



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Education, Children and Young People Committee

**Wednesday 14 June 2023**

**Session 6**



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**EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE**  
**19<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2023, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

- \*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
- \*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
- \*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)
- \*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
- \*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)
- \*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
- \*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
- \*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
- \*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

- Cheryl Burnett (National Parent Forum of Scotland)
- Mike Corbett (NASUWT)
- Beau Johnston (Scottish Youth Parliament)
- Anne Keenan (Educational Institute of Scotland)
- Carrie Lindsay (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
- Dr Colin Morrison (Children's Parliament)
- Dr Joan Mowat (University of Strathclyde)
- Nick Smiley (Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Pauline McIntyre

**LOCATION**

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)



# Scottish Parliament

## Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 14 June 2023

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]*

### Violence in Schools

**The Convener (Sue Webber):** Good morning, and welcome to the 19th meeting in 2023 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

The first item on our agenda is a round-table session on violence in schools. The committee is aware that a number of incidents of violent behaviour have taken place in schools across Scotland over the past year. We want to understand more about those incidents, so we have arranged this discussion so that we can hear from a range of voices. In particular, the committee is 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.

I welcome our witnesses. In no particular order, we are joined by Anne Keenan, assistant secretary at the Educational Institute of Scotland; Mike Corbett, national official for Scotland at the NASUWT; Beau Johnston, member of the Scottish Youth Parliament; Carrie Lindsay, executive director of education and children's services at Fife Council, who is representing the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland; Dr Colin Morrison, co-director of the Children's Parliament; Nick Smiley, chair of the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists; Dr Joan Mowat, senior lecturer in the school of education at the University of Strathclyde; and Cheryl Burnett, chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland. Thank you all for joining us.

We begin with a bit of housekeeping. Today's session is a round-table discussion. It is intended to be more of a conversation than a question-and-answer session, which is what Government ministers who appear before the committee get. Members will pose questions to help to create a structure for our discussion, but if any witness wants to come in, they should please catch my eye or that of one of the clerks, who are sitting to my left, and I will do my best to bring them in.

I will start off by asking an opening question to set the scene. Does the panel think that we currently have a clear picture of the violence that

is taking place in schools across Scotland? I invite Cheryl Burnett to answer first.

**Cheryl Burnett (National Parent Forum of Scotland):** Last week, the National Parent Forum of Scotland launched a survey in response to parent concerns and complaints that have been raised regarding behaviour in schools and violence in schools. We have seen a rise in the formation of all the issues. To be brutally honest, violent incidents have always happened; they happen in our school buildings and in communities. However, the rise in incidents post-Covid has brought the issue to the fore. Overwhelmingly, parents have agreed with us on that, and our interim results show that.

**Mike Corbett (NASUWT):** I think that, as an organisation, via our members, we certainly have a clear picture of the situation. However, the issue has been around for a while. Looking back at 2019, survey results from our members showed that verbal abuse was an issue for 55 per cent of members and that physical assault was an issue for about 13 per cent of our members. The most recent figures show that those numbers have risen. Now, 60-odd per cent talk about verbal abuse in the past year and 17 per cent talk about physical assault in the past year. It is important to make the point that, although there has been an increase in incidents post-Covid, that is clearly not the only issue; violence in schools has been around for a while.

However, it is useful for us to be in this forum and that the cabinet secretary has announced a summit on the issue, as that will help us to get it acknowledged and, we hope, start to try to address it.

**The Convener:** I ask Anne Keenan to respond. I am using your full names for the broadcasting team. It might seem a bit formal, but it is simply so that broadcasting can zoom in.

**Anne Keenan (Educational Institute of Scotland):** I agree with Mike Corbett that the issue has been with us for some time. The EIS has long supported members in dealing with issues around violence and distressed behaviours, and we have campaigned for increased funding, particularly around additional support needs. Most recently, post-Covid, we have seen more and more comments from members and reports from our reps that the issue is rising.

At the weekend, at our annual general meeting in Aviemore, the rising nature of the issue was a significant focus of a number of the motions that were brought before us. We had our national executive meeting yesterday, and again the issue was a topic of discussion. Unsurprisingly, in an all-member survey that we did, the issue featured greatly, and you will have seen from our written

evidence that we have published a number of the findings from that survey. Almost three quarters of respondents to the survey indicated that they were stressed frequently or all of the time.

When we look at what underpins that, we find that 53 per cent of secondary school respondents said that improved pupil behaviour would have the biggest impact on their wellbeing. Also, 71 per cent of secondary school respondents said that managing behaviour was the biggest driver of workload. We know from colleagues who are in pastoral support and senior management teams that that can be a particular issue for them.

In the primary sector, 65.2 per cent of respondents indicated that the biggest impact on their wellbeing would come from having more classroom assistants and more support for inclusion for those with ASN, with 70 per cent saying that that would assist with their workload.

There is clearly a feeling from our members that there is an issue that has to be dealt with. Unsurprisingly, to respond to those requests from our members, we have now launched a campaign that looks at ASN workload and, importantly, pupil behaviour.

**The Convener:** As our conversation continues, I am sure that members will pick up on those issues. This part of the meeting will be more structured, as I try to get everyone involved. I come to Nick Smiley.

**Nick Smiley (Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists):** Thank you. You will see from the papers that have been submitted that concerns about behaviour in schools have been around for a long time. There has been a national approach, and a lot of work has been done in the area. However, there is no doubt that the current context is becoming more challenging and there are issues that we are all facing. Our union colleagues tell us that the impact on teachers is significant.

We have to bear in mind that the factors that underlie the issue are complex and cannot be captured in a black and white way. The factors that affect children's behaviour and that are in play just now, post-pandemic, are significant in what we are dealing with. Particularly among younger children, we have seen an impact on their behaviour, communication and capacity to cope in a school setting. We are dealing with distressed behaviour, which is proving to be a bit of a challenge across all our schools and early learning and childcare centres. There is also the impact at secondary school level on young people's mental health, which is still a big concern for us, as well as an impact on attendance et cetera.

People have been concerned about the issue for a long time, but factors are in play just now that

are making the issue more complex and challenging, and we are going to have to get to grips with the issue and support schools to address it. It is not something that schools can tackle on their own. As has been mentioned, behaviour is a societal issue as well as a school issue and it cannot just be looked at through the lens of what happens in school.

**The Convener:** I ask Beau Johnston to come in next.

**Beau Johnston (Scottish Youth Parliament):** I think that Nick Smiley has raised many points that are very relevant to the Scottish Youth Parliament. Personally, and as a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament, I do not feel that there has been enough consultation with children and young people on the issue to gather their views on it.

The issues that are raised with us by children and young people are the ones that they feel are the most important, and that is what guides our work and what we prioritise for campaigns and policy work. The issue of violence in schools has not been brought to us, which suggests that it might not be at the top of children and young people's priorities. The priorities are issues such as educational attainment, education reform, better support for mental health issues and the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, that does not necessarily mean that violence in schools is not an issue for young people; it is simply not a top priority. There needs to be more consultation with children and young people on the issue.

**The Convener:** I know that Cheryl Burnett is keen to come back in, but I am keen to get an initial response from everyone.

**Carrie Lindsay (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland):** The question about whether there is a clear picture of violence in schools is a good one. The data that we have uses slightly different definitions in different places, because there is no firm definition of violence or distressed behaviour, and different systems are used to record incidents. We have a lot of information, but we do not have the full picture. I agree with Beau Johnston that we need to be working with our children and young people. The health and wellbeing census provides a lot of information, and we can start to gather data from that. Some local authorities are gathering sample data in particular schools by asking young people whether they feel safe and what they feel could be done about the issue.

I think that there is a perception that has been put out there in the media that there are individual situations that have been quite serious. However, those situations are not necessarily as prevalent

as it would appear from the media. That creates almost a social norm effect, which could lead to young people believing that those sorts of things might be happening everywhere. I agree with Beau Johnston that it is important to have conversations with our young people, as well as parents and staff, so that we can gather their views about their experiences in schools.

We do not yet have a clear picture. I believe that Education Scotland is doing a report on the issue, which we are expecting in July. I hope that that will give us a bit more information, alongside the health and wellbeing census. The Association of Directors of Education has also been gathering information and has looked at statistics across some of our local authorities. We are starting to build a picture, but I would not yet say that there is a clear national picture.

**Dr Colin Morrison (Children's Parliament):**

The initial problem for us is the framing of the discussion and, with respect, the question. There is no definition of what we are talking about. First, if we are talking about violence, a working definition would be that it is defined as behaviour by people against people that is liable to cause physical or psychological harm. Is that what we are talking about today? If it is, that gives the discussion some parameters that we can all understand.

If we are talking about behaviour, we would then talk about relationships. Over the past 30 years, we have worked alongside some amazing school-based colleagues, not just teachers—we need to remember that there are many adults in a school setting. We have worked with adults and children to change things such as behaviour policies to relationship policies. When you do that, you change the whole way of being and the culture of a school. It is not just about the practices—restorative practices are an example—that people can adopt; it is a hearts and minds piece. If you change the nature of your relationships, you will address the challenges and difficulties in those relationships.

Our schools are not places of violence. They might be places where incidents happen, but to paint the picture that we have a problem with violence in schools does not reflect the day-to-day experiences of teachers who go into schools with love and a nurturing attitude, work hard to build relationships with children and focus on learning and teaching. That is what happens daily in our schools. I am concerned about the framing of the discussion. I know that we will dig deep into the topic, but I think that it is really dangerous to develop a narrative that our schools are dangerous places and places of violence, because they are not.

**The Convener:** I am not sure that that is how we had framed today's discussion. We are just trying to understand a bit more about what is going on. I will bring in Dr Mowat.

09:45

**Dr Joan Mowat (University of Strathclyde):** I agree with a lot of what Nick Smiley said. I will not pick on the framing issue, but I agree, in principle, with a lot of what has been said.

I would frame my response by recognising that there are current concerns about violence and behaviour in schools, but I also think that Scottish education has a great deal to be proud of. There has been a significant cultural change in Scottish schools, with a much greater recognition of underlying reasons for children's behaviour. That has led to a much more empathetic approach to children, and relationships, trust and children's rights have come to the fore. That represents a significant change since the days when I was a deputy head working in a deprived area.

