

PE1548/FF

Petitioner submission of 2 May 2017

Thank you to the committee in the first instance for all the work they have done on this petition, I am extremely grateful for your support. Thank you also to the Deputy First Minister Mr John Swinney for answering the petitions committee's questions on 20th April. I have not yet seen the new guidance, so cannot really comment on how robust it will be at the time of writing.

I accept the Deputy First Ministers kind invitation to speak to the Advisory Group for Additional Support for Learning on 30 August 2017 with my good friend and colleague Mrs Kate Sanger to discuss the communication passport resource and how this tool may help to support staff in schools in understanding the function of behavioural distress in children with additional support needs and complex learning disabilities. I am delighted that The Scottish Government have decided to promote the use of the communication passport as a pro-active strategy to help staff avoid the use of physical intervention.

I understand that the Scottish Government have had some resistance to the new guidance, but I remain disappointed that the UNCRC's concluding recommendations to "Abolish the Use of Isolation Rooms" has not been taken forward despite full support from Scotland's Children's Commissioner and ENABLE Scotland (Note that this submission was not included in the MSP's spic briefing before Mr Swinney's meeting as it didn't arrive in time)

There is a difference between a calm, nurturing, comfortable quiet space that a child can choose to go to "escape" when things become too much or they are having difficulty coping. We do not have any problem with that whatsoever. This is not the reality though. The vast majority of these spaces are bare isolation/seclusion rooms resembling cells and cupboards that are very frightening to children. These "rooms" are deceptively presented as calm/calming/quiet/cool down rooms. One school even named their room "The Happy Garden" which had wall art of flowers on the bare concrete walls inside a lockable door. This box room was windowless, freezing cold and was completely bare except for a mat on the floor. There was nothing to bring comfort to a child yet it was deemed suitable to contain primary school aged children with disabilities until they had "calmed down".

I am hoping that the guidance Mr Swinney talks about will be very clear and that there will be provision for all such rooms to be gone from our schools as they are not fit for purpose.

I was very pleased to hear Mr Swinney say he would look at the situation again in a year or two to see if the guidance had in fact made a difference and if things had not improved he would consider "statutory force". I wonder if it would be reasonable then for us to ask that Mr Swinney give the committee a commitment to do exactly this say in May 2019?

I am looking forward to seeing the new guidance, and would ask that the committee not close the petition until we have had the chance to have a look at the guidance and reflect on it.

I also think it's important for the committee to be aware that the other 3 Governments and Assemblies in the UK are watching the outcome of this petition very closely. We have made such great progress and I would like to pass on my heartfelt thanks to the committee members, clerks and The Scottish Government for their engagement and support in this matter.

I said when I came to the Petitions committee in March 2015 "Please, help us protect Scotland's most vulnerable children" I hope that when these new guidelines are published that we have done our job, not just for children in Scotland, but very possibly all over the UK.

If this is the case, we should all be very proud that we have made this happen.