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Our Reference: 202300387942
Your Reference: 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

8 January 2024

Dear Mike,

Thank you for your email dated 27 November, highlighting the start of UN Women's annual 16 Days of Activism to end Violence Against Women and Girls. As I said in my statement to Parliament on 29 November, I am grateful to NASUWT for their recent research around behaviour in schools, particularly the impact of gender-based violence in the classroom.

We are clear that gender equality should be at the heart of the Scottish Government's vision for a fairer Scotland, one where women and girls have and are empowered to exercise equal rights and opportunities, have equitable access to economic resources and decision making, and live their lives free from all forms of violence, abuse and harassment. This includes within the education system. I will take each of the points you raise in turn:

- **A first step to tackling the issue by recognising there is a problem and acknowledging that violence against women and girls is a cause and consequence of gender inequality.**

The Scottish Government agrees unequivocally that violence against women and girls is a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Misogyny and violence against women and girls continue to have a devastating impact and we are fully committed to tackling it. Within education, we are clear that all girls and young women should have a gender equal experience of education, which is the overarching ambition of the Gender Equality Taskforce in Education and Learning.

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- **All parties must apply a gendered lens to discussions on school behaviour, placing the voices of those with lived experience at the heart of decision-making. Sexual harassment of teachers in schools and colleges is commonplace and the majority of incidents fail to be reported or dealt with effectively. Women make up approximately three quarters of the teaching profession, so this is a key issue for Scottish education.**

It is important that the experience of the teaching profession is reflected accurately in policy documents being developed by the Scottish Government. The contribution and support of NASUWT in developing the Gender Based Violence in schools framework, ensuring that the concerns of the teaching workforce have been taken into account, will be key to it effecting change. Being able to engage directly with teachers through NASUWT and the EIS Equalities Committee has provided a helpful insight into the issues our teachers are facing as further highlighted by the BISSR results.

- **Visible and strong leadership from the Scottish Government. The Gender Equality Taskforce in Education and Learning (GETEL) must be given greater political priority, and NASUWT looks forward to working with you as the Chair of the Taskforce to achieve a gender-competent experience of education and learning for all girls.**

I agree that the Taskforce requires strong and consistent leadership in order to effect systemic change. I have agreed to chair the group going forward and am considering how it can best address behavioural issues which are underpinned by misogyny and gender-based violence, the type of which have emerged during the the discourse around the behaviour in schools summits.

- **A commitment to educate children and young people and school staff on the importance of gender equality and to address the causes and impact of sexual harassment.**

One of the fundamental aims of the Gender Equality Taskforce in Education and Learning is to effect systemic change, which includes ensuring that young people and school staff understand the need to embed gender equality throughout the education system. Members of the Taskforce who also sit on the Gender Based Violence in Schools framework working group, are committed to ensuring that it helps tackle sexual harassment and gender-based violence. It will be underpinned by resources we will develop as part of the PSE review, which will enable schools to teach confidently about the issue of sexual harassment.

The framework is designed to support schools in taking a whole school approach to the prevention of gender-based violence. This can be achieved through actions around school culture and ethos, school policies and systems, professional learning and development for school staff, and the curriculum. The framework includes information on how school leadership, school staff, families and carers, children and young people, and community partners, all have a role to play in preventing and addressing gender-based violence. This means schools should be addressing the underlying causes, particularly gender inequality.

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In addition, the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring all children and young people receive high quality relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education, which is an integral part of the health and wellbeing area of the curriculum. RSHP education is intended to help children and young people build positive relationships as they grow older and should present facts in an objective, balanced and sensitive manner within the framework of curricular values and an awareness of the law. We are also clear that children and young people should gain knowledge appropriate to their age and stage of education.

