

Council denies services for children with additional support needs are being cut

The City of Edinburgh Council denies that it is making changes or cuts to places in schools for children with additional support needs (ASN).

The Edinburgh Reporter has been told that many applications for Enhanced Support Base (ESB) placements have simply been rejected by the council – so many that parents have now formed a WhatsApp group to share information and find a way to resolve the problem themselves. One parent has said that almost all parents she has spoken to plan to appeal to the council against the decisions. The council says this is not correct and that some applications have been granted.

A spokesperson for the council said that it is *“not the case that all applications for placements in ESBs in schools had been rejected nor that all the places have been suspended”*.

The ESB programme was introduced by Edinburgh Council over the last five years. There are ESB facilities in nine schools in the capital, whereas prior to this there were either mainstream schools or special schools. As the provision was rolled out gradually they have only been in operation for a few years and have not had their first cohort of pupils transition all the way through primary school as yet.

One parent explained: “If you had a child with additional

support needs, they were either in a special school or they were in the mainstream and nowhere in between, which was obviously quite difficult.”

The set up is slightly different in each school but it can be a classroom or a few classrooms in a kind of unit where children with ASN may begin school by spending the majority of their time there. Gradually learners may then spend some time in the mainstream classrooms as well.

The parent continued: “Here is how it has worked for my child. At first my child spent most of the time in the ESB being supported by the specialist staff and now spends more time in mainstream with a pretty full timetable. It depends on each child and what is appropriate for them, but it is a fantastic, really inclusive, model.”

UNCERTAINTY

There is now a great deal of uncertainty and rumour about what the recent decisions mean among a group of parents whose applications have been refused. Every parent of a child with ASN has to make a placing request which they all did in October last year for children moving to secondary schools this year. The process is supported by school staff and educational psychologists who advise on the best course of action for each child. The results of those applications have just been announced and this is where the problem lies.

Some parents and carers in the city say they are now confused about the provision of ESB places for their children, which appear to have been rejected wholesale, and have contacted us with their individual stories. All want to remain anonymous because it is their children who are involved, but all say their applications, and at least 20 others, have been refused.

The first explained that their child has autism and while it is not yet time to make an application many other parents

known to them have had applications rejected. From that first conversation many others followed.

Another parent has two children with an intellectual disability, one of whom is currently in an ESB. Both children require support as "neither can read or write and they have other behavioural issues as well". The application for the younger child to join the same ESB as their sibling has been refused. The parent explained: "Instead a mainstream place in a catchment high school has been offered 'with enhanced support provision', but I just don't know what that means. Whatever this new model is that they're bringing in, there's no information about it, and it's been done in a massive hurry." The parent has also established from speaking to the council that the previous arrangement of referring placement applications to an Educational Resource Group (ERG) appears to have been abandoned. Instead they were advised that to cut down bureaucracy any child with ASN will just transition to mainstream and each individual school will determine what support each child receives.

Another parent who has a child moving to senior school has made an "out of catchment" application for an ESB place as their catchment school did not have an ESB unit. That application has also been refused.

The parent said: "The intention is to mainstream educate my child with "enhanced support provision". That's what they're calling, it but that's a very newly coined term that nobody's ever heard of before. And it means precisely nothing.

"What is really frustrating is that they asked us to apply. We have been preparing for years for this transition. Our child needs a lot of preparation. In mainstream primary they have done brilliantly, and the school has been incredibly supportive. There is a full time one to one support at the moment, but now the goalposts have been moved and none of these ESB places are available. If I had known that was what

was happening I would have applied for a place at a special school. That is not open to me any more as they are all over subscribed for the people who applied at the right time. All the bells, the open classrooms and walking around the school building would be too much for my child who is mentally and physically disabled. It would be totally impossible.

“If they were going to change the provision then they should have told us about that before we made our application. At the very least they should have explained what “enhanced support provision” means before sending out the letter. It doesn’t mean anything to us. We’re all very protective of our children and appreciate and understand that it takes a lot of work to look after them. I just don’t feel that I don’t feel that my child would be safe in a mainstream school.”

