

Southport deaths 'highlight' need for school safety

The tragic deaths of three children during a mass stabbing over the summer highlighted the need for additional security at an East Lothian primary school, councillors were told this week.

Parents at St Gabriel's RC Primary, in Prestonpans, had lodged a petition with the council calling for higher fencing and a lockable gate at their school.

But while the petition, which was signed by 334 people with a further 29 online signatures, was raised before the tragic killings in Southport, a meeting of the council's petitions committee was told it had only served to support concerns.

Diane Brash, representing a parents group from the school, said: "Our main concern is safety, we started this petition during the summer holidays before the incident at Southport but that only highlighted the need for a fence and a lockable gate to go round the school grounds."

The petitions committee was told that the request was not a complaint against the council or the school, which Ms Brash said, was much-loved in the community with staff and their work with families appreciated by parents.

But she said incidents of vandalism within the school grounds, dog fouling on playing fields and a break-in over the holidays all pointed to the need for additional security.

She told yesterday's meeting that as recently as the day before there had been another incident involving antisocial behaviour at the school.

She said: "Pupils from another school came in and when they were asked to leave by staff they got a mouthful of abuse and stones thrown at them.

"We feel as a parent group it is not safe for our children."

The committee was told by its head of infrastructure Tom Reid that a review of all school perimeters which began several months ago was being undertaken by officers and the findings could be brought to a council meeting in the coming months.

And he said St Gabriel's security met the standards set in the Cullen Report, which looked into the issue following the Dunblane massacre in 1996 when 16 pupils and one teacher were killed by a gunman who entered their primary school.

Mr Reid said the building's perimeter was secure, along with the entrance and lobby with CCTV cameras covering outside areas.

He said: "In terms of the school perimeters we have been working on this for five to six months and there is a report being prepared which will come forward in the next four to six weeks with an updated condition on all school perimeters and any issues that need looked at.

"The cost of fencing in a single primary never mind all of them is incredibly high and there is no capital money set aside for that in the current capital plan."

Nicola McDowell, the council's head of education, said adults patrolled the school playgrounds when pupils were outside adding: "I want to give everyone assurance over the security and safeguarding . Every day there are at least four adults in the playground, and the head teacher and deputy.

“There is a secure entry system to the school, there is CCTV in the playground and a camera which triggers if there is activity at the back of the school.”

The committee unanimously rejected the petition on the understanding a report of the findings of the full review of school perimeters would be brought to councillors and include St Gabriel’s in its findings.

The review report is expected to come before the council’s education committee in November.

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter