

Postcode lottery in learning help

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SOME of Scotland's most vulnerable pupils are facing a postcode lottery over the level of support they receive for conditions such as autism.

New figures show a significant difference in the proportion of pupils with complex difficulties being given a co-ordinated support plan (CSP) across authority areas.

While not all children with additional support needs require a plan it has an important status because it requires councils to ensure pupils receive appropriate support.

Figures show that in Renfrewshire 5.3 per cent of pupils have a plan, compared to 0.1 per cent in Falkirk and East Ayrshire.

An alliance of private and charitable providers of services to vulnerable children are now calling on the Scottish Government to urgently review how local authorities support pupils with complex needs.

The concerns emerge at a time when the number of pupils with additional needs has increased by more than 55 per cent since 2012, from 118,000 to 183,000. The current figure represents more than a quarter of the overall pupil population.

Over the same period the number of teachers trained to support such pupils fell from 3,248 to 2,733, a decline of 16 per cent.

A spokesman for the Scottish Children's Services Coalition said: "It is clearly of concern that we are experiencing a decline in the use of CSPs, which is to support those with the most complex needs. This is despite an increase in the numbers of those requiring such support.

"The disparity in those with a CSP between those in the least and most deprived areas is also worrying as, if we are to close the educational gap, it is key that we target the resourcing to those in the most deprived communities.

"We are also concerned about the disparities that exist between local authorities on such support, which clearly raises concerns about how such a policy is being implemented and a lack of standardisation of who is identified."

Last month a conference heard parents

were being left to fend for themselves in the fight to get extra school support for vulnerable children.

Professor Sheila Riddell, from Edinburgh University's centre for research on inclusion, said the reduction in the proportion of pupils being given statutory help meant "pushy" middle-class parents were more likely to secure a CSP.

She said: "We are being told in local authorities that the policy now is not to open them anymore unless parents demand them. This is putting the onus on the parent, or possibly even the child, to demand a document that they may not know about rather than the local authorities doing what they are legally obliged to do, which is assess whether the child needs one."

Under the 2004 Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act a statutory duty is placed on councils to identify, provide for and review the additional support needs of their pupils.

Additional Support Needs cover pupils with a range of issues including learning disabilities, dyslexia, a visual or hearing impairment, language or speech disorders, autism and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. It can also include gifted children.

In 2016 a poll by the ENABLE Scotland charity found 70 per cent of ASN pupils said they lacked support while 94 per cent felt schools were not getting enough resources.

Previous research has shown pupils from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to be identified as having ASN, but are less likely to have a CSP.

The suggestion is that this is because middle-class parents have the resources and resilience to pursue a CSP even when councils were resistant.

OPINION

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Seven-year wait for autistic boy's support plan

CASE STUDY

ONE Scottish family fought for seven years before they were able to secure the right level of support for their autistic child.

The parents, who wish to remain anonymous, said their son, who is now aged 18 and pursuing a modern apprenticeship, struggled throughout nursery without staff knowing what was wrong.

His mother said: "We became more aware of behavioural issues once he started nursery where he had major difficulties getting on with

fellow pupils and problems taking instructions from teachers. This would result in frustration and anxiety and his way of communicating this could sometimes result in bad behaviour, but it wasn't until he was aged seven that we got a diagnosis."

However, despite the fact their child's complex additional support needs required input from a variety of services it still took seven years for him to get a co-ordinated support plan (CSP).

His mother said: "We took the decision to apply for a CSP, which we were entitled to, given the involvement of all these sectors, but the council did not respond within the

statutory time. The decision was therefore taken to bring this to a tribunal and the council was informed that it had to act on this requirement, but we still didn't receive anything from them.

"Unfortunately, his conditioned worsened, with increasingly serious emotional and mental health challenges and it is difficult to put into words how demanding it was."

The council finally secured a place at a special school, but even then he was not given a CSP, only receiving one a year later.

His mother added: "The whole process has taken an immense toll on myself and my husband."



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Failing children by postcode is unacceptable

THE expression “postcode lottery” has gained much traction in recent years. It suggests services that should be rights are actually matters of luck. It hints at disparity, unfairness, unequal treatment. It raises suspicions about a lack of national strategy – or, if there is one, that some local authorities are not co-operating with it.

In the case of giving additional support to pupils with complex needs, councils have a statutory obligation both to identify such children and to provide extra help for them. However, disturbing evidence is beginning to emerge that this obligation is being flouted.

Additional Support Needs (ASN) admittedly relate to a complex spectrum of conditions that include autism, learning difficulties, social or emotional issues, dyslexia and speech disorders. Not all children with such problems require a co-ordinated support plan (CSP) but for those with particularly complex, high-level needs, such assistance is necessary – and legally guaranteed.

The idea that it might depend upon where the child lives is a cause for serious concern. New figures show that, for example, 5.3 per cent of the pupil population in Renfrewshire have a CSP compared to 0.1 per cent in Falkirk and East Ayrshire.

There may be reasons to account for this. For example, some local authorities may have staffing difficulties, not unrelated to a fall in the number of teachers trained to

support such pupils – at the same time as the number of children needing such aid has risen massively.

To compound discomfort about this issue, evidence suggests children in disadvantaged areas are more likely to have additional needs but less likely to get the necessary support. Once more, the attainment gap edges wider.

Concern has already been raised that “pushy” parents in better-off areas are securing support for their children, but the wider problem suggested here is an onus on parents to lobby for help. That’s not how it’s supposed to work.

The case of a family who spent seven years fighting to get a CSP for their autistic child is shocking. In that case, there is the suggestion of a council reluctant to offer support, never mind to play an active part in identifying the problem. The Scottish Children’s Services Coalition is calling for a review into how councils support pupils with complex needs, and we support them in this. Such a review should consider in particular how CSPs are brought into play. A targeting of resources to deprived areas may also be required.

The seeming reluctance in some places to implement CSPs suggests a failure to recognise that this is everyone’s problem. It impacts on all children. Failing to support some parents is failing to support them all. And failing children by postcode is simply unacceptable.

