

# Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

4th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday 9  
March 2022

PE1870: Ensure teachers of autistic pupils are  
appropriately qualified

## Note by the Clerk

**Lodged on** 21 June 2021

**Petitioner** Edward Fowler

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

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

## Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [1 December 2021](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to teaching unions.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received responses from NASUWT and the petitioner which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.

6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).

## **Action**

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

**Clerk to the Committee**

## Annexe A

### PE1870: Ensure teachers of autistic pupils are appropriately qualified

#### Petitioner

Edward Fowler

#### Date Lodged

21/06/2021

#### Petition summary

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

#### Previous action

I have contacted MSPs and spoken with education authorities but things have not changed.

#### Background information

Special conditions apply to the employment of teachers of hearing-impaired and visually impaired pupils. Both require teachers to obtain appropriate qualifications before they can be employed by education authority to teach such pupils.

I would like to petition the Scottish Parliament so teachers who teach children with autism must have an appropriate autism qualification.

I would like special conditions to apply to the employment of teachers of autistic pupils. I would like the education authority to only employ teachers with an appropriate autism qualification to teach pupils with autism.

## Annexe B

### Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1871 on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2021

**The Convener:** The next continued petition is PE1870, which was lodged by Edward Fowler. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce legislation that requires teachers of autistic pupils to be appropriately qualified, in order to improve educational outcomes. The petitioner states that he “would like the education authority only to employ teachers with an appropriate autism qualification to teach pupils with autism.”

The petition was last considered at our meeting of 22 September. At that meeting, we decided to write to the Scottish Government to seek an update on progress that has been made against the “Additional Support for Learning Action Plan” and to write to key stakeholders to seek their views.

Since the petition was last considered, we have received a number of stakeholder submissions, which are summarised in the committee papers and make a number of suggestions for how teaching provision for children with autism could be improved.

Scottish Autism notes that “There is currently a lack of alternatives for young people who cannot thrive in mainstream school” and that “inclusivity can only be achieved with a sound understanding of autism, comprehensive individual profiling, flexible teaching practice and low-stress environments.”

The National Autistic Society Scotland highlights a survey of over 1,400 parents, of whom 72 per cent suggested that “staff having a better understanding of how their child’s autism affects them, including their communication needs, would have made a difference to their child.”

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has provided a written submission that notes many of the developments that have taken place—or are planned—in relation to the petition’s aims. That includes new content for initial teacher education on autism. Earlier this month, the cabinet secretary shared with the committee a copy of an updated “Additional Support for Learning Action Plan” and progress report, and noted that the action plan is next due to be updated in spring 2022. Do members have any comments or suggestions for actions?

**Marie McNair:** I think that a lot more discussion of the petition is required. I did not see the views of the teaching unions in the documents, so I suggest that we invite the unions along to give evidence or ask them for written submissions.

**The Convener:** Thank you. As colleagues have no other suggestions, I think that we all agree with that. In the first instance, we will write to the teaching unions and get their parallel evidence in relation to the evidence that we already have and see where that takes us. It may well be that it leads to our agreeing to take further evidence on the petition at a forthcoming committee meeting.

*Members indicated agreement.*

## Annexe C

# NASUWT submission of 23 December 2021 PE1870/K - Ensure teachers of autistic pupils are appropriately qualified

### **Introduction**

Petition PE1870 calls on the Scottish Parliament to 'urge the Scottish Government to introduce legislation requiring teachers of autistic pupils to be appropriately qualified to improve educational outcomes'.

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

### **ITE Curriculum**

Teaching is a uniquely challenging occupation. Balancing the learning and emotional needs of 30 unique individuals at any one time against maintaining professional expertise in a subject area is a significant challenge. Too many ITE providers do not consider with sufficient care the management of students' workload. ITE programmes are often characterised by needlessly detailed planning and record-keeping requirements that increase burdens and force many students, particularly those with family or caring responsibilities, to drop out. As a result, those who in other circumstances may have become effective practitioners are lost to the education system.

Therefore, notwithstanding the merits or otherwise of the proposal set out in the petition, the NASUWT has concerns about any proposal to reform the content of ITE programmes through approaches based simply on adding additional content to ITE programmes that are currently overloaded and unreasonably workload intensive in many cases.

It is entirely legitimate for stakeholders to express views on the skills, knowledge and understanding that ITE should seek to develop. However, it is important to acknowledge that curricular space on ITE programmes is

finite and that their design involves inevitable choices about content to be included and excluded, as well as about the depth to which those areas included in programmes should be studied.

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

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

The NASUWT receives feedback from members indicating the variability of training experience between ITE providers in many areas, including ASN, equalities, and behaviour management. It is agreed that student teachers are entitled to high-quality baseline training which prepares them to assist pupils with a range of additional needs, including those of autistic children. However, it is equally important that the Committee recognises the limitations inherent within that training. It is impossible for any institution to cover all potential ASN within their syllabus.

The NASUWT is not in favour of an identified prescriptive list of conditions which ITE students must address, as this will not support teachers to assist all their pupils, many of whom may have complex and nuanced needs. This is especially true in the context of the policy aim of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC). Any list would necessarily be limited in range and could exclude other conditions that may be regarded legitimately as at least as important as those included on such a list.

Training at ITE on ASN cannot be viewed in isolation. It is but one element of support to complement a range of whole-school and targeted approaches to help support the mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing of children and young people. It is important to also recognise that while striving to ensure consistency across a provider, improved ITE training on ASN will not provide a quick fix on its own to guarantee that appropriate ASN support is available to all schools, teachers and learners across Scotland.