- **The provision and promotion of national guidance for schools on behaviour and gender-based violence: the manner in which a school responds to incidents of sexual harassment and bullying of its staff will be indicative of how seriously and how effectively the bullying and harassment of pupils is tackled. A school that fails to tackle sexual and other forms of harassment and bullying of its employees effectively will find it more difficult to develop an effective and credible response to safeguarding pupils. Any national framework or guidance must be supported by appropriate resources.**

The Gender-Based Violence in schools framework contains a separate section on responding to gender-based violence experienced by staff members. The framework sets out how local authorities and schools can support staff members who may be experiencing gender-based violence in the workplace. The framework includes guidance on responding to incidents and signposting to resources, including teaching unions, who provide support to their members.

As part of our shared policy programme with the Scottish Green Party, The Scottish Government is committed to exploring whether further actions beyond those already planned, including guidance for schools, are required.

- **Many schools are not equipped with effective reporting and monitoring procedures for staff to report incidents of sexual harassment and violence. Women members have told us that they are not confident that reporting sexual harassment incidents will be taken seriously by management and, further, that this is a barrier to reporting. Robust policies for tackling sexual and other forms of harassment and violence, whether physical or verbal, must include effective reporting and monitoring procedures.**

The Gender Based Violence in schools framework is clear that where staff report incidents of sexual harassment or gender-based violence, that these incidents are recorded. Staff should feel empowered to take any incidents through the appropriate channels. If a behaviour is covered by the definition of GBV provided in this framework, it should be recorded in the Bullying and Equalities module of SEEMiS, or under an equivalent section of a schools' recording system.

- **The refreshed RSHP guidance is just the beginning of the change needed. Schools need to be supported to go further and take proactive action to create a culture in which girls are safe and can thrive. What is needed is a whole-school approach that is appropriately financed and resourced and which will include a key focus on PSE in delivery and implementation.**

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We know a whole school approach can provide a foundation on which schools can strengthen their culture and ethos, however we need to ensure all the supportive guidance documents are in place. We are committed to ensuring we provide our hard working and committed educational workforce with tools they need to help their schools become more respectful and tolerant places for our children and young people to develop in.

- **Ministers must take appropriate action to ensure that social media companies immediately address the very serious threats to teachers and take full responsibility for the harm being caused by those who use these platforms to abuse teachers.**

The well-being of our teachers is of paramount importance, and we are committed to ensuring a safe and supportive environment for all education staff. We acknowledge the gravity of the situation and fully understand the concerns regarding the misuse of social media platforms to target teachers. It is imperative that social media companies take responsibility for the harm caused by individuals who abuse these platforms.

We are dedicated to promoting the health and well-being of the entire education workforce. Since October 2020, we have invested over £2 million in a comprehensive workforce support package aimed at providing mental health and well-being support to individuals across the education spectrum.

This year we are providing £200,000 to Know You More to offer free wellbeing coaching to teaching staff and educational professionals across Scottish schools and early learning facilities. This coaching aims to establish a secure and confidential space where individuals can prioritise their own well-being, fostering resilience against various challenges, including those linked to social media.

As responsible employers, local authorities play a crucial role in safeguarding the health and well-being of all staff members in schools. We actively encourage the implementation of employee assistance programs, and it is our commitment to ensure that teachers are aware of and have access to these support systems.

Furthermore, we recognise the importance of addressing social media misuse in relation to school staff. We stand firm on enforcing these principles to maintain a respectful and safe environment for our educators.

To further assist schools and parents in promoting responsible social media use, we recommend adopting the guidelines outlined in Education Scotland's Parent Council Resource ([Parent Council Resource A guide to gathering views and ensuring parents' voices are heard in your school \(education.gov.scot\)](#)), which emphasises the importance of responsible social media use. Additionally, the social media resource provided by Connect, a parental engagement charity, can serve as a valuable tool when dealing with online abuse. You can find this resource at [Social_Media_Resource_Pack.pdf \(connect.scot\)](#).

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- **At the 2021 NASUWT Women Teachers' Conference, we asked attendees how safe they generally feel outside of work. Only 10% of respondents felt very safe. NASUWT commends the Safe Home campaign, championed by the STUC, and asks the Scottish Government to promote teachers' safety when travelling to and from work.**

Scottish Government officials are in early discussion with COSLA and other partners to look at the viability of safety apps as a means of providing additional reassurance to women accessing public spaces and to inform improvements to facilities such as CCTV and lighting.