The council has a policy called GIRFEC – getting it right for every child – and The Scottish Government has a presumption of placing a child in a mainstream school. These do not in this parent’s view match up. They continued: “Not only is this presumption of mainstream unfair on my child it is also unfair on the rest of the pupils. If there are say, three families in one class with children with ASN then it would be hugely disruptive. It would also be really unfair to teachers. Our child’s place was also rejected on the basis that the school we applied to would have to employ another teacher.”

An Education Consultant explained to The Edinburgh Reporter that “people at management level in schools, departmental heads and those who support learning have been told that the ESBs will not exist any more. The presumption is that these children with quite significant and complex needs are going to be in mainstream”. They continued to explain that the children affected need a physical environment which is “quiet and stable, and predictable”. In mainstream schools the sensory overwhelm can just be too much for some children. The suggestion is also that “they’re essentially removing Pathway Four provision for some fairly complex kids”.” with all the

legal obligations that this entails. (Pathway Four is an obligation imposed by the Curriculum for Excellence on local authorities.)

The consultant helped several parents with the applications last autumn but does not know of anyone who has an ESB place. Speculating about the reasons behind the move by the council they said: "I think what the council will do is give a pot of money to the schools and say, you design your support based on the cohort of pupils you have.

"Beforehand each child would have what was called audited hours – a sum of money attached to each child. But when inclusion started to bite councils realised there were a lot of children who would qualify, and they didn't have enough money. So what they did at that stage was give each school a pot of money. Looking at it fiscally perhaps that is the only way to do it, but the school management is then forced into a situation where they gatekeep support because they don't have enough. There is of course no official confirmation. My primary concern for this cohort of kids who are leaving P7 is that they are the people who really need an enhanced transition to high school."

Comment from Edinburgh EIS

Alison Murphy, Local Association Secretary Edinburgh of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) said: "Edinburgh EIS has not been consulted on any plans, nor had any communication from Edinburgh Council, about what it is intending for its Enhanced Support Bases, bases that are designed to support pupils with additional needs in mainstream settings – though we do understand that the provision is, indeed, under review, and that some changes are in the offing.

"This failure to consult is something we have already raised with senior officers, as the swirl of rumours is obviously very concerning for staff, as well as for pupils and their

families. Given the history of cuts to provision, it is hardly surprising if people are reluctant to take reassurances at face value. We certainly hope that the council is not planning any cuts to this vital service. There is a mass of evidence about the rise in additional needs, and teachers need more specialist support if they are going to be able to meet the needs of all pupils. We hope that, going forward, there will be constructive engagement with us, and with all stakeholders, in order to ensure effective support.”

Education, Children and Families Convener, Councillor Joan Griffiths said: “We’re fully committed to ensuring that learners have their needs met in the school that provides them with the best possible support. This includes our 10 special schools and the range of Enhanced Support, Wellbeing and Nurture bases across the rest of our schools and early years centres. There is no planned reduction in resource for these services, in fact we’ve actively increased this.

“To be clear, Enhanced Support Base placements have not been suspended and the Education Resources Group continues to meet and assess decisions on the best outcomes for learners. In common with the rest of the country, additional support needs are rising across Edinburgh. We keep these levels of need and models of provision under review, to ensure we can continue to provide quality support for all.

“We will always strive to educate children with additional needs with the resources that are most appropriate, whilst adhering to the national ‘presumption of mainstream’ requirement from The Scottish Government.”

SNP Group leader Cllr Adam McVey said: “SNP councillors have been speaking to a number of parents who have been denied an ASN placement for their child and we’re extremely concerned.

“This looks like it could be another major cut to support for kids with additional support needs that has been imposed,

behind closed doors, and completely ignoring the needs of the children and young people.

“We’ve been asking questions about whether this is a cut to this provision and how many children are impacted. Parents need answers urgently, and we’ll keep asking until they get them.”



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