However, cultural change is very difficult to achieve—it does not happen overnight; it takes a lot of work and time to achieve. It is very important that we continue with the approaches that we are adopting at the moment but see how they can be improved.

On your question about whether we have the data, I do not think that we have the data on the national picture. The behaviour survey was delayed by two years, so it is almost six years since we had the previous one. We are still waiting to get the data on exclusions, violence and assault in schools for the more recent period, because that has not been published yet. We cannot make a true comparison between the two latest sets of data, because schools were closed for a lot of that time.

A lot of data is emerging from third sector organisations and that is very valuable. However, we are not quite there yet for the national picture. We will be in a much clearer position at the end of the year, when the behaviour survey comes out and when we get the next set of statistics on exclusions from schools.

For the past two years, my research has focused on the impact of Covid on children and families. I have been looking at the literature, not just from Scotland but internationally. There is a strong message about the mental health impacts of Covid on children and young people, which inevitably have an impact on their behaviour. To pick up on some of what Colin Morrison said, manifestations of what might be described as violent behaviour or assault are often a sign of distressed children. It is important to frame it in that way.

Schools are working very hard to support children, young people and families. That is what I am hearing in the small-scale study that I am currently conducting on how prospective headteachers have been supporting their school communities. To be honest, they have gone the second mile. Schools are working very hard to support children, not just in relation to lost learning, but in relation to wellbeing. We need to put the emphasis on wellbeing.

**The Convener:** I am hoping that we will get into those issues. I simply posed an opening question to get the discussion going and to get a sense of where people are.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** A whole bunch of stuff was raised in the opening comments, so it is tempting to go in 100 different directions to follow up the things that have been said. There are things that are easy to agree with because they are lovely principles, and then there is the reality. Here, we have the meeting of two things—nice words and lovely ideas, and then the reality of what many teachers are telling us is their daily experience in some of Scotland's schools and classrooms.

I think that Carrie Lindsay hit the nail on the head. We do not actually know exactly what is happening in our classrooms, because there is such variation in reporting. We need at least to agree that there needs to be a common standard across Scotland for situations that arise in classrooms or schools to end up being reportable. At the moment, we are reduced to using anecdotal evidence in a lot of these discussions. I have certainly been told by quite a few teachers that they are positively discouraged from reporting some of the things that happen in their classrooms. They are told not to make a fuss about them even though, in some cases, people have been off work or even hospitalised.

**The Convener:** One of our other members is going to pick up specifically on the data element later.

**Stephen Kerr:** Okay.

**The Convener:** That is fine. We are meant to be fostering a discussion, so we will take that point and leave it there. Mike Corbett will be next, followed by Cheryl Burnett.

**Mike Corbett:** I will stick with the point about scale and build on some of the comments that have been made. It would be useful to establish a definition of the violence that we are talking about. We would go with the Health and Safety Executive definition, but it is important that we define what we are talking about in the first instance.

On scale, we have heard mention of the behaviour in Scottish schools research study. That

has been delayed, but we will get it later in the year and it will provide a point of comparison. Even then, however, that study is quite limited in its scope so there are still potential question marks around it. It will help with data, although it will not be available until later in the year.

I reinforce the point that has just been made about reporting. There are a huge variety of reporting systems. I am not just saying this because Carrie Lindsay is here, but our members in Fife say that Fife Council has recently done a lot of work to make it much easier for teachers to report incidents. In some areas—I will not name and shame them—the systems for reporting violent incidents are byzantine.

The results of the national discussion need to come into this. I know that Beau Johnston said that the issue has not come to the Scottish Youth Parliament, but the results of the national discussion and the consultation with pupils there have made it clear that a number of pupils do not feel safe in school at the moment.

Finally, we need to take a step back and acknowledge that great things are happening in schools. A lot of progress has been made on behaviour. However, today's focus is on what our members are telling us are issues, and that is why we are talking about them today.

**Cheryl Burnett:** I want to respond to the point that was made about definitions. Mike Corbett is right about that. For us, it is about behaviour, the relationships that we have with our kids in school and making sure that their focus is on learning.

We must also reflect on the fact that the mental health and wellbeing of a significant number of young people are impacted. As parents, we are seeing that our kids are really stressed and anxious. Some of them are refusing to go to school, and their behaviour in school is altered as a result of whatever has happened to them in the home, the community or the school setting.

We have to break down the definitions of behaviours. Is it a bullying behaviour? Is it having an impact on mental health? Is it additional support needs oriented, or specifically learning support needs oriented?

On the point about reporting, the initial results of our survey show that more than half of the parents whom we have surveyed so far do not feel that their children are safe in school. That is quite a damning response. When a parent puts their child into school, they want to be sure of their safety and, as Colin Morrison said, sure that they will be nurtured, safe and supported. If we look at the duality of children not feeling safe in school and the staff not feeling safe in school, we can see that the system is broken and it needs to change. I therefore welcome the discussion about finding



ways to resolve these long-term issues. As a colleague said earlier, this is not something new.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** I thank everyone for joining us this morning and for sharing the incredibly useful information that you sent us in advance.

I want to pick up on some of the discussion that we have had so far, because it feeds into the issue of identifying the scale of the problem. I am a bit concerned that, even this morning, we might be falling into the trap of suggesting that there is not a problem when there actually is one. We heard from Mike Corbett, Anne Keenan and others about the increases that they are seeing in the school environment. It is fair to say that, although we should not look at what certain newspapers might print on their front pages, the low level of discipline that has been raised with us is wearing for staff. It is causing the wellbeing issues that Mike Corbett and Anne Keenan highlighted.

We are creating a bit of a pressure cooker environment in classrooms. I agree with Dr Mowat's analysis of distress behaviours and with Nick Smiley on the point that there is distress here for young people. We need to get to the bottom of the reasons for that in order to support them to develop better through their education.

First, why do we have that inconsistent approach to reporting? Secondly, why do some people say that they are scared to escalate issues and that they are not taken seriously when they do so? They are told that there is a fear of bringing the authority into disrepute. That culture has to be addressed if we are to get to the bottom of this. My questions are for Anne Keenan, Mike Corbett and Carrie Lindsay.

**The Convener:** Would you like to kick off on that, Anne?

**Anne Keenan:** I am glad that Pam Duncan-Glancy has brought up the issue of low-level disruptive behaviour, because the feedback that we get from members is that persistent low-level disruptive behaviour can lead to a huge increase in stress and have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of teachers. I appreciate that we are talking about definitions and violence, but we also need to consider that behaviour issue in order to improve the mental health and wellbeing of teachers and staff in schools in general.

The feedback from members is that reporting and recording are incredibly variable. A particular issue can be that support for staff, such as staff being given time to report, does not exist. The feedback from members is that, if a staff member has been involved in an incident, they are not necessarily given time to recover from that and to consider reporting it. Some of the forms are particularly labour intensive. We know from

members that they have excessive workloads and that it can add to that if they are asked to complete the forms.

Depending on the number of times that they have to complete the forms, a kind of wearing down happens. The feedback, including from some headteachers and our deputy headteacher and headteacher network, is that the forms are completed and sent to the local authority, but staff get no feedback as to what should happen thereafter. A perception exists that teachers are in, as one of our members said, an infinite risk assessment process where they are asked to complete forms and do risk assessments without being given additional resourcing to address the underlying causes of the distressed or violent behaviour.

I agree that the issue has to be framed in the context of additional support needs. I am not saying that every child with an additional support need has a prospect of being violent, but we are saying that, if a child or young person is displaying distressed or violent behaviour, an additional support need potentially needs to be addressed and we need to get to the underlying cause. Teachers not being provided with the resources to be able to do that is a huge problem.

From our members' perspective, the reporting element feeds into that. There is no consistency. We would like to see a return to the collation of national statistics in relation to the issue so that we can have some comparison, and we would like forms to be as straightforward and simple as possible so that salient information can be gathered consistently across the piece in a way that does not add to workload. We would like mechanisms to be in place that do not discourage people from reporting.

A concern exists that some schools might feel that that would suggest that they have a particular problem. However, we think that that culture needs to change. Things need to be much more open and transparent. Teachers need to be actively supported by their schools and local authorities to report incidents, and action needs to be taken thereafter—for example, some kind of tracking—so that we can see where resources need to lie and where we need to invest to address the problem and change the culture. We absolutely need to address the cultural issue.

I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary refer during the debate in Parliament to the importance of trusting teachers. However, we need not only to trust them, but also to support them to deal with this.

10:00

**Mike Corbett:** On that key point about a fear of reporting, we have a cultural problem. I suspect that it originally came from well-intentioned aims such as reducing the number of exclusions. However, our members certainly tell us that one of the unintended consequences is that, when it comes to local authorities getting violent incidents in schools and the number of exclusions reported to them, there has increasingly been a culture of fear among headteachers, who do not want to report a large number of violent incidents or exclusions because it makes their school look bad. There is definitely a cultural issue and a pressure on local authorities and headteachers. That may be because they have misunderstood the guidance, but it absolutely leads to situations where individual teachers feel dissuaded—as Stephen Kerr touched on—from reporting violent incidents and abuse.

I will give the committee an anecdotal example. As part of our evidence to the committee, we had put in a couple of anonymised examples, including an example from a teacher who was subject to homophobic abuse. He flirted with the idea of putting in an anonymised example of his terrible experience but, despite the fact that it was anonymised, he withdrew it at the last minute. That shows the fear that exists. It also touches on the wider societal issue of the online abuse of minorities at the moment. There are societal issues here as well, but the issue of fear in relation to a lack of full reporting is important.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** The point about online abuse is really important. Either your submission or the EIS submission talks about the definition of violence including written violence. Does it also need to include online abuse?

**Mike Corbett:** I think that it does—yes. Over the past 18 months, teachers generally, our members among them and those who are part of protected groups—including disabled members, but especially black members and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members—have certainly suffered a terrible increase in online abuse.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Are we recording that just now?

