

Call for 'urgent explanation' over school support for additional needs pupils

Edinburgh's councillors called for clarification of the support being offered to pupils with additional needs after a "significant number" were refused places in school learning hubs.

Some families of children with additional support needs have been left worried about their child's transition to secondary school after applications to attend Enhanced Support Bases (ESBs) were turned down. Instead, families were told their support needs – often complex and varied – would be met through "enhanced support provision".

Councillor Kate Campbell, SNP, said elected members had not been offered an explanation on "the difference between the two" during a full council meeting on Thursday last week (February 8).

She said: "We had enhanced support bases in schools and we're being told this is going to be called enhanced support provision."

The bases exist within nine city secondary schools to help pupils with disabilities, such as Autism and Down's Syndrome, to thrive in mainstream education settings. Parents who have seen placements rejected ahead of their child starting S1 after summer said the impact of not having access to the spaces would be significant. One said their son "would not be

safe" in school "without having a full time one to one support assistant".

The council did not provide an explanation for why the placing requests had been refused, but insisted there was no "planned reduction in resource for these services", provision of which it had rather "actively increased".

Education convener Cllr Joan Griffiths said ESBs "have not been suspended" and added: "We keep these levels of need and models of provision under review, to ensure we can continue to provide quality support for all."

Speaking at the meeting, Lib Dem councillor Euan Davidson said he had been contacted by a "significant number" of "stressed" families regarding the situation. He said: "Transition to secondary can be an incredibly difficult time for all children and families. This is even more so the case for those dealing with the complexities of additional support needs, which is why the need for enhanced transition is recognised in legislation.

"Confirmation that these support bases are not only not being closed but more provision is planned is very welcome indeed. However, it's clear we've still got a communications job to do here to answer the many many questions these parents are rightly asking."

The Greens' Steve Burgess said councillors were owed an "urgent explanation" by officers.

He said: "Reports about young people being denied support they need in school through enhanced support bases are very concerning. The council should be doing what we can to support people to thrive in the education setting which is right for them and we'd like to thank the concerned parents who have raised this issue with us and set out what a reduction in support would mean for them.

"We're hopeful that reassurances we've heard so far from

council officers that there's no change to the level of provision will be confirmed. The current uncertainty is having an impact on young people and families."

An emergency motion, passed unanimously, ordered officials to give an update to councillors "including details of communication with providers and parents, and any relevant financial information about funding".

It also called for a report with a comparison of the number and outcome of applications to enhanced support bases and other alternative provisions between this year and last – and for officers to make "urgent contact with families rejected for ESBs or other alternative provisions to discuss their concerns".

Councillors asked that the report, which will go to the next education committee in April, includes details of "how additional safe, supported space will be provided within existing school footprints" and whether support staff will be "additional, specialist trained or contained within existing school staffing levels" as well as confirmation there will be no cap on places available.

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter



Education Convener Cllr Joan Griffiths PHOTO ©2021 The Edinburgh Reporter