

Agenda Item	10.
Report No	EDU/15/25

The Highland Council

Committee: Education Committee

Date: 4 June 2025

Report Title: Improving Relationships and Behaviour in Schools Action Plan - Update

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - People

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The 2023/4 national [Behaviour in Scottish Schools](#) survey and subsequent report (BISSR) was the 5th survey and report undertaken across Scottish schools since 2006. The 2023 report showed a difference to behaviour in schools from the previous (2016) report and cited the significant impact of COVID on overall attendance and behaviour in schools and communities across Scotland. As a result, an updated action plan has been created ([National Behaviour Action Plan 2024-27](#)). This is owned jointly by the Scottish Government and COSLA and sets out 20 actions, under 8 themes, to be delivered by March 2027.
- 1.2 The BISSR found that while most children are able to manage school well most or all of the time, the evidence is that there is increased disruption in classrooms and increases in physical and verbal aggression.
- 1.3 Particular concern was raised regarding the wellbeing of teaching and support staff, who frequently experience disruptive behaviour in classrooms. Disruptive behaviour and poor relationships also have an impact on school ethos and atmosphere and in the report were noted to lead to greater stress and anxiety for the whole school community.
- 1.4 The general issues reported in the BISSR are reflective of what has been recorded in Highland schools, and as a result of the recommendations in the Action Plan we are reviewing our own policies and support structures as well as how we record and monitor pupil-staff incidents in schools, to ensure our own practice and processes are in line with national recommendations.
- 1.5 This report provides a brief overview of the recommendations within the National Action Plan, the situation in Highland and generally accepted best practice in supporting positive relationships and behaviour in schools.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. Consider and note the work ongoing nationally in supporting better relationships and behaviour in schools;
- ii. Note the evidence base that supports the approach taken in Highland to address relational issues in our schools; and
- iii. Agree the actions being taken in Highland to ensure our practice is in line with national recommendations.

3. Implications

3.1 Resource

While there are always requests for additional resources to support children and young people in our schools, the strategies we are recommending and implementing in Highland do not in themselves require additional resources, but rather a different way of using the resource we currently have available.

3.2 Legal

- Health and Wellbeing is one of the three main strands of Curriculum for Excellence and as such there is a duty on all local Authorities in Scotland to address this area of work across the curriculum in all schools.
- The Education (ASL) (Scotland) Act 2004 and 2009 requires the local authority to identify, provide for and review the additional support required by children and young people with ASN who are over-represented in the statistics relating to exclusion and pupil-staff incidents.
- The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 emphasises the importance of everyone involved with a child taking responsibility for their wellbeing, and ensuring they work together to enable the child to reach their full potential.
- The Equality Act 2010 requires all local authorities to support those staff members and school pupils who have disabilities.
- The UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 highlights the need for statutory bodies to take a rights-based approach to supporting children and to ensure all children have their right to an education upheld.

3.3 Risk

The risk of not implementing an evidence-based approach to supporting children and young people framed around a whole school approach to positive relationships is to the emotional development of our children and young people and also to the safety and wellbeing of our staff.

3.4 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)

There are no changes being made to the Health and Safety processes already in place to support our school communities.

3.5 Gaelic

The approach we are taking in schools across Highland applies equally to GM schools and units.

4. Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This is an update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required. Any significant changes to practice or policy following review will have impact assessments undertaken on them individually.

5. Background

- 5.1 There is clear evidence that the relational style offered to children and young people impacts greatly on behaviour, staff and child wellbeing and attainment.
- 5.2 Evidence consistently shows that a positive school ethos and culture is essential to developing positive behaviour in the classroom, playground and wider community. The current national guidance on relationships and behaviour in schools has at its foundation a whole school ethos of prevention, early intervention and support against a background which promotes positive relationships, learning and behaviour.
- 5.3 Positive outcomes are most evidenced in a relational style characterised by high warmth and support, high standards and high expectations of socially responsible behaviour. It requires an ability to effectively set limits for behaviour, ensuring effective implementation of values and expectations in a firm and consistent manner, while using reprimands and consequences when necessary. The relational element in this process is key, as all members of the school community are held to the same standards – teachers being reflective practitioners, differentiating work to meet needs, supporting curiosity and safety in the classroom; Head Teachers providing leadership and an understanding of managing through change within their schools; non-teaching support staff helping pupils with social interaction, communication, and addressing anxieties; parents and other practitioners supporting a positive school ethos through their engagement and support; and pupils engaging with their peers, with staff and with the curriculum respectfully, in an environment that encourages children's participation and listens to their views on decisions that impact on them.
- 5.4 This combination aims at preventing problems, alleviating issues and also has the dual purpose of managing behaviour in the short term and developing responsibility among children in the long term.