**Mike Corbett:** As I said, there is a culture that dissuades some of that recording. We are therefore back to the question of whether we have the full picture. We have a lot of the information, but in some ways we still do not quite have the full picture.

**Carrie Lindsay:** Mike Corbett referred to some of the things that we have done in Fife. I do not want to focus on Fife, but we have put an app on the laptop of every member of staff so that,

whenever they go into their computer, it is there and they can very quickly submit evidence about their concerns. Unfortunately, however, when we start to gather that information, it becomes a problem in society as well as a solution. People, including our local politicians, will look at the information and data and see cases rising. We are encouraging reporting and we want to get a full picture, but sometimes that becomes a bit skewed.

We have to be careful about how we use the data. As many of my colleagues will, we use it regularly with our trade unions and we have discussions about how we will respond. We had a session with all the directors to look at the topic, and lots of information was gleaned about forums and organised meetings that they are having with trade unions to make sure that we are encouraging staff to do that reporting and that we are using it to inform what we do next. It is not just about having the data; it is about what we use it for.

We need to be able to respond locally to the data that we have. We know what resources we have and what training and support we can do. We are now starting to see that targeted approach; if people have that data, they can use it to target in some ways.

Anne Keenan touched on feedback. That is sometimes difficult because time has elapsed due to the need to gather information and go through various health and safety things. Sometimes it is about finding time in the school. We have certainly done a lot of work with headteachers to make sure that they make the giving of feedback to anybody who has been involved in a situation an absolute priority. However, that is a challenge.

We have been gathering data from a range of local authorities and it shows that the figure is less than 1 per cent—that is not a national figure; it is just something that we have been looking at—in most of our settings, apart from additional support needs settings. Those are called a range of things in different places, including special schools and departments of additional support.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** When you say that the figure is less than 1 per cent, what are you referring to?

**Carrie Lindsay:** I am referring to the recording of violent and aggressive incidents.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** How does that compare with the data that we are hearing about from others today? It has been mentioned that 17 per cent of people are experiencing physical assault and 62 per cent are experiencing—

**Carrie Lindsay:** I cannot comment on that. I do not have that data; I do not see where that evidence is coming from. That is the data—

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** That gets to the heart of the problem—

**The Convener:** Pam, let Carrie Lindsay respond.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** —does it not?

**Carrie Lindsay:** All that I can talk about is the data that I have been looking at, which the directors have provided for me.

My last point is about our young people feeling safe in school. I know that one local authority, on the back of an incident, went out to all its secondary schools and undertook focus groups with them. That showed that more than 90 per cent of the young people said that they felt safe in school. Some are saying that they do not feel safe. However, I provide that information to give perspective to what was said.

**The Convener:** I will come to Cheryl Burnett on this topic, then Ross Greer will ask a question.

**Cheryl Burnett:** On reporting, I have to link that back to parents. We are talking a lot about staff. I appreciate why that is the case, but the other side of the coin is when parents make a decision to have an initial conversation to raise and report a concern. When they have that conversation with the school—which might be via a phone call, an email or another type of interaction—they assume, maybe wrongly, that it will be jotted down and noted. However, in reality, many parents do not know when a concern becomes a recordable incident. When we look at what defines a recordable, notifiable incident, we get into very murky waters.

An example is bullying or challenging behaviour in schools. When a young person is directly impacted as a result of the behaviour of another young individual in a school setting—sometimes incidents fluctuate between taking place in school and in the community, as they can cross both settings—parents are unsure what the process is. No clear process is provided to us or shown to parent councils as to what the right way forward is.

I understand that teachers and staff are a wee bit confused about what the right process is and that whether they have a process is a postcode lottery. However, the same is true for parents. When parents make an initial report, it can get lost in translation. What was a molehill can suddenly become a mountain and we are faced with the extreme side of the process.

**The Convener:** That is a useful comment.

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** Mike Corbett's point about not only reporting incidents but ensuring that what has motivated them has been accurately reported, particularly when it involves a protected characteristic, is really

important. I am keen to hear from others on that, because I am aware that the Time for Inclusive Education campaign for LGBT inclusive education made the point that violence against queer pupils or staff was often being recorded as a generic incident of violence and that that motivating factor was not being recorded.

Personally, I am not remotely convinced that we are accurately recording violence against young women and girls in which misogyny is the motivating factor. Do the other witnesses believe that there is an issue there, too?

I also want to specifically ask Carrie Lindsay about the health and wellbeing census that she mentioned. There is really valuable data in that. I am interested to know how local authorities and schools have used that in the past to inform their policies on dealing with bullying and violence. I am also interested in how that data can be used, given the highly politicised discussion that took place about the census this year and the very variable return rate that we got. Is the census as usable now for that specific purpose as it has been in the past? I am aware that some schools got a 95 or 100 per cent response rate and that other schools and entire local authorities did not take part at all. Can we use the data this year in the way that we have in the past?

**Carrie Lindsay:** You will be aware that some local authorities were not able to participate in the health and wellbeing census for a range of reasons. Therefore, the national data was incomplete.

You will always have good response rates from some places and not so good rates from others. However, in response to your question, if you look at the data nationally it gives you good information to start from.

Local authorities also gather their own information, which is perhaps why some of them have not bought into the health and wellbeing census—they might already have been being doing some data gathering of their own.

There is a wealth of data that people can use to inform the policies and practice in their local authority, and I think that health and wellbeing census data, at national and local level, should be used to inform policies and procedures.

**The Convener:** Beau Johnston would like to respond to Ross Greer's questions, too.

**Beau Johnston:** The point that Ross Greer raised about people from different backgrounds, such as LGBT people and young women, is particularly important for young people. As I said before, although violence is not necessarily an issue that has been brought to us as a concern for

young people, that does not mean that it is not an issue—it just has not been brought to us.

Things such as the bullying of LGBT+ people and homophobic, biphobic and transphobic behaviour have definitely been brought to us. We have lots of policy on that, such as that there should be a dedicated fund for initiatives to educate, prevent and address LGBT bullying and discrimination in all schools. That policy passed with a 74 per cent vote, showing that a lot of young people feel that that is a major issue.

We have a women's empowerment working group, which we established because we feel that young women need support. It is looking at doing that. The discrimination element is definitely a big issue for young people.

**The Convener:** In the interest of time, I will move on to questions from Ruth Maguire.

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** Good morning, everyone. I appreciate all your experience, expertise and different perspectives.

I want to talk specifically about children for a wee while. Initially, I want to ask about and listen to you telling me about your perspectives on the factors and aspects that increase instances of violence and violent behaviour. Nick Smiley, you touched on some of that in your opening remarks. Can we look at that a bit more deeply?

I would then like to chat about potential solutions. Colin Morrison spoke about how having good relationships can be preventative and protective. Perhaps we could talk a bit about that as well.

**Nick Smiley:** I want to go back to something that was said earlier about language. I am not comfortable with talking about violence and so on when we are talking about children's behaviour, although I absolutely accept the concerns around the harm that has been caused.

Children with additional support needs are overrepresented in incidents in which people are hurt and behaviour such as that occurs. There is no doubt about that, and members will know about it from the papers that have been submitted.

There is a fundamental issue about how we understand children's needs and how we support them in the school context. When it comes to the whole area of additional support for learning, there has been the Morgan review and so on. That all needs to be looked at in terms of how we support children.

On the issue of the incidents that occur that cause a lot of concern and alarm, it is about distressed behaviour in the vast majority of incidents, which can be viewed through a prism or lens of trauma. We have more children presenting

with neurodevelopmental needs now. The combination of those needs with, perhaps, traumatic experiences or needs not being met outwith school sometimes results in situations in school that are very difficult to manage.

The age of children who are presenting with neurodevelopmental needs has got younger. It is quite clear now that, even in age groups as young as those in early learning and childcare, we have children who come into school requiring a lot of support and for whom the environmental situation itself is very demanding. Trying to meet their needs poses challenges. I would not talk about violent behaviour in those contexts, but there are children who become distressed and cannot cope, and they communicate and express their needs through behaviour that is difficult for staff to deal with.

**Ruth Maguire:** I appreciate what you are saying. Pardon me for using the wrong term. We acknowledge that children with additional support needs are a large cohort. I think that what drives some of the discussion of this issue is not that; it is the examples that people see of children and young people causing physical harm to other children and young people. I appreciate that all violence is caused by distressed behaviour.

10:15

**Nick Smiley:** When it comes to those situations, I echo what others have said about the need for relational approaches in the culture and ethos of schools and in how we support young people to understand their emotional needs and how to cope in situations where there is conflict.

Probably because of the impact of the pandemic, some young people have missed out on key developmental experiences. Some of our young people—

**Ruth Maguire:** Can you give examples?

**Nick Smiley:** One instance is children who were impacted by lockdown around the time when they were coming to the end of primary school and were meant to have a supported transition to secondary school. A lot of our children who would have had an extended transition into that new environment were not able to have that. A whole cohort of young people—particularly those with more complex additional support needs—have struggled to settle and find a secure base in secondary school, despite a lot of work.

We have to bear in mind that, even once lockdown was over, measures were still in place that meant that schools were restricted in what they could do around bringing children in from primary to secondary. That impact of those experiences in the whole area of transition—I

would include in that the transition from nursery to primary school as well—was significant, and I think that we have a legacy from that. We have young people with significant levels of social anxiety, and some young people are not able to navigate the social environment of school in the way that perhaps they were before, so more incidents of conflict might be arising out of that.

There has been a lot of discussion about data and how representative data is. In my own authority, the biggest increase in incidents is in the younger age groups, not in secondary school. Incidents that are more serious and where people are hurt are almost always complex situations involving children and young people with significant additional support needs. Our specialist provision is probably where there are the highest number of incidents that would be recorded, and they arise out of complex situations with children who have very significant communication needs and who can become very distressed and will express that sometimes through what you would term violent behaviour, although that intention is not there. Those are the most serious instances. In my experience, when staff are hurt it is in that context of very complex additional support needs. I do not think that we can necessarily separate that from the wider discussion.

**Ruth Maguire:** Thank you.

**Dr Morrison:** If the committee is looking for evidence or an explanation about why the primary 1 or primary 2 child is picking up their desk and causing chaos through their distressed behaviour in the classroom, I would really encourage you to read Public Health Scotland's work around its Covid-19 early years resilience and impact surveys. The fourth one is live now. That has large-scale data that tells us what happened to the children who have just been referred to—children from the most vulnerable families—when they went through lockdown.

I know that it is easy to have hindsight and that a Covid inquiry is going on, but the impact of the closure of early years and community-based services for the most vulnerable families is coming home to roost and the Public Health Scotland evidence will show you that it has a long tail. Those behaviours have become established. There is a significant minority of three, four, five and six-year-olds who do not access green space or a garden at all in a week—they are not outdoors, at all. That is just a little thing that struck me this week when I was reading the Public Health Scotland work. Please read it.

These are not excuses. We are not saying that those children are behaving badly because they get away with it, as other people might suggest to you. Those children are behaving in those ways because their lived experience has been so shut

down. Trauma is about disconnection and disempowerment. We need to unpack what those things mean, day to day, and not just for the wee ones. It is harder to apply your empathy and your kindness to the 14 and 15-year-olds, but they have pretty much gone through the same experience, so let us be kind to them all.

There are solutions, but we are also pulling things out from under people's feet. On a flight, adults are told to fit their oxygen masks first. As a children's organisation, we think that we should look after the adults first, because, if we do not do that, we cannot look after the children.

Yesterday, CELCIS held an event at the University of Strathclyde relating to wee breathers, which is a trauma-informed programme that supports education staff to manage the kind of behaviours that they cope with day to day. Two years ago—or it might have been before Covid—Barnardo's published work on the importance of supported supervision for education professionals. Currently, such support is pretty poor; there is often very little of it in many settings. If you do not have time to be supported and to grieve and understand loss, and if you cannot unpack what it feels like to have a five-year-old pick up a chair and throw it at you, you are not able to adopt the right approaches.

We have good policy. "Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2: A Positive Approach to Preventing and Managing School Exclusions" is a good policy. Such policies should not be unpicked because of our anxiety and worry about what is happening to people. We now have fewer exclusions in Scotland because, before Covid, we all worked so hard to make that the case.

I will throw in one more point. In the past week, I have heard that at least four local authorities are closing school libraries. School libraries are a place of sanctuary where a kid who is struggling can go instead of standing in a corridor. They can get a book and be read to—in some schools, the librarian takes in their dog. School libraries are a therapeutic space.

We cannot say that we want to deal with these things if we are not dealing with the reality of what we are taking away and if we are not providing adults in schools settings with what they need to be able to do their job properly.

**The Convener:** I have a list of people who would like to come in. I will bring in Beau Johnston first.

**Beau Johnston:** Colin Morrison touched on the use of preventative strategies rather than exclusions to deal with what we are talking about. Four key issues play into that: cuts to youth work budgets, education reform, the incorporation of the

UNCRC, and the lack of availability of mental health support.

Youth work is essential in providing so much support for so many young people. As well as helping young people to develop their skills and find a route out of the poverty that might be causing the violence, youth workers can provide them with mental health support and build relationships with them. It gives them somewhere to vent and say, “I’ve had a really bad day. Can we talk about this?”, and they do not have to take that out through their actions.

As a result of budget cuts, however, those resources are not as available to young people. That leads me to the point about green spaces: youth work can provide those spaces and other such things for children and young people to access as a solution, but with the budget cuts to youth work, they are becoming less and less available to children and young people.

On education reform, a lot of people in the Scottish Youth Parliament feel that the current education system is not designed to help children and young people to reach their full potential. That can create a difficult school environment for young people in which they do not feel that their mental health is well supported by the education system. Instead, they feel that the system is not designed to look after them and ensure that they are learning in a safe way for their mental health.

We know that there is a lack of mental health support available because, following the pandemic, there has been a lot of demand for it. There are two strategies for resolving that. First, there could be preventative spending—there could, for example, be spending on youth work as a preventative strategy. Secondly, there could be spending on community-based mental health services. A Scottish Youth Parliament project that looked into the effectiveness of such services found them to be incredibly successful in helping children and young people with their mental health. However, there needs to be investment if they are to be expanded, and the funding should be streamlined so that the services are available to children and young people.

In relation to the incorporation of the UNCRC, children and young people do not necessarily know where their rights are, because those rights are not currently incorporated into law. That means that young people cannot say, “These are my rights in this space. This is where I can go for help.” They do not know how they can rely on their rights as set out in the UNCRC to ensure that they are being protected and looked after.

**Dr Mowat:** I endorse all the points that have been made so far. Building on relational approaches such as, say, nurture, is very

important in this context, and school counselling has a great deal to offer in that respect.

A lot of the issues that we are highlighting relate to additional support for learning. Unfortunately, that tends to be the very first thing that goes when there are budget cuts in local authorities, and support staff are often made redundant. Finding some way of ring fencing that support for children would be valuable.

We need to take the type of empathetic approach that Colin Morrison talked about, not only to children but to staff. Building in high-quality initial teacher education on relational approaches and career-long professional learning is very important, as is developing strong partnerships with parents, because they know their children best. Listening to parents as equal partners is an important aspect, as is trying to increase access to child and adolescent mental health services, which is very difficult right now. All of those things would help address the issues.

**The Convener:** I have a list here, so we will hear from Anne Keenan, Carrie Lindsay and then Mike Corbett. I must ask everyone to keep things tight.

**Anne Keenan:** I will do my best.

There has been a lot of discussion about relational approaches. We completely agree that such approaches underpin our approach to ASN, but we have to realise that, although Scotland has fantastic ASN legislation and policy, the issue is how we bridge the gap between policy and practice.

From an EIS perspective, that comes down to resourcing. It is not a new issue; in fact, we have been raising it for a number of years now. The committee’s predecessor, the Education and Skills Committee, highlighted the importance of resourcing back in 2017—and now we come back to it again.

When the Morgan review was announced, we hoped that it would shine a light on the issue, but resourcing was missing from it. We have to face the fact that if we want good relational approaches in our classrooms, we have to pay for them. We have to resource additional support for learning, and we need enough teachers and pupil support workers on the ground to support it. That means more investment and smaller class sizes—a promise that was made in a manifesto commitment in 2007 and which has not been realised. We need reduced class contact time, with more preparation time for teachers given over to developing differentiation.

Smaller class sizes would allow for much more meaningful engagement with pupils and parents and with support agencies. Indeed, those

agencies also need more resourcing. We have heard about the waiting lists for CAMHS, and we know about the difficulties in trying to access speech and language therapy support from psychologists for our youngest learners. A whole host of investment needs to go into that.

We also need to look at the whole recovery agenda, because we have not really done that. There has been a drive to get back to normal and to go back to looking at attainment statistics and top-down accountability measures, but we need to look meaningfully at recovery for teachers as well as for children and young people in our schools, and that will need a package of resources to support it.

**The Convener:** I know that some members will pick up on some of the solutions that you have discussed.

I bring in Carrie Lindsay.

**Carrie Lindsay:** I recently listened to the lead of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit in Strathclyde—it is not called Strathclyde any more; I mean Glasgow City Council—talking about the significant increase in antisocial behaviour in communities. That is not just a school problem, and, if we put it in that pocket, we will perhaps not do it justice or have the biggest impact. I agree with exactly what Beau Johnston said about youth work and mental health support. In addition, active schools are important in getting our young people engaged in activities in groups, so that they are not just at home on the computer, doing work in a very isolated way. It is crucial that we, as a wider society, think about that.

10:30

I also want to touch on what Colin Morrison said about transitions from nursery to primary 1, and transitions in secondary schools between secondary 2 and S3. The issue is not just behaviours but attendance. Because some of the families who did not send children to school during the pandemic have not re-engaged with the value of schooling, we are having a real problem with attendance, particularly with some school refusers—that is, young people who display such anxiety that they cannot attend. Such interrupted learning makes it difficult to do a personal and social education programme with a group of young people, because they are not there all the time. Given that they seldom attend, it is difficult to input some of those areas of work and get them to share and work together.

I visit schools every week. Even in some nursery school settings, in which there should be groups of 20 children, there might be only six or seven children coming in on a particular day. All the children might come in over the course of the

week, but they do not come in every day. We need to shift that. One solution is for us collectively, as a society, to try to ensure that people revalue education and school attendance. This is about the whole village—it is not just the people who are in the schools who will make that difference.

**The Convener:** Thanks, Carrie. I have Mike Corbett and Cheryl Burnett next. Keep it tight, Mike.

**Mike Corbett:** I will try.

Attempts are already being made to address the factors that have been highlighted in much of what has been said, with trauma-informed approaches, the recognition of young people's distress, the recognition of adverse childhood experiences and the recognition of post-pandemic issues with the explosion in additional support needs. Lots of good work is already going on. However, as has been said, if people are going to be able to do the small-group or one-to-one work that a lot of those distressed children need, that will need resources, and I am not convinced that those resources are there.

As many members know, I have 25 years' experience in the classroom. For me, there is another element: teenage boys in secondary schools who swear at teachers as performance—in other words, to show off in front of their pals. Maybe we need to dig down into why that goes on, but there is certainly more to it, and we need to explore those other elements. In fact, that brings me back to a big issue that has already been touched on: the lack of independent research on the reasons that drive these things, particularly post pandemic. We would like more independent research on the key factors in that respect.

Mention has been made of relational approaches. However, although the approach—or, at least, its language—can be changed, that will not necessarily change behaviour. As evidence of that, I can tell you about a new positive relationships policy, as a result of which, according to our members, low-level indiscipline was no longer being recorded; there was more disruption; and although there were restorative approaches in place, they were often being used with the same pupils, day after day, without, it seemed, their improving behaviour. That happened in February 2019 in a school that, in its view, was trying to do the right thing. Many such approaches have been tried—and, in some situations and some schools, they do not always work. That needs to be recognised.

More broadly—and I have said this to the committee before—the Morgan review seems almost to have been forgotten about. There really needs to be a refocus on ASN.

