

AHDS Consultation response: Consultation on Excellence and Equity for All: Guidance on the Presumption of Mainstreaming

Section 1 – Introduction

Q1. Do you agree with the vision for inclusive education in Scotland?

The vision is admirable and desirable but in order for it to become a reality, current shortcomings need to be addressed. There is a real need to improve the availability of resources for staff and training (for all staff) within and beyond schools as well as during ITE. There is also a continued need to tackle bureaucratic demands placed on schools which do not add to the pupil experience. A simple way to express this would be to say that this guidance looks good on paper but does not reflect reality. Resources are key.

Member comments: “Staffing and resourcing are the lynchpin of inclusion. Without them the vision is unachievable.”

 “The paperwork involved in trying to access various services is completely unmanageable and gets in the way of supporting children.”

The document places a very high value on inclusion “Inclusion is the cornerstone...” AHDS very much agrees with this sentiment but for this to be brought to life it needs to be properly resourced and staffed. Without a meaningful increase in resources the goals of this guidance will not be achieved. It must also be borne in mind that children can be effectively excluded by an inappropriate mainstream placement.

“Appreciation of diversity...” is a key feature in the guidance and it will be important to ensure that training in values and attitudes is available as well as strategies for addressing, managing and supporting ASN.

Q2. Do you agree with these principles?

AHDS would not argue with these principles but their delivery is entirely contingent on sufficient resource being made available.

Section 2 – Key features

Q3. Are the expectations set out...the right ones?

The expectations put a clear emphasis on “ALL children”. This is not being achieved in the sense that not all children are in a setting most appropriate to their needs or with the staffing and resources to be properly supported. AHDS would very much endorse the policy and the expectations but cannot while it simply leads to unachievable expectations being given to parents and placed on schools due to insufficient resources.

The expectation that a pupil should “...receive full time education in a school which best suits their needs” is crucially important but is not always delivered or delivered timeously. We believe that the process of accessing specialist provision or additional staff/expertise is too long. The presumption of mainstreaming prevents some children being given fair access to a more appropriate environment. Some children are left to “fail” when they could be much better catered for in specialist provision.

The expectations in relation to 'Participating' ("...access to an excellent education" and "...extracurricular activity") are clearly what we should seek to achieve but resource constraints again come to the fore and without increased resources and a willingness to place children in specialist settings we will not achieve this for ALL children.

The expectation that children should receive a "...curriculum tailored to meet their needs" is of course correct but this assumes that the system has teachers with sufficient knowledge and expertise in all school settings accompanied by appropriate resources. This expectation carries with it the need for considerable support including via ITE.

Section 3 – Deciding on the right provision for a child or yp

Q4. Are the entitlements and options for provision clear

Yes these expectations are clear but it is not clear how school leaders or parents might challenge when local authorities are not delivering on the duties placed upon them.

Member comment: "A real problems began when a parent cannot accept recommendations that a specialist unit/school or a split placement is in the best interests of their child and the mainstream school. How this will be resolved must be made clearer. Who, is the final arbiter?"

There is confusion between the references in the earlier section to 'all children' and the duties referred to in this section when considered in the context of the exemptions outlined in the following chapter ('efficient education' and 'unreasonable expenditure'). It seems unreasonable to create expectations in relation to 'all children' and place 'duties' which imply open ended expenditure to ensure provision is made but to then bring in such loosely defined exceptions. What is **reasonable**? Is the guidance now saying "*We can meet needs as long as it's not too expensive?*" This means that we cannot fulfil the expectations for **all** children.

Section 4 – How and why could the exemptions be applied?

Q5. Is the commentary and the reflective questions helpful?

We have some difficulty reconciling the exemptions set out with the policy intention (see our response to Q4).

While the reflective questions are a good starting point AHDS members often report a long and bureaucratic process in the pursuit of additional support or specialist placements for pupils. There is a need to apply more resources to this process to allow for swifter decision making and resource allocation in the interests of pupils (this means support with data collection, reporting, input from psychological services, health services, training (including more specialised training/input such as around the use of physical intervention), etc. Members report that resource constraints are leading to delays in accessing appropriate support or children having to 'fail' first in mainstream before support is forthcoming. This runs counter to the early intervention approach that we should be taking and can often lead to extensive work being required once the child has moved into the specialist setting in an effort to unpick the effects of inappropriate mainstream placements.

Member comment: *“The time taken to access specialist support within mainstream means that so much damage is done before the support arrives. Every time I have seen a child who is increasingly distressed, I have seen a class teacher absent with stress-related illnesses. This goes unreported because no-one wants to talk about the impact on staff in mainstream schools of supporting children who need more specialised help.”*

Section 5 – Delivering Inclusion

Q6. Are there any missing areas...

Paragraph 38 indicates that *“...it is essential that they are active participants in the decisions which are being made about their education.”* This is clearly desirable but how should this be ensured for all children. Will advocacy services be considered active participation by pupils when they are unable to voice views about their education?

Member comment: *“Not all pupils are even aware of their own views or have any understanding of this. This can cause great stress for the pupils who are not of this level. I feel it should say 'if appropriate' “*

Q7. Were the case studies helpful?

Case studies are useful in that they give an insight into particular situations but the value is limited if you cannot marry it to your own situation. Examples given cite “visiting staff”. Eg. teacher for EAL. It doesn't offer any guidance about how to proceed if you are unable to get the extra staff required due to a lack of availability or budget restrictions. This is much more often the reality that schools are facing.

Examples where there is more detail about how nurseries and primaries manage situations would be more useful to practitioners (i.e. share good practice).

Member comment: *“I am watching fantastic committed staff stretched to their limits going over and above but becoming saddened by the lack of support / financing.”*

Q.8. Overall helpful?

AHDS would fully endorse the theory and aspirations that are set out in this guidance but it needs to be accompanied by considerable increases in resources in both mainstream and specialist settings. Without that the guidance simply sets expectations which are not achievable.

Q.9. Any other comments?

The emphasis on the presumption of mainstreaming means that education in a special school or unit is perceived as a second-rate option. This is not the case. It is more appropriate for some children/young people to be educated in alternative provision. This needs to be put forward more strongly as an acceptable option and a core part of a pupil focussed education system.

There is a real need to ensure greater expertise in ASN amongst the entire teaching profession. We believe that input on ASN should form a core part of Initial Teacher Education and ongoing development. In addition, more use could be made of the skills and expertise of ASL staff e.g. in sharing good practice within learning partnerships/cluster groups, delivering specialised training, advising on strategies and techniques to support children with specific ASN. etc.

Member comment: "ASN provision must be more accessible from early years. Having to complete P1 in mainstream with a view to "settling in and see how they go" is totally unacceptable for some. How is that meeting the needs of a profoundly, autistic, non-verbal child who is not toilet trained and requires one to one support at all times?"