6. Positive Relationships and Behaviour in Highland – Policy Framework

- 6.1 Highland Council has a [Positive Relationships Framework and Guidance](#) document that is in line with the requirements of the Scottish Government policy landscape.

6.2 Our framework has been shaped by an understanding of child psychology, child development and systems thinking. It takes account of the importance of early development on the long-term outcomes for individuals and an understanding of the impact of the behaviour of adults on that of children and young people. It sits within a rights-based approach and an understanding of the power differentials in any work with vulnerable groups, including children and young people. Our Framework has drawn together relevant research and educational thinking. It promotes a relationship-based approach, with a focus on self-regulation and co-regulation, which we know is effective in creating calm and respectful early years settings, classrooms and schools.

7. Positive Relationships and Behaviour in Highland – Data

7.1 We have recently undertaken a survey with our school staff to gather more information about the behaviour in our schools and what the barriers and successes are. There were 866 responses to this survey. 67% of respondents were teachers, 19% were Pupil Support Assistants (PSAs) and 10% worked in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC).

7.2 The issues reported as having ‘the greatest negative impact for staff’ are recorded in the table below. This data was drawn from a free text box and so staff were able to report any and all incidents that in their view were most significant in negatively impacting their role. The scale of the issue is provided by the number of times these issues were mentioned by staff; from the total number of incidents, they reported:

Issues having the most negative impact on staff roles	Scale of the issue
Disrespectful language and behaviour e.g. shouting/swearing	23%
Non-compliance	12%
Interruptions in class	9%
Physical behaviours aimed at staff (punching/kicking)	9%
Truancy/absence/lateness	8%
Lack of concentration/general apathy	8%
Physical behaviours aimed at other pupils	7%
Vandalism	7%
Bullying	4%
Emotional Dysregulation	3%

7.3 These reports are largely in line with the 2023 Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research (BISSR), which indicates that low-level disruptive behaviour remains the thing that causes most impact in ELC settings and schools and is characterised often by an inability or unwillingness to engage with an activity or lesson, especially where relationships are not yet well formed or where the child isn’t able yet or doesn’t feel it is safe to share their views respectfully.

7.4 Last school session there were 613 children involved in pupil-staff incidents across Highland. Across schools and ELCs this represents less than 2% of children. Of those children, 94 were in special schools and overall, 85% of incidents involved

children with additional support needs (ASN) characterised specifically with learning difficulties; neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism; communication difficulties; family issues; or social and emotional needs. In many cases their language, communication and cognitive skills were poorly developed.

7.5 The age where there is the highest level of pupil-staff incidents in Highland is P1 (28% of incidents are recorded in relation to 3–5-year-olds). This is similar to other local authorities. Our understanding of this is that very young children haven't yet developed their language skills or understanding of social situations to enable them to positively engage in busy early years spaces or to communicate their needs well. After P1 the number of reported incidents fall, indicating the developmental nature of this issue in primary schools.

7.6 To address this, the Psychological Service and ELC staff have implemented a training course specifically for early years, to support staff to better understand and support the developmental needs of children at this stage. This is especially important as we know that children born during the COVID years experienced much less socialisation that might have been the case for other cohorts.

7.7 In the recent staff survey (November 2024), staff were asked what they found to work in supporting dysregulated and distressed children. By far the greatest number of responses related to providing safe, quiet spaces where children could sit and calm down, often with a knowledgeable member of staff with whom they already have a relationship. They also noted the importance of a general calm, relational approach and time to listen with empathy, compassion and understanding. Building trust and positive relationships with clear communication and a consistent approach were also seen as important, as were positive relationships with family and carers.

This accounted for 73% of the responses to 'what works' and is largely in line with what we know makes the biggest positive difference to the development of children and young people. Although there has been a great deal of media coverage about sanctions and punishments, only 0.006% of responses mentioned these as being helpful in supporting distressed children.

7.8 In our survey staff were also clear that in order to implement strategies most effectively, time was required as well as sufficient staff to allow them to be responsive and flexible to the needs of this group of children. Staff also required knowledge and skills, built up over a period of time to ensure a consistent approach is able to be implemented across a whole school.