A number of points have been made about broader societal issues, with youth work being mentioned. The point about libraries, too, is vital. As someone who used to be a teacher of English, I have a big view on that. Such things are vital to improving things more generally for young people.

**Cheryl Burnett:** I wholeheartedly agree about youth work; in fact, I am heavily involved in youth work outwith my role on the National Parent Forum. I recognise what Beau Johnston was saying about young people's strengths and their ability to cope with the pressure of being in school all week and then coming back to the community to feel safe and to re-regulate their emotions. For me, first and foremost, there has to be a community-wide approach.

Our talk today is still very school-centric. The reality is that this is not just a school problem; we have to be able to work with every other part of the system. We have talked about educational psychologists, but what about the other allied health professionals and health visitors who have key responsibilities at the transitional points of a child's journey from birth onwards?

There is a duty and responsibility here, and again, I have to agree about the lack of funding. Resourcing is a huge issue that is fundamentally and detrimentally impacting children and young people. We are now talking not just about educational reform but about lifelong learning. We are no longer talking about three to 18—we are talking about learning beyond that. The impact that we are seeing now will continue, and we are seeing it spill over not just inside school but outside school into our local communities. We need a community-wide approach, because we all need to be on the same page. It cannot be the sole responsibility of the school.

I go back to Anne Keenan's point about the need for robust policies and legislation. With Angela Morgan's review and recommendations, there was a lot of hope that they would shine a light and create change, but I am hearing the same thing from parents, day in, day out. Nothing has changed. We have to put our money where our mouth is and present solid, workable and meaningful recommendations that we can take forward. Funding is the biggest barrier to success.

**The Convener:** On the Morgan review, I would just note that, on 8 June 2022, we minuted our intention to carry out an inquiry into additional support needs and, in two weeks' time, we will have an initial committee discussion about that inquiry and what it might look like. The issue is very much on our radar.

I call Stephanie Callaghan to carry on the theme of additional support needs.

**Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** Thank you all for coming today. It has been a really interesting and wide-ranging conversation. I want to talk about bullying in schools—children harming other children. Yes, the behaviour of children with additional support needs is an issue, but they are also often on the receiving end. The Morgan report has already been mentioned and we know that the strategies for additional support needs work for all children and young people. That is something to consider down the line. A lot has been said.

I am interested in a couple of wee points—you do not all have to answer all of them. I am interested in Covid, poverty and mental health. Are there wider approaches? Should we be looking to teach strategies to all our young people to enable them to cope better with the challenges that they face just now?

Secondly, I am interested in accountability. Accountability is part of the issue, because it is about relationships and supporting young people whose behaviour is not what we would hope it to be. There are sometimes situations where young people get away with it and are not held accountable, which is also not good.

My third question is about infrastructure. Are our schools just really big? I would be interested to hear from Joan Mowat, Nick Smiley, Colin Morrison and Cheryl Burnett in particular.

**The Convener:** Joan, would you like to come in first?

**Dr Mowat:** Could you quickly remind me of your first question? Was it about all children being involved in trauma-informed approaches?

**Stephanie Callaghan:** Yes, it was about having a wider approach that teaches our young people strategies to promote their own wellbeing and mental health and to deal with anxiety.

**Dr Mowat:** I would totally agree with that approach. Developing understanding in children and adults is a starting point for positive change. That is a really positive suggestion.

Work is already going on in schools around resilience, for example. A lot of good work is going on in social and emotional learning programmes. I take the point about absence in schools, which is a particular problem at the moment.

On the point about accountability, it depends what we mean by that. In my view, accountability is being able to take responsibility for your own actions. The best way to do that is through discussion, listening to children and providing the opportunity for restorative approaches. Accountability does not necessarily mean sanctions—and, as we know from long experience, sanctions do not necessarily work. For



example, down south, where there is a lot of emphasis on zero-tolerance approaches, exclusion rates are soaring. We do not want to go in that direction.

As for research, there is quite a significant body of research on restorative practice, nurture and so on, but that is not to say that in a specific context or situation the approach will not fall down. I agree with the point about the need for further research.

With regard to infrastructure, I have long argued in my own research for the need to build a support infrastructure around communities, schools, families and children. What I mean by that is what has already been mooted by many around the table—which is, as I have said in my submission, that this problem cannot be solved by schools alone. You need a multidisciplinary lens on the matter. That will mean looking at all the support services—home link workers, community workers, those who work with parents and so on—because all the different supports for communities, families and children need to work in harmony with each other. I know that that is a very big ask, but that kind of holistic view of the lives of children and families will be absolutely crucial if you are going to make any progress at all.

That probably means that at every level of the system, from the local right up to Government level, bodies need to be talking to each other about, say, housing or fiscal policy. All of those things are in the mix, particularly the issue of poverty. We need to recognise that these things are not separate: mental health, poverty, behaviour at school and so on are all closely linked and cannot be put into silos. They have to be looked at holistically.

I hope that that answers your question from my perspective.

**Dr Morrison:** I just want to follow up on something that Anne Keenan said earlier. As we came out of Covid, the Children's Parliament pushed the idea of a recovery curriculum really hard—indeed, it is in our submission. However, we failed in that, so we jumped straight back into re-establishing an exam diet, looking at notions of lost learning and focusing on attainment. We saw many adults in schools trying to develop a recovery-based approach, talking about resilience, bringing children back to learning and focusing on health and wellbeing, but that was in the face of political and organisational pressures to address the issue of literacy and numeracy testing, which was a huge mistake.

Hindsight is a fine thing, and I do not want to talk about all the emergency measures that were taken during Covid. Instead, what I am talking about is a real decision about the educational response that was articulated post pandemic and

which did not do the children and young people—never mind the adults in the environment—a service.

A lot of good schools focus on ideas of resilience and building confidence. For example, I am a huge fan of speech and language therapy. It provides a foundation for addressing many of the issues, particularly with regard to behaviour, that boys, in particular, bring, and it links well with nurture-based approaches, but it is also a very effective tool, because it gives children the language and the space to think about their emotional wellbeing and to be able to talk about themselves and what they feel. There are lots of such things that we do already and that we know work.

We have also done lots of work on bullying; I will send you the report of an investigation that we did before Covid on the issue. Children have solutions to bullying. They know, for instance, that the absolute focus has to be on prevention. Once you are in the middle of a situation, it is, as we know, very difficult to manage things. There are rights-based approaches to such matters.

Accountability is a really interesting issue. You cannot have it unless you have a basis for understanding it. For example, we talk about rights-based relationships that are based on empathy, kindness, trust and the core idea of human dignity. If those things are embedded in the work undertaken with children from early years through primary into secondary school, they will have a foundation for reflecting on behaviour that is unacceptable or which targets another person. Was that kind? Was that empathic? Are you undermining trust? What does human dignity feel like to you? Why are you behaving like that? What have your experiences been that teach you that behaving like that is acceptable? We can unpack and address that behaviour. Bullying is the thing that comes up most when we speak to children about human dignity and what undermines it. It is endemic and problematic, and it is made worse by social media.

10:45

I was a wee bit all over the place there, but I want to make one final plea. I do not know whether any of you will have a long enough memory to remember this. In 1995, the Calouste Gulbenkian commission on children and violence was published. Kathleen Marshall, who was our first children's commissioner, was one of the commissioners. That work, which is still available online, looked at the extent of the violence experienced by children. We know that children are more likely to experience violence and perpetuate it, and they are more likely to experience violence against them by adults than

other children. The commission looked at children's experience of violence and at what we can do about it. Some of it is about children-on-children violence, but most of it is not.

The Scottish Parliament passed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill, and I thank it for that. How do we now step up and think in a bigger way? We talk about having an alcohol-free childhood and a tobacco-free childhood. Why are we not talking about having a violence-free childhood? The issue also goes back to data and what we can do to explore and understand the experiences that children have. What strategies can we use to make sure that, whether they are at home, in school or in the community, children's childhood up to the age of 18 is experienced as a non-violent childhood? That is the big question about how we can pull all this together. I hear the concerns, but we need some kind of big idea to get a better understanding.

**The Convener:** Beau Johnston, would you like to contribute next?

**Beau Johnston:** I just want to echo what Dr Mowat and Colin Morrison have said. There should be a restorative approach to bullying rather than a punishment type of approach. It is essential that all these discussions should be framed in the context of the rights of children and young people. I have recently been to Geneva to hold the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments to account on their obligations under the UNCRC, and the UN committee agreed with me and the other children and young people I went with that a lot more needs to be done to ensure that children and young people have access to their rights.

A key article of the UNCRC that plays into the issue is article 12. Children and young people need to be at the heart of designing restorative approaches, and their voices need to be listened to during the process. They need to work alongside other decision makers to create those restorative approaches to tackling bullying.

**Nick Smiley:** I am very aware of the time, so I will not say too much. I agree with what Joan Mowat, Colin Morrison and Beau Johnston have said. They have covered most of what I would want to say, but I will just make a couple of quick points.

On the original question, universal supports in school are absolutely essential. We would always want to do things in a staged way from universally targeted to intensive, and we need the support at all those levels. We need to be teaching all children about respect and emotional regulation. Carrie Lindsay made a point about the impact of attendance on that kind of work, and poor

attendance can disrupt what we would want to do for some young people.

To go back to the pandemic and the perceived or agreed increase in issues with behaviour and violent incidents, we need to be aware of the impact of the pandemic and the restrictions on young people's sense of connectedness with school and their communities. If they do not have that affiliation with school, they are much more likely to get involved in behaviours that we see as disruptive or concerning. There has been an impact on that connectedness and we need to continue to provide support and work on that impact. I agree with the points about holistic and community-based support and that schools cannot deal with these issues on their own.

Finally, I will quickly illustrate what was said about resources for additional support needs and the exponential increase in the number of children with ASN by using some of the ASPEP data that we have. Back in 2007, the ratio of educational psychologists to children with identified additional support needs was 85.8 children per psychologist. That is based on the Scottish Government's data on additional support needs. In 2022, we have 659.7 children per individual psychologist, so there has been an exponential increase in demand and a reduction in resource.

**The Convener:** Thank you for putting that number on the record.

Stephanie Callaghan directed the question to you initially, Carrie Lindsay. Would you like to add anything further?

**Stephanie Callaghan:** The question was to Cheryl Burnett.

**The Convener:** I am sorry, and it is Cheryl who wants to come in on that. Thanks for keeping me right, Stephanie. I apologise, Carrie.

**Cheryl Burnett:** I want to break down what Stephanie Callaghan spoke about. First and foremost, bullying is a massive issue. For the majority of parents, a predominant concern is the impact of bullying behaviour on their child or young person. However, one of the positives is that a lot of work is being done nationally on reviewing the national anti-bullying strategy. A working group is looking at "Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People" and how bullying is recorded and reported, and it is breaking down some of the things that we have spoken about today.

The national anti-bullying charity, respectme, has been at the forefront of supporting parents and carers and children and young people, and the National Parent Forum of Scotland has done a lot of work alongside it to ensure that there is

guidance on that. However, the reality for parents is that there is a misconception about where the policies sit at an individual school level.

There is a national policy that guides and drives all those robust recommendations and what we should be doing, but the reality of the implementation of that policy is that each school creates its own policy, taking elements from the national level to the local level and the local level to the individual level. There is a lot of variation, and parents do not know where those policies sit, because it is not always made clear that a policy is a policy on bullying; it could come back to what we have been discussing about behaviour and relationships.

There is another serious concern around the infrastructure. We have talked about capacity. Nursery and primary schools are set up to be nurturing, safe and welcoming environments. They are heavily focused on the nurturing awards, the flags and the ambassadors for nurture. The reality is that secondary schools are not built to support those lovely, fantastic initiatives. They are built to teach, and school buildings are limited with regard to what can be delivered in them. Specialist staff need to be funded to be trained and to support children and young people.

It is great that we have all those fantastic initiatives at that level, but we struggle with the transition to secondary school, where it becomes a whole different ball game, because the focus is on teaching and learning. It is fantastic that there are counsellors in secondary schools, but the problem is that they can see only a limited number of children. In a secondary school that has 1,600 pupils, a counsellor will be able to see only 10 or 15 children in a week.

**Stephanie Callaghan:** I want to go back to something else that you said. We have restorative practice and work on relationships, but bullying is still happening and it is a massive issue for parents.

**Cheryl Burnett:** It is a massive issue for parents.

**Stephanie Callaghan:** Do parents feel that there is enough focus on what we can do to support and protect young people who are being bullied? I hear quite a bit, especially from neurodiverse groups, that things are changed around the child who is being bullied while the bully goes through school in the normal way. The child who is being bullied might not be going to classes, physical education or extracurricular activities. Is that what you hear, too?

**Cheryl Burnett:** I was going to say that it is a postcode lottery. It comes down to interpretation, availability, funding, resourcing and staffing. If parents report an incident of bullying, as I said, it is

then hidden behind a wall, because they do not know what the process is. Sometimes, a parent will feel that an incident has not been dealt with in a timely manner. That is not to say anything detrimental about the school, which has a process to go through. It comes back to what we talked about earlier about recording bullying.

You are right that there is a lot of focus on not excluding pupils and finding ways to avoid exclusion through restorative practice. However, the reality is that, in certain areas, there is not enough space or capacity for that—not just in the school building but in external provision. Beau Johnston spoke about youth and family work. In South Lanarkshire, where I come from, we have youth, family and community learning, which does a lot of supportive work under education resources to ensure that those children and young people get support. That takes it away from being only in the school building.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and Colin Morrison was absolutely spot on about that. If we could go back in time, knowing what we now know, to change what we did then, we might be looking at a different future. However, parents just want their children to be safe. Bullying is absolutely one of the biggest concerns that parents deal with on a daily basis—and I mean a daily basis. That came out in our initial survey on behaviour. We are halfway through the survey, which runs for another week, but it has shown that bullying is absolutely one of the biggest factors.

**The Convener:** Mike Corbett wants to come in. Please keep it tight, because I have my eye on the clock and we have other topics to cover.

**Mike Corbett:** I will try my best.

**The Convener:** Yes, please.

**Mike Corbett:** On bullying, there is a worry, particularly about the reporting. An Education Scotland report has been produced that highlights the clunkiness of the SEEMiS system and the differences in different places. That issue needs to be looked at.

Accountability is vital. Absolutely, the vast majority of pupils and young people who are dealt with via a restorative justice approach take responsibility for their actions, and the approach works with them. However, in too many places, there is a vacuum above that—there is a lack of support from senior managers. The issue is often turned back on the teacher, with people saying, “Oh well, your lesson was not entertaining enough to engage this pupil who swore at you.”

That is where responsibility is not taken. You get pupils—I would say this is typically more in the secondary sector than in the primary sector—who give a smirking apology and say, “Aye, sorry for

swearing at you.” What does that restore? How does it restore any trust or dignity for the teacher and for everyone involved? It does not. For us, that is a crucial issue. A lot of people talk about restorative approaches. Absolutely, they work up to a point, but they are clearly not working wholly or we would not be here today.

I will make one brief final point. The UNCRC is important and we would like it to be incorporated soon, but it is important that we do not take a pick and mix approach to the UNCRC. Article 12, which is about listening to pupils’ voices, is important, but so are other articles, such as article 3, which is about acting in the best interests of children more generally, and articles 28 and 29, which are about the right to education of children more generally. Let us not forget the 29 others in the class when one pupil has been violent, abusive or threatening. That is important to point out.

**The Convener:** I ask Dr Mowat to come in briefly, because I want to pick up on other topics.

**Dr Mowat:** I will be brief. I am going to talk about my experience. As the deputy head at Vale of Leven academy, I became very despondent with the same pupils standing outside my door day after day, no matter what I did. I found that the only thing that made a difference for those pupils was investing time, effort, care and love in them. I developed support groups that those children attended for an hour a week for most of the year, and I trained staff in the school to work with those children. That intensive work with them over a long period actually began to result in change in some of the sort of children that we are talking about, in whom the problems have become intractable. I think that time, effort, love and care need to be invested, and that is a resource issue.

**The Convener:** On the theme of what happens in the classroom, I come to Stephen Kerr.

**Stephen Kerr:** I was quite relieved to hear what Mike Corbett said just now, because I was beginning to wonder where the pattern of the discussion was going.

I would like to refer to issues related to classroom management, classroom sizes and teacher training, but I want to begin with some words of a whistleblower that were reported in *The Herald* a couple of months ago. It was a teacher who was talking about the experience that they were having. I have a suspicion that it relates to one specific school, but I will read the general comments that are reported in that news article. The teacher said:

“I’ve worked in schools in difficult places and it was not like this. Other places were run with precision and you could have great relationships with the kids because the place was so well structured and they felt safe.”

The whistleblower goes on to talk about something called the Pivotal behaviour method, which apparently is a system based on restorative justice. The teacher goes on to say:

“We can’t pick apart what actually is policy, such as the city-wide no exclusions policy, and what is some dogmatic theory that management seem to be following.

Senior management follow this script in terms of language, using very euphemistic language so that even when you’re having an informal conversation with a senior manager you can’t use terms like ‘consequences’.

When you speak to them it’s not like having a normal human interaction and I think, for the kids, it is very confusing.

You always work with children from a place of kindness and empathy—but you’re very clear with what you expect them to do and give them very clear boundaries.”

11:00

That is backed up by the evidence from Tom Bennett. He talks about creating an environment in a school, and in the classroom, where a culture is set that

“Violence ... is unacceptable; where students incur instant penalties for doing so; where suspensions and exclusion are used as last resorts in the worst scenarios.”

He says that

“Anything less than this fails to keep children and staff safe, which is the fundamental responsibility of the school.”

I would like to hear some views on the comments from the whistleblower—I think that that person might be a member of Mike Corbett’s union, judging by the way that it was written—and on the general approach of setting clear boundaries and having known sanctions, perhaps agreed with pupils, that are applied. Those would include exclusion in the worst cases, as a last resort, so that the individuals concerned are not allowed to disrupt the 29 others or to continue to physically or verbally abuse—

**The Convener:** To whom are you addressing that question to start with?

**Stephen Kerr:** I think that I know what Mike Corbett might say, so—

**The Convener:** We will start with Mike, then, will we?

**Stephen Kerr:** Do you want to start, Mike?

**Mike Corbett:** Yes—I will make just a couple of points.

The Pivotal approach comes originally from the book by Paul Dix, “When the Adults Change, Everything Changes”. The problem with that approach is that it has been seen as a one-size-fits-all approach that has been imposed from above in a number of schools.

In that book, Paul Dix says some interesting things that seem to have been forgotten, or were maybe never even part of the training in some local authorities or for some headteachers. He says that children who misbehave need to experience “an immediate, proportionate consequence”. He says that behaviour management policies must be developed and owned collaboratively across a school staff, that those that are imposed from above are doomed to fail, and so on.

We see the problem not as the adoption of the Pivotal approach itself, because at its heart is a restorative approach that can work, but as the misinterpretation or misapplication of that approach. As I touched on earlier, there is a failure to give teachers the tools and support to go to the next place. Teachers say, “I have tried—I have had my 10 restorative conversations. What do I do next? What support am I getting from above?”

You might want to cover your ears if you are easily offended, because I have a report from a deputy headteacher in a Scottish school of what was said to a probationer teacher. It was reported to me last week; it probably happened two weeks ago. The teacher was told:

“I get told to fuck off all the time—what makes you think you’re special?”

If that is the support that is being given to probationer teachers, it is no wonder that a lot of our teachers are feeling that they do not know where to go next.

**Stephen Kerr:** Or are leaving the profession.

I am happy to hear responses—

**The Convener:** Just as a warning, I understand that you were obviously quoting, and you did refer to it beforehand, but if we could perhaps curtail the language—

**Stephen Kerr:** We have had the ration of one use of the F-word.

**The Convener:** Right. Stephen, who else were you asking for comments?

**Stephen Kerr:** I think that we should hear from the EIS.

**The Convener:** I call Anne Keenan.

**Anne Keenan:** We absolutely think that there should be a whole-school approach to behaviour management, which would involve everyone in the development of the behaviour policies. We would want an empowered approach to developing those policies, and then a common understanding of how they would apply and when it would be appropriate for particular sanctions to be used in certain circumstances. That would be very much part of the getting it right for every child

approach—it would be part of the discussions as part of a child’s planning process.