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

In April 2018, the NASUWT published the results of an ASN survey which examined member experiences in relation to the presumption of mainstream. Ongoing feedback from members indicated that there was

an increasing focus on inclusion and that the demands being placed on teachers and schools were also increasing, with more and more learners with complex needs being taught in mainstream classrooms, while cuts to specialist services exacerbated the difficulties teachers face. The survey sought evidence about the nature and extent of these issues.

The following stark statistics were revealed in the survey:

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

As a teachers' trade union, the NASUWT clearly has concerns not only for the impact on pupils' learning, but also for the wellbeing of the teachers who deliver that learning. The issue of reduction in ASN support has been consistently raised at the Union's local and national conferences. The impact on teacher workload is clear. Without support, teachers are left to manage classes on their own, often struggling to cope.

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

## **Morgan Review**

In its submission to the Morgan Review, the NASUWT highlighted that policy and practice in respect of ASN were high priorities for the Union's members but that its experiences highlighted a range of issues and concerns about ASN. In particular, the Union noted that teachers had



expressed concerns about management practices relating to ASN, including how ASN is prioritised within the school. Many ASN teachers and teachers working in special schools raised concerns that abuse and violence is now seen as ‘part of the job’.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There were also increased workload challenges in preparing online differentiation in support of ASN students. Teachers were rarely given sufficient time with or access to appropriate resources to support their ASN pupils who were learning at home during lockdowns. This will have impacted on the skills and confidence of many ASN pupils.

Austerity has imposed significant pressure on resources in all parts of the public sector, and ASN support has been disproportionately affected. Supporting children and young people with ASN requires urgent renewed

investment in tailored services and education settings to ensure that there is equality of opportunity and choice for all.

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

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

### **Next Steps**

Addressing the concerns highlighted above and moving to implement the recommendations of the Morgan Review will be central to ensuring that the education system establishes and maintains the most effective and sustainable arrangements possible for meeting the needs of pupils with ASN, including those of autistic children and young people. The joint Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) updated Additional Support for Learning Action Plan and progress report was only published in November 2021.

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

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

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

## Petitioner submission of 2 March 2022

### PE1870/L - Ensure teachers of autistic pupils are appropriately qualified

Two recent articles have been produced in Aberdeen that directly relate to my petition.

Recently the Aberdeen Press and Journal highlighted teachers in Aberdeen being abused and physically assaulted. It stated almost half of the teachers after a survey by the Educational Institute of Scotland suggests almost a third of teachers had been physically assaulted by pupils in the 2021/22 season revealed the scale of the issue in Aberdeen.

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon is quoted as saying that “there should be zero tolerance of abuse against teachers”.

I feel that there is a bigger picture here and it is related to my petition. Many of the children who are unable to cope in a mainstream class have Autism. Some can become overwhelmed in the environment they are made to attend, without the right supports and strategies this can trigger extreme challenging behaviour.

Many teachers are not sufficiently trained to deal with children with autism who may also have co-occurring conditions such as a learning disability, ADHD, Sensory Issues, Anxiety, OCD, etc. Autism plus any of these conditions will result in complex support needs. Many may need an additional Co-ordinated Support Plan. This type of in-depth level of support is far greater than just the standard additional support needs. When the correct supports are not in place this can result in teachers being abused both verbally and physically.

Aberdeen Radio Original 106 (Monday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2022) also ran an article stating that:

“The joint EIS local association secretary Ron Constable states, the returns from our local survey of teachers in Aberdeen City makes for worrying reading. Teachers are experiencing high levels of physical and verbal abuse. It is also evident from the comments that teachers are concerned about the level of support which in many cases they feel simply isn't there. The vast majority of teachers feel they are seeking to manage children presenting complex needs without the correct resources. It is also telling that almost 50 per cent of teachers have thoughts of leaving teaching as a career. The report is based on the views of 600 teachers across Aberdeen City who responded to a survey in October 2021.”

I remember a time when teachers were looked up to by parents for their educational knowledge and ability but now many parents and advocates have more knowledge about autism and learning than the teachers. They attend meetings with their child's professionals, and it is evident that there is a wide lack of knowledge and expertise on autism. They find it hard to accept that their autistic child is included in the general 'additional support needs' when they can have so many more specific and complex needs (once instance only; the child being non-verbal as well as having a host of other autistic traits).

Some parents themselves have gone on to gain a Post Grad Cert in Autism and Learning in order to help understand their own child. Some complete the full six National Autistic Society certificate modules: Autism & Communication, Understanding Autism, Autism, Stress & Anxiety, Autism & Sensory, Supporting the Family. Some are doing the certificate in (BILD) Positive Behaviour Supports.

I feel this petition needs to consider the parents view's as they feel that the teachers do not have sufficient training or experience of autism to teach their children.

I believe these articles have highlighted this and that the system at the moment is failing both the teachers and the children.

Children with autism should be given equal consideration as Deaf and Blind children. They should be singled out educationally the same as Blind and Deaf. Blind and Deaf children require “thoughtful and unique educational approaches in order to ensure that are given the opportunity to reach their full potential”, so should autistic children.

Children with autism can experience the world very differently to neurotypical children. They can be sensitive to physical touch; they can be non-verbal; they may have hearing or sight issues. They can have triggers that initiate a meltdown in class or when they get home. The autism community have been trying to highlight these issues as their children are the highest number of children excluded from schools. The office for statistics shows that autistic people are the least likely to be in work of any other disabled group. Just 21.7%. This all relates back to a failed education, and we must look at why they are failing.