7.9 Being calm and consistent in approach and providing safe spaces for children to regulate their emotions is more beneficial than the blanket application of sanctions because, whereas "other" children will be corrected by a firm voice from a key adult, for a child who has experienced trauma or who has not formed secure attachments, their "hyper-vigilance" means that the very same social signal could be enough to trigger distress. So instead of reading a raised eyebrow as a reminder to be quiet, they may interpret it as rejection.

7.10 As a result of this difficulty, many children who haven't yet learned how to regulate their emotions rarely respond to sanctions successfully, because a sanction simply

reinforces what they have felt or been told already, which is that they are “naughty” or “bad” or “not good enough”.

7.11 For such children tracking patterns of emotionally dysregulated behaviours can be helpful. This is an approach that can identify where preventative approaches or early intervention may be helpful. So, if there were issues regularly before lunch, then an early lunch might be tried to see if hunger is a factor. If every break time there were issues, variables in the playground could be isolated to see what is causing the problem.

7.12 Being aware of individual needs and working consistently on building positive relationships and secure attachments between staff and children can dramatically decrease the number of incidents experienced by a child (O’Neill et al, 2010).

8. Improving relationships and behaviour in schools: ensuring safe and consistent environments for all Joint Action Plan 2024 – 2027

8.1 The aim of the Joint Action Plan associated with the BISSR is to support the provision of safe and consistent environments in our schools. It is founded on core values of respect, a collective responsibility to encourage and support relational approaches based on care, high standards and high expectations.

8.2 The Action Plan sits within a policy landscape of whole-system planning and multi-agency approaches incorporating children’s rights, whole school approaches, GIRFEC (Getting It Right For Every Child), meeting additional support needs, parental engagement and The Promise.

8.3 In support, the Scottish Government has provided:

- The provision of £900k funding, nationally, to provide central training of support staff to respond to identified needs.
- The publication of new guidance on preventing and responding to gender-based violence in schools, which will assist in addressing the emerging theme of increased misogyny in schools.
- The publication of updated guidance on mobile phones in Scotland's schools, in recognition that children and young people using/looking at mobile phones or tablets when they should not can be disruptive in classrooms.
- HM Inspectors will provide schools with enhanced feedback on relationships and behaviour as part of their inspection reports, to ensure inspections help support improvement.

8.4 The Action Plan sits within 3 phases covering the 3 years from 2024-7. Setting expectations; Engagement with stakeholders; and embedding cultural change. The next Progress Report will be published in March 2026.

8.5 The activity that has been undertaken to date has focused on responding to areas of emerging concern, and on those areas where evidence suggests there is a need to clarify approaches and support consistency. Progress has been slow due to the complexity of the issues identified but there is some progress across the plan, with the various working groups involved.

8.6 Whilst it is clear from the BISSR and the discussions held at the subsequent National Relationships and Behaviour Summits that there is general support for relationships-based approaches, it is similarly clear that there are challenges with how such approaches are working on the ground. Some of the difficulties highlighted by school staff nationally are:

- That relationships-based approaches have resulted in a lack of meaningful consequences for disruptive behaviour.
- Lack of time and resources needed to implement such approaches successfully.
- There is a need for alternative options of support for those children and young people who, for a variety of reasons, struggle with boundaries and meeting the established expectations of behaviour.
- Lack of options as to how to manage the behaviour of a small core group of young people with whom all other approaches and strategies had been exhausted.

8.7 Whilst recognising and acknowledging this feedback, the national plan remains grounded in the approach of promoting positive relationships and behaviour, and supporting the wellbeing of children and young people, but puts in place a range of actions designed to empower staff to address the spectrum of dysregulated and distressed behaviour seen in our schools. In doing so, the actions focus both on setting guidance and expectations using national policy and providing practical support to schools and school staff to ensure the implementation of policy in practice and to provide children and young people with the right support at the right time.

9 Current Activity Underway in Highland

9.1 Bearing in mind the priorities within the national action plan, we have surveyed staff and found similar issues in Highland as were found in the national report. The Council already has a framework on Promoting Positive Relationships (PPR), with the same underpinning values and principles as recommended nationally. This provides a model for individual schools to create their own PPR policies adapted to their own context and reflecting engagement with stakeholders. Practice can be supported by providing a more coherent approach to staff training and support through our specialist services; to help staff in ELCs and schools understand the principles of the evidence-based approaches and implement these with fidelity.