In addition, we cannot forget the health and safety aspect. Mike Corbett referred to the UNCRC and the rights of the other children in the class, as well as the rights of the child or young person who is displaying the distressed or violent behaviour. However, we cannot forget the health and safety rights of the teacher, which are also enshrined in legislation. That is a health and safety matter as well.

There are a number of competing rights that have to be balanced, and there are circumstances that we have to embed within our behaviour management policies to ensure that everyone in the school is safe. That needs everyone’s support and buy-in right the way through the whole school approach.

The level of understanding is very important. The children and young people need to have that level of understanding of the policies and practices and of when there may be consequences. We have set out very clearly in our policies for members what we would expect to happen in certain circumstances and the supports that should be available for them. That common level of understanding needs to be applied across the school system.

You mentioned the importance of retention of staff. In our recent survey, we asked how many teachers intended to be in the profession five years from now. Only 51 per cent said yes, they did, and a large proportion—from memory, I think that it was around 38 per cent—referred to the impact and distressed and violent behaviour. A number of them, I have to say, were headteachers and deputy headteachers.

**Stephen Kerr:** So, the EIS does not have a no-exclusions policy. Some councils seem to have a “no exclusions at all costs” policy. You do not support that.

**Anne Keenan:** We have very clearly said in our policy on violent and aggressive behaviour that there are circumstances in which pupils should be excluded, and the reason behind that is partly because there need to be risk assessments. There are health and safety implications, and those risk assessments have to be undertaken so that everyone can remain safe in schools.

**Stephen Kerr:** But there should be something after that, should there not? Exclusion should not mean that the pupil is banished.

**Anne Keenan:** There needs to be a clear understanding of the risk that is presented, the management of that risk and what steps need to be in place, moving forward, to keep everybody safe.

**The Convener:** Other folks are looking to come in on this topic, Stephen, if you do not mind.

**Stephen Kerr:** Sure.

**The Convener:** Beau Johnston and Dr Morrison want to come in.

**Beau Johnston:** I think that that approach should be avoided if possible, but if you are going to do that, it should be consulted on and designed with children and young people to ensure that their rights are at the forefront of it. The problem with exclusion is that it breaches rights in articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC, which Mike Corbett mentioned. We should not have a situation in which our most vulnerable young people are having their rights breached because of being excluded. If it is going to happen, it needs to be designed with children and young people.

**Stephen Kerr:** If they need to be excluded, there needs to be a referral to somewhere else.

**Beau Johnston:** Yes, there needs to be support in place for that. That decision should ultimately be designed with children and young people, and they should be meaningfully listened to. That might involve speaking to groups of children and young people, perhaps with lived experience of the issue, and finding out what would have helped them in that situation. Having those discussions with children and young people and designing the framework for this with them is how you put—

**Stephen Kerr:** But you are not against consequences for the sort of behaviour that we are discussing.

**Beau Johnston:** Me personally?

**Stephen Kerr:** Yes.

**Beau Johnston:** No, but I have not experienced it.

**Stephen Kerr:** Good.

**The Convener:** I come to Dr Morrison.

**Dr Morrison:** All behaviour has consequences. There are antecedents, there is a behaviour and there is a consequence, and consequences can be good or bad—they can reinforce or they can change. There is nothing wrong with the word “consequences”.

It is our job, as adults, to intervene at the point of the antecedent and ask what we can do to avert the behaviour, to work with the actual behaviour when it is happening and then to look at the consequences. What are the positive consequences that we can enact? For example, if a behaviour gets lots of attention and nothing is done to change it, it will continue. If I am five years

old and I am distressed, I am gonnae get lots of attention.

Obviously, we understand basic psychology. Forgive me if I get this wrong—punishment does not change behaviour. That is well established. We just need to look at Polmont. Go and visit Polmont and speak to the young men there; you will find that something like 80 or 90 per cent of them left school functionally illiterate and were excluded by P7. Those are the consequences of exclusion from school. Let us please not lose everything we have gained in the system in Scotland—

**Stephen Kerr:** That is a little bit extreme.

**Dr Morrison:** Over the past 10 or 20 years, we have worked really hard on exclusions. It does not mean that children do not get the support or that staff do not get the support. It is hard to deal with anonymised cases. We take them at face value. It sounds as though the person who was mentioned is poorly supported and management is not behaving very effectively. It is all fine and well—

**Stephen Kerr:** But it is very extreme to say that we should not have any exclusions, because—

**Dr Morrison:** I did not—I am sorry; that was my final point. Thank you for reminding me. The—

**Stephen Kerr:** I think that your causation and linkage is—

**The Convener:** I think that Colin wants to come in on that point, Stephen.

**Stephen Kerr:** Fair enough.

**Dr Morrison:** My final point was that there is no such thing as a “no exclusions at all costs” policy. There is no such thing. There never has been and there never will be.

**Stephen Kerr:** That is not how the teachers feel.

**Dr Morrison:** You are using that language, so I am just correcting it. I am saying that there is no—

**Stephen Kerr:** But I am saying that that is how the teachers feel.

**The Convener:** Stephen.

**Dr Morrison:** You might contest what I say, but I am telling you something that is factual. There is no such thing as a “no exclusions at all costs” policy. There are children and young people who are excluded from school, which means their being moved to another setting. It is very rare, but it happens. There is no no-exclusions policy, but there has been 20 years of work since “Better Behaviour, Better Learning”, which Joan Mowat knows well. We have worked on our rates of exclusion and responses to behaviour.

**Dr Mowat:** I agree with the points that you were making about the need for a very consultative and consistent approach to discipline in schools that involves putting relationships to the fore. However, if you go too far down the route of Tom Bennett and so on, there is a danger that you begin to head towards zero-tolerance policies, and research has shown that such policies simply do not work in the long term.

The word “consistent” needs to be considered very carefully. To me, you need to be consistent in your approach in treating every child as an individual and taking account of their individual circumstances. That does not mean going light on them, but if you have an approach where consistent means that every time X happens, Y happens, that is not, in fact, in the best interests of children or their rights.

You need to have an approach that everyone understands, that children and parents are consulted on and on which there is agreement within the school. Everyone needs to understand the policy, which should be based on relationships, trust, empathy and care.

**Stephen Kerr:** Consequences?

**Dr Mowat:** I agree with the point that Colin Morrison made about consequences. There are always consequences for behaviour.

**Stephen Kerr:** Sanctions?

**Dr Mowat:** If you go down the route of sanctions, they must be appropriate, they must be considered very carefully in relation to the circumstances of the child and full account must be taken of the context. I would never say that there is no circumstance in which an exclusion would be appropriate, but we have been far too quick to go to exclusions in the past.

I know that, as a deputy head, I was under a lot of pressure to exclude children. I sometimes had to work very hard to explain to a member of staff why I did not think that it was the appropriate thing to do in a particular context. I would not rule exclusion out, but it has to be truly the very last resort, not the first thing that we go to.

**The Convener:** Before I bring in Nick Smiley, Beau Johnston wants to clarify something.

**Beau Johnston:** I think that I slightly misunderstood the final question that Stephen Kerr asked me. I just want to say that my viewpoint on consequences aligns with that of Dr Mowat.

**The Convener:** Dr Morrison.

**Beau Johnston:** No—Dr Mowat.

**The Convener:** I think that it was the viewpoint of both Dr Morrison and Dr Mowat.

**Beau Johnston:** Yes. I agree with both of them.

**The Convener:** I call Nick Smiley. I am sorry about that.

**Nick Smiley:** I agree very much with what Dr Morrison and Dr Mowat said. I will make a couple of points.

There has been quite a bit of criticism of restorative approaches. It is important to say that structure, boundaries and limits are very much part of a restorative approach. If there are issues about how such an approach is being implemented or operationalised in a school, that might give rise to some of the things that Stephen Kerr talked about. However, it does not mean that the approach itself is problematic; it is about how it is properly implemented. There needs to be a very clear structure, which absolutely needs to be a part of nurturing and restorative approaches. It is important to make that point.

The other point is that although it can perhaps be seductive to think about sanctions and exclusions as a solution, we know that they are very much not that. As has been said, there is not a no-exclusions policy; there are situations where exclusion is a necessary action. However, I think that we always know that it does not, in fact, move us forwards in relation to the needs of that individual child or young person.

Lastly, excluding a child and sending them somewhere else has been mentioned. We have to be really careful about that. The English system of zero tolerance, whereby pupils are excluded from school and referred to pupil referral units, has been mentioned a couple of times, and we know it has very poor outcomes for young people. Education environments that take that approach are not particularly supportive. We need quality education environments and options for children when we get to a point where trying to support them in a mainstream environment becomes too challenging. However, the idea of excluding children to offsite units is not a solution.

11:15

**The Convener:** Two more people are considering coming in. I am keeping an eye on the clock. I will bring in Anne Keenan, whom I ask to be very brief, and then I will bring in Carrie Lindsay.

**Anne Keenan:** It is unfortunate that we are talking about exclusion, which is a harsh alternative, because we are in a situation in which we have a lack of resources. If we had appropriate resourcing, we could have early intervention strategies that would, I hope, address the issues. We would then not have to consider anything of that nature.

**The Convener:** That might be a good segue into the final part of the meeting.

**Carrie Lindsay:** In schools, we use an exclusion so that we can take a bit of time to reintegrate a child back into the school setting with support. In my whole career, we have had to move only one child to another setting. Exclusions do not generally mean that a child does not return to school. There is a misunderstanding, as people think that an exclusion means that a child will not return to their school, which is not the case. The policy is to support the school, the family and the child, so that the child can come back to the school with appropriate support.

Lastly, we need to be careful about comments about things that have happened in individual schools, because that creates a false reality about what is happening.