Our Equally Safe Strategy is aimed at preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls and is focussed on early intervention, prevention and support services. This is backed by £19m of annual funding from our Delivering Equally Safe Fund, running from October 2021, to support 121 projects from 112 organisations that focus on early intervention, prevention and support services. Those who perpetrate violence and abuse, the majority of whom are men, must change their actions and behaviour. It is only through fundamental societal change that women can be protected.

The refresh of the Equally Safe strategy was published on 7 December as part of a joint launch with COSLA and those organisations who contributed to the Refresh process.

- **Violent attacks against women are on the increase and are often driven by other intersectional factors such as ethnicity, age, gender identity, faith, sexual orientation and disability. Taking an intersectional approach is key to challenging prejudice and hatred. Trans awareness and the experiences of trans women should be explicitly considered.**

The Scottish Government recognises the role intersectionality plays in how gender-based violence manifests itself. We are clear on the importance of taking an intersectional approach to all of our work related to tackling inequality and discrimination. That is why the Gender Based Violence framework was developed to take an intersectional approach to tackling sexual harassment and gender-based violence in schools.

In addition, the Gender Equality Taskforce in Education and Learning has been clear from the outset that it too takes an intersectional approach. At its first meeting it agreed that:

- **All girls and young women in Scotland, including girls and young women affected by intersecting inequalities will:**
- **Be taught by gender competent, educational professionals;**
- **Not experience sexism, sexual harassment, or gender-based violence in the classroom or other educational setting;**
- **Freely choose subjects and areas of study, including those traditionally dominated by boys and men.**
- **To indicate a commitment to improve, HMiE should replicate Ofsted inspection practice and have a thematic inspection around violence against women and girls in schools – exploring the experiences of teachers and staff as well as pupils.**

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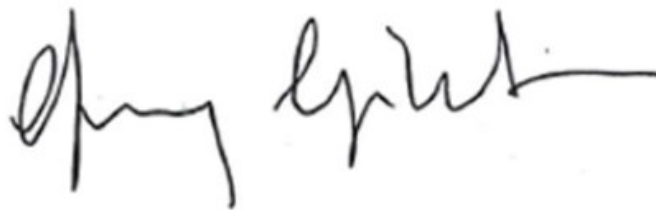
As part of Education Scotland's Inspection approaches, all schools that are being inspected are advised that they are required to make all documents and records related to bullying, complaints and serious incidents available to inspectors during the visit. Inspectors review these records and documents and discuss the nature of incidents with relevant staff. Inspectors sample children and young people's individual files in order to evaluate how well the school is following correct guidance and supporting pupils. If there are incidents related to gender-based violence included in the records provided by the school, inspectors will discuss these incidents with staff and evaluate approaches used to deal with incidents.

HM Inspectors recognise that there is a need to ensure that schools are fully aware of gender-based violence, that children and young people are well supported following incidents and that they feel confident to report any incidents. Prior to the inspection visit, children/young people, parents/carers and staff are asked to complete pre-inspection questionnaires. Questionnaires ask specific questions about bullying and if children/young people feel safe in school. There is also an opportunity to provide comments. If children/young people provide responses to indicate they do not feel safe or comments that indicate they are at risk, inspectors share information with staff in the school and seek assurances that the school will follow up on issues. During the inspection visit, inspectors will meet with children and young people in groups, in classes and during breaks. Inspectors talk to pupils about how safe they feel in school and issues related to bullying, including violent incidents.

As part of the process in publishing the Gender Based Violence framework, the Scottish Government is committed to commissioning an independent review to establish positive practice and further areas for improvement, during this parliamentary session. We expect this will be completed through a thematic inspection carried out through the Education Inspectorate.

Thanks again for taking the time to write to me. I look forward to continuing to work with NASUWT and other key partners on this important issue.

Yours sincerely,



JENNY GILRUTH

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