9.2 There is some knowledge in schools on topics such as being trauma informed, nurture approaches, solution focused approaches and restorative practice. However, we have found that there is often little in-depth knowledge of these interventions and staff find it difficult to find the time to attend training to refresh or reset their understanding of the values base to these approaches. As a result, some of these approaches e.g. Restorative Practice, are not used well and are seen to be failing as a result.

9.3 In our staff survey, only around 50% said that they had attended any training on Promoting Positive Relationships, GIRFEC, understanding trauma and adversity, inclusive practice or mental health awareness in the past 2 years. Only 30% had attended training on de-escalation strategies or restorative practice in the same time

frame. As a result, we are providing regular training throughout next school session and will further promote these opportunities to all ELC and school staff.

- 9.4 Elected Members approved £1.048m additional recurring funding to support ASN in schools in the Council's budget in March 2025. This will enable the establishment of a new approach to supporting our PSAs by creating a team of PSA Lead Practitioners who will deliver in situ training and support specifically for PSAs; and also, the creation of a team of ASN teachers who will likewise work with head teachers and class teachers. This will help to overcome the practical difficulties of releasing staff to attend training off site or online whilst also providing high quality, meaningful, development opportunities for all schools-based staff to apply the approaches set out above in their own settings with the pupils they work with in a daily basis. Delivering practical strategies and techniques that will make a positive real-life improvement for our children and our staff. Funding will also be used to develop and refresh training materials and opportunities for service-wide development and improvement.
- 9.5 The Council's Educational Psychology team is regularly involved with schools to support their knowledge and understanding of behaviour and relationships. Getting the balance between individual work and whole school strategic support can be challenging. Often schools would like more individual work while Educational Psychologists would suggest that strategic engagement would make more of an impact overall for both staff and students. We will continue to work on getting this balance right, to be able to support both individual and whole school approaches e.g. having a focus on emotionally based school avoidance at an individual and school level. The additional resources referred to above will help with this.
- 9.6 There is also work underway to better capture information about staff-pupil incidents and respond to them timeously. Although this only relates to a small number of children (2% of early years and school age children across Highland), disruption to a lesson can be significant if there are ongoing issues that are not effectively addressed at an early stage. This will include the ongoing review of support in schools, in specialist provisions and in our offsite facilities, which provide an additional resource for those children who find it difficult to maintain regular school attendance.
- 9.10 A recent workshop was held for all Members to provide information and insights into all of the issues explained in this report and to offer an opportunity for Elected Members and union representatives to feed in their insights and views and to ask questions. Further opportunities to provide similar types of briefings can be arranged if Members would find that useful and informative.

10. Summary

- 10.1 Children who lack trust in adults need to learn this through building positive relationships with those close to them (often staff in schools and ELCs). Learning about the impact of adversity and putting into practice strategies that build positive attachments can help a dysregulated child develop social skills and feel safe within their environment.
- 10.2 Children (especially those in early years) respond to their environment. At this age behaviour is seldom directed with malice to adults or their peers but is often a

response to feeling unsafe and not being able to communicate this effectively. When we understand this better, we can adapt our environments and expectations and address the child's development more effectively.

- 10.3 We will continue to work on our own strategy to support positive relationships, with a particular focus on early years and early intervention. The work of the Educational Psychology teams, support staff and Speech and Language Therapists are key to support developmental work in the early years as a preventative approach for later primary and secondary behavioural issues. The additional funding committed through this year's budget will augment the resources we have across Highland to support schools-based teaching and non-teaching staff to develop and enhance proven approaches to promoting positive behaviour that will enable children to achieve their potential. We will also continue to ensure that our Highland strategy is in line with the national strategy and action plan.
- 10.4 Because behaviour and relationships are about people and human interactions, these are complex issues, and it is unlikely that one approach will address all issues. It will take time to create a whole school/service/community culture, which is important if we are to effectively understand and address the issues identified. We will engage with the National Action Plan to ensure we address all recommendations made.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - People

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Background Papers: Promoting Positive Relationships in Highland Schools February 2024

https://www.highland.gov.uk/meetings/meeting/4936/education_committee

Behaviour in Scottish schools: research report 2023

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/behaviour-scottish-schools-research-report-2023/>

Relationships and behaviour in schools: national action plan 2024 to 2027

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-action-plan-relationships-behaviour-schools-2024-2027/>

O'Neill, L, Guenette, F & Kitchenham, A., (2010). "Am I safe here and do you like me?" Understanding complex trauma and attachment disruption in the classroom," British Journal of Special Education, 37/4: 190-197