

Growing numbers of children in West Lothian identified with Additional Support Needs

Growing numbers of children in West Lothian have been identified with Additional Support Needs – as the council was praised for the help it provided.

Across primary schools in the county 31% of pupils have ASN and in high schools it's 46%.

The figures have risen by 10 % in the last five years.

They cover a broad spectrum of needs and present the council with higher demands and greater parental expectation.

Service Manager Kristyna Macsween told a meeting of West Lothian Council's Performance Committee: "The service is facing significant pressures and growing demand on resources due to an increased number of pupils with additional support needs."

It came as councillors heard that the partnership and multi service approach in the county has made it a front runner in local authorities in providing inclusive education.

Recent surveys of head teachers and families returned overwhelmingly positive responses to the work of the service within schools and with parents and families. A survey showed

positive responses in excess of 90% from schools and – families.

This has seen a drop in placement appeals and tribunals and a service more centred on pupil needs.

That recognition of the breadth of support offered has seen the council drop the term Additional Support Needs in favour of Educational Support Needs.

West Lothian has led other authorities with a presumption in favour of mainstream education for the last 19 years to bring children into schools to help build peer relationships as part of their education. This is done through additional work with staffing in schools and extra help through ASN staff.

Mrs Macsween told councillors that schools worked hard to develop inclusivity into daily life. The programme is very family focused, with the emphasis on doing what was right for each individual child.

She said: “When it’s right it’s right, and when it’s not we know that too. We need to make sure we give every opportunity to a child. It is challenging, but we are here to support the child.”

Councillor Tony Boyle asked: “Are there any other local authorities starting to follow the West Lothian example?”

Mrs Macsween said there had been “reach out from several local authorities”. Inter-service links between local council already exists.

A report to the Performance Committee said that as a result of growing numbers of children and young people being assessed with ASN: “The service has expanded significantly over this period, building capacity and broader skills and expertise in order to meet the needs of families in West Lothian.

“The service has been rebranded as the ‘Education Support

Service' from 'Additional Support Needs' to emphasise the importance of supporting every child and inclusion across the whole of West Lothian communities."

Chairing the meeting, Councillor Peter Heggie asked why there was wide variation in ASN figures in some schools. Deprivation is a major contributory factor.

The report added: "The service recognised there are opportunities to increase the level and quality of feedback from customers. This includes improving response rates to customer perception surveys in order to ensure that the service has a clear understanding of customer experience at each stage of their journey.

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Councillors praised the efforts of the team and thanked Mrs Macsween for her comprehensive report.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter