.

### **Morgan Review**

14.In its submission to the Morgan Review, the NASUWT highlighted that policy and practice in respect of ASN were high priorities for the Union's members but that its experiences highlighted a range of issues and concerns about ASN. In particular, the Union noted that teachers had expressed concerns about management practices relating to ASN, including how ASN is prioritised within the school. Many ASN teachers and teachers working in special schools raised concerns that abuse and violence is now seen as 'part of the job'.

15.The context of the Review was that there had been an increasing national focus on inclusion and a clear expectation that every teacher is a teacher of ASN. Feedback from NASUWT members working in front-line roles with children and young people with additional educational needs (AEN) suggested that the demands being placed on teachers and schools were increasing, that increasing numbers of learners with more complex needs were being taught in mainstream classrooms, and that, across the system, the range and complexity of needs were increasing.

16. NASUWT members also emphasised that cuts to specialist services were exacerbating the difficulties that schools face and inhibiting the ability of schools to access the support that children and young people with ASN need. Reports also indicated that schools and teachers were encountering significant challenges as a result of austerity, including issues arising from cuts to local authority and other education and health services.

17. In light of these concerns, the NASUWT welcomed the Review's recommendations on teacher education and development, namely:

*'Teacher recruitment, selection, education and professional development and learning processes must align with the changed and changing profile of children and young people in Scotland, ensuring:*

- *All teachers hold and enact professional values of inclusion and inclusive practice and see this as a core part of their role.*
- *All teachers understand what additional support needs are. They are clear about their role in supporting the identification of additional support needs and the need to adapt their teaching to ensure a meaningful learning experience for all their learners.*
- *All teacher education and development includes nationally specified practice and skills development in supporting learners with additional support needs, as a core element.*
- *Practice learning and development at local level must include where and how to access specialists' expertise and support.*
- *Communication, relationship building and positive mediation skills development are incorporated and embedded into teacher education and development, supported by coaching and mentoring opportunities.*
- *Parity of career progression, pathway structures and opportunities for specialist teachers of Additional Support for Learning:*

- *There should be a first teaching qualification in additional support needs available during Initial Teacher Education; and*
- *The career path proposal under consideration by the SNCT to develop new career pathways should have an additional strand for Additional Support for Learning.*
- *The focus and methods for teacher education and practice learning are directly informed and developed by the feedback of teachers.*
- *Innovative and partnership approaches to practice learning should be developed including delivery and participation of children, young people, parents and carers.*

18. The NASUWT further concurs with the evidence from the review to show that ASL is not visible or equally valued within Scotland's education system. In 2018, 30.9% of children and young people in Scotland's schools had an identified ASN. Therefore, additional support provision cannot continue to be viewed as a minority area of interest, nor can it continue to be considered separately within the framework of Scottish education.

19. The pandemic has further entrenched system-level tensions: ASN specialists have had to be in schools more often; ASN teachers have provided support to the most vulnerable young people throughout the pandemic without the provision of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) or access to specialist equipment; and scant national attention has been given to children with complex needs or autism, with erroneous assumptions being made about the support required to facilitate learning from home.

20. There were also increased workload challenges in preparing online differentiation in support of ASN students. Teachers were rarely given sufficient time with or access to appropriate resources to support their ASN

pupils who were learning at home during lockdowns. This will have impacted on the skills and confidence of many ASN pupils.

21. Austerity has imposed significant pressure on resources in all parts of the public sector, and ASN support has been disproportionately affected. Supporting children and young people with ASN requires urgent renewed investment in tailored services and education settings to ensure that there is equality of opportunity and choice for all.

22. ASN deserves to be prioritised by the Scottish Government not only to highlight awareness of the significant issues the system faces, but also as a vehicle for ensuring greater investment in the sector. Investment in, and collaboration between, wider children's services is key. The crisis has highlighted and deepened pre-pandemic concerns about the fragmented nature of children and young people's services in key respects, particularly in the areas of special and additional needs. The Government must support action in this area through significant investment in these services, particularly in-school and out-of-school services focused on supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and those who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged. The real-terms cuts in spending in the children's services sector experienced over the past decade must be reversed, with additional resources made available to meet recovery-related priorities.

23. Without investing in appropriate provision, it is to be anticipated that ASN children's education and mental health and wellbeing will continue to be compromised.

### **Next Steps**

24. Addressing the concerns highlighted above and moving to implement the recommendations of the Morgan Review will be central to ensuring that the education system establishes and maintains the most effective and sustainable arrangements possible for meeting the needs of pupils with ASN, including those of autistic children and young people. The joint Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities



(COSLA) updated Additional Support for Learning Action Plan and progress report was only published in November 2021.

25. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has had a negative impact on the progress which would otherwise have been expected, but the NASUWT believes more than a year is required to assess the impact of the recommendations and action plan and that an evidence-based review of progress would be required, including a full assessment of barriers to adoption, before any additional recommendations should be considered.

26. It is also noted that the Scottish Government autism action plan published in December 2020 is due a full report in December 2021.

27. The NASUWT has been seeking a seat on the Additional Support for Learning Implementation Group (ASLIG) to support the delivery of the ASL action plan and is committed to campaigning for robust implementation of the Morgan recommendations.