**The Convener:** We did not get to discuss the role of social media in amplifying the problem, and I know that we will not have time to do that justice. I will bring in Willie Rennie to ask his questions.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** We started the session with a fair bit of anxiety that some people felt that we were going to throw out some of the significant improvements that have been made over the past years—and certainly since I was at school, which was a wee while ago. I have no doubt that the system is much better now. However, there is also no doubt, whether the numbers have gone up or down, that a significant number of concerns are being raised by parents, young people, teachers and staff about what happens in response to incidents.

In this part of the session, I want to focus on the solutions. Many of you have come up with some cracking solutions already. We have talked about libraries, green spaces, youth work, mental health support, educational psychologists and issues around resourcing in the Morgan review.

My concern about those solutions is that some of them are long term. That does not make them bad, but they do not help the teacher I spoke to last week who showed me the bruises on her legs and the hair that had been pulled out of her head. We need to consider whether we are missing something about how we respond to individual incidents when, as Anne Keenan has said, the problem is at crisis point.

I have heard repeatedly that teachers are fed up with having endless repetitive restorative discussions that go nowhere. I want to understand whether there is a failure with the application of the restorative approach or whether there has been a misunderstanding of that policy. Alternatively, is there something else that we need to do to address the situation?

We are not generalising or saying that something should apply in all cases. I am not for going back to the old ways of punishment of the past. I reject them and support the restorative approach. However, there is clearly a problem. I want to focus on how we deal with incidents when teachers feel helpless and to understand what we are not getting quite right. How can we help those members of staff to deal with the problem?

**Anne Keenan:** Teachers need time to develop relational approaches. Our Edinburgh local association recently did a survey of staff members, which I read last night in preparation for this session. The survey discussed restorative practices, and one comment jumped out at me. It was from a respondent who said they cannot have restorative discussions with pupils because they have 26 other children in the class who are waiting to be taught, so those discussions are segued into quick conversations outside the classroom door.

If we are going to invest in such practices, we need to give our teachers the time, training and space for them. We need to look at the resourcing issues and have smaller class sizes so that those approaches can be developed. We suggested that 20 should be the target class size. We have some of the highest class numbers of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, and there has been commitment after commitment to reduce class sizes, but we have not seen that happen since it was promised 16 years ago.

We need critical investment in education, and by that I mean core education funding—not additionality or pupil equity funding that cannot be relied upon in years to come. We need investment in core education, smaller class sizes and reduced class contact time. There is a manifesto commitment to reduced class contact time, but we have yet to see it brought to fruition. It would help if class contact time was brought down even to 21.5 hours, so that teachers had more time, but that has not happened. We have the third-highest class contact time figure in the whole of the OECD. The Government has committed to making those changes, yet time has not been given over to marking and preparation.

We also need more investment for ASN specialists, ASN teachers and pupil support workers. I referenced the statistics that came from colleagues in the primary sector about the impact that such investment would have on their wellbeing, and, at the beginning of the session, I spoke about how reducing workloads would have a huge impact. If we had more pupil support workers, that would have a significant impact. We cannot look at relational approaches without looking at the multidisciplinary context, and to do that we need investment in the other support



agencies, health and social work to support education. We have discussed the societal impact of that, and we need investment across the board.

**Mike Corbett:** Time and resourcing are absolutely vital, particularly in the secondary sector, because it is more of a challenge to embed the restorative-conversation approach when teachers have six or seven classes, one after the other, and the class is off before the young person can have a chat with their teacher.

Restorative approaches work for the majority of pupils, but what the member seemed to be touching on is what lies beyond that and what the next steps are before exclusion. For us, the next step is better and more prompt support from senior management teams in schools. They might not currently have the time to properly devote to taking a pupil out and working with them on a one-to-one basis, because they have so many other things to do, but that is crucial.

The step after that is a referral system in which a teacher says that they have tried all that they can—that is, they have tried all their restorative approaches and are not getting anywhere—and they can then refer up to a deputy head in the school. However, we have a lot of examples of members making, say, 10 referrals over the past month but not getting any response. There is clearly a time issue for senior managers with regard to dealing with these problems and supporting teachers who are in the classroom.

**Willie Rennie:** Could we come to Carrie next?

**The Convener:** We have Cheryl Burnett wanting to come in next.

**Willie Rennie:** Sorry.

**Cheryl Burnett:** For me, the solution has to be about strengthening guidance and support for parents. We have come back to discussing the classroom environment, but that is just one element. The children still have to go home, so we have to find ways of supporting parents to support them. It cannot always be the sole responsibility of a classroom teacher or a senior management team in a school.

In South Lanarkshire, where I am from, we had a lot of issues post-Covid. It was not a gang culture, but there was territorialism; the reality was that the kids had nowhere to go and had started accumulating. In our area, we involved everybody—headteachers, the police, the fire service, housing services, community members and obviously youth organisations—in a community safety meeting to find a collaborative approach and to try to resolve things through early intervention and prevention. That approach was not based on the school having the sole responsibility; indeed, we have to realise that this

is not just a matter of one area having responsibility. Taking that kind of wider collaborative approach made such a difference in relation to early intervention, because all the key people who were impacted and had the opportunity to deliver much-needed service provision and those preventative models were around that table, having that conversation.

For parents, in particular, I must reiterate that there is no one-stop shop for information. Most parents rely on information from the school. As parents, we have to at least be signposted to where we can go for support. That is one of the biggest issues. A lot of judgments get made, with people saying, “Oh, it’s the parents’ fault” or “It’s the parents’ responsibility”; however, the reality is that a parent might have been shouting it from the rooftops that their child or young person needed the right advocacy or support, but if they are not being guided themselves and are getting information from only particular areas, they will not get that support. There needs to be clearer signposting around communication and transparency to show a parent where they can go.

**The Convener:** I will bring in Beau Johnston next and then come to Carrie Lindsay.

**Beau Johnston:** Two tactics are needed. You need to think about the long term and things such as youth work funding, but you also have to look at what is not working with restorative approaches.

Part of that is, as I have said before, about bringing young people into the conversation, particularly those with relevant experience, and asking them, “What is going on here? How can we make a system that works for you? How can we get a system that does not let you get away with things that could be impacting on your own right to education and which ensures that teachers are protected?” Children and young people need to be at the heart of those conversations.

Earlier, Dr Mowat mentioned the need to inform children and young people about the process, too. My school has been particularly good at making sure that we know under what circumstances different approaches will be taken. It is really important that children and young people are aware of the approach that will be taken by teachers in the school.

**Carrie Lindsay:** It is important to say that individual circumstances can be quite unique. Mike Corbett referred to the fact that restorative approaches will work for the majority, so we are talking about the bespoke approaches that we need for individual youngsters.

Sometimes they do not respond to a hierarchical approach—that is, the idea that if you do this, this will happen and if you do that, that will happen. Sometimes it is difficult for people to understand

that, because they think that, because that route worked for person A, it should work for person B. If person B did not respond to any of that, a slightly different approach will be needed. We need to get better at working with our partners and thinking about alternative approaches to support that young person if the things that have been tried have not worked. As someone who was a headteacher for a number of years, I know that, in some circumstances, you might try 30 different things and it will be the 31st thing that works. You really just have to stick at it.

I realise that that might not give people the confidence that they want to be able to say, "If you do this, it will work." That is not the reality; the reality is that all schools are different, with different leaders and different make-ups of staff. Sometimes they have really enthusiastic staff and sometimes they have staff that you have to drag along, kicking and screaming. That is the reality and that is why we have to look at every situation and find solutions that work for individuals.

However, some things can be done on that universal basis to ensure that we have a grounding for everybody. Once that is done, we can use the small resource that we have—I am, of course, not arguing that we do not need more resource—in a targeted way to offer support wherever it is required. We need to ensure that we are doing the trauma-informed practice, the restorative approaches and the de-escalation and that those things are in all of our schools as a foundational basis. Once they are there, we need to think about a multi-agency wraparound approach for those who are not being supported in that way.

My last point is that, in secondary schools, guidance staff are key to being able to provide some of that support and to ensuring that there is the capacity to support young people. They do move around a lot; as Mike Corbett has said, teachers have their young people for only 50 minutes or so. That is a very different scenario from what happens in a primary school, where it is much easier to have relationship-based practice, because you can make time for it. I am not saying that it is easy, but it can be done there. In a secondary school, the situation is quite different, so the guidance staff are really important in that respect.

11:30

**Dr Mowat:** I totally agree with what Carrie Lindsay has just said and with Anne Keenan's point about the difficulties in finding time for restorative work. That approach has to be seen as part of a much larger range of approaches that can be used.

It is difficult to answer your question, because I just do not think that we know the answer. There is a need for research. If we say that restorative practice is the way ahead, staff need to understand why, in certain circumstances, it is not working as well as it should be. Therefore, I think that there is a need for research.

We tend to be overreliant on surveys. Qualitative approaches are much better at getting at the why of things, so I recommend that we look at them. That kind of research has certainly been done in the past by people such as Professor Gillean McCluskey at the University of Edinburgh, and there is a need for it.

We have also talked about the context of individual schools. As we know, schools in areas of multiple deprivation can have very many more social issues that staff have to deal with in the school, and that might lead to difficulties in finding time to deal with all the things that come across their desks. I think that there is a need to understand the particular context of schools in areas of multiple deprivation and the behaviour issues that they face, and how they can develop policies that best support their school.

**Nick Smiley:** I just want to make a quick point with regard to the teacher Willie Rennie talked about earlier. Staff wellbeing is absolutely an important issue for us all, because there is a lot of stress and pressure in the system. Supervision for teachers has been mentioned; the teacher who had that experience needs to feel held and contained, and he or she needs time to process what has happened to her or him. That is what we need to provide, and it comes from prioritising time with them within the school. However, that is difficult.

I suppose that I am not answering your question completely, but there is an issue about how contained and supported individuals feel. We need to do a better job in that respect, so that they are able to process what has happened to them and to feel supported and held by the school. If they are carrying a lot of unresolved worry, concern and distress, that has to be addressed, and they have to be supported.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much for what has been a very good discussion and for your time this morning. I think that we will find your evidence to have been very beneficial.

The public part of our meeting is now concluded.

11:33

*Meeting continued in private until 12:19.*

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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