

Additional Support Needs in Early Learning and Childcare Action Learning Set Session 1

Setting the Context: ASN, Inclusion
and ELC | Synthesis Report



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Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the emerging themes from the first Additional Support Needs (ASN) in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Action Learning Set session, held in September 2026. It draws together insights from presentations, facilitated discussions and participant reflections, capturing key messages and areas for further consideration.

The session created space for participants to reflect on practice, learn from national evidence and each other's experiences, and consider what enables children and families to access early, consistent and coordinated support.

In defining this session, consideration was given to the findings of Janie McManus' review, [Additional Support for Learning: A Review of System Delivery for Learners](#), which highlights both the important role of ELC in recognising and responding to emerging need and the increasing pressures faced by settings in supporting children with ASN.

Presentations and discussions explored a range of factors that influence the support for children with ASN in ELC, including the increasing complexity of children's needs, the importance of early intervention, inclusive practice, workforce capacity, multi-agency collaboration, and the conditions required to provide effective and coordinated support. Contributions also highlighted the role of professional learning, quality improvement and system-wide approaches in strengthening outcomes for children and families.

The findings are intended to inform learning and improvement across the ELC Sector, Scottish Government, and other key stakeholders by identifying what supports effective and inclusive approaches to ASN.

This report will form part of a larger collection of evidence, resources and shared learning that supports ongoing development across policy and practice.

Background

Early Learning and Childcare has a key role in children's lives. It is often where emerging needs are first identified, where relationships with families are built, and where early intervention can make a significant difference to outcomes.

At the same time, it is acknowledged that ELC Services across Scotland are responding to increasing levels of need and growing complexity. This creates both challenges and opportunities as we work towards ensuring children receive the right support, at the right time, in the right way.

Early Learning and Childcare, as set out in the National Standard and GIRFEC, promotes an inclusive and nurturing approach, alongside a clear focus on equitable access to funded ELC and the early identification and approach to additional support needs.

Methodology

Action Learning is an established development approach that is based on the idea that some of our most valuable learning comes from reflecting on real experiences and exploring them with others. It recognises that, particularly when working with complex issues such as ASN and inclusion, there are often no simple answers or single solutions.

In this context, rather than focusing on finding immediate solutions, Action Learning encouraged participants to

- Reflect on practice and experience
- Ask thoughtful questions
- Explore assumptions and different perspectives
- Learn from colleagues across the ELC Sector
- Identify opportunities to influence change

The session provided a structured opportunity for participants to reflect on practice, share perspectives, ask questions and learn from one another's experiences. Rather than focusing on training or reporting local activity, the session created space for collective reflection and inquiry.

Participants were encouraged to explore two questions, consider different viewpoints and reflect on the wider system influencing outcomes for children and families.

Reflect on a real experience where there were opportunities to strengthen the support provided to a child with ASN. What happened, and what can we learn from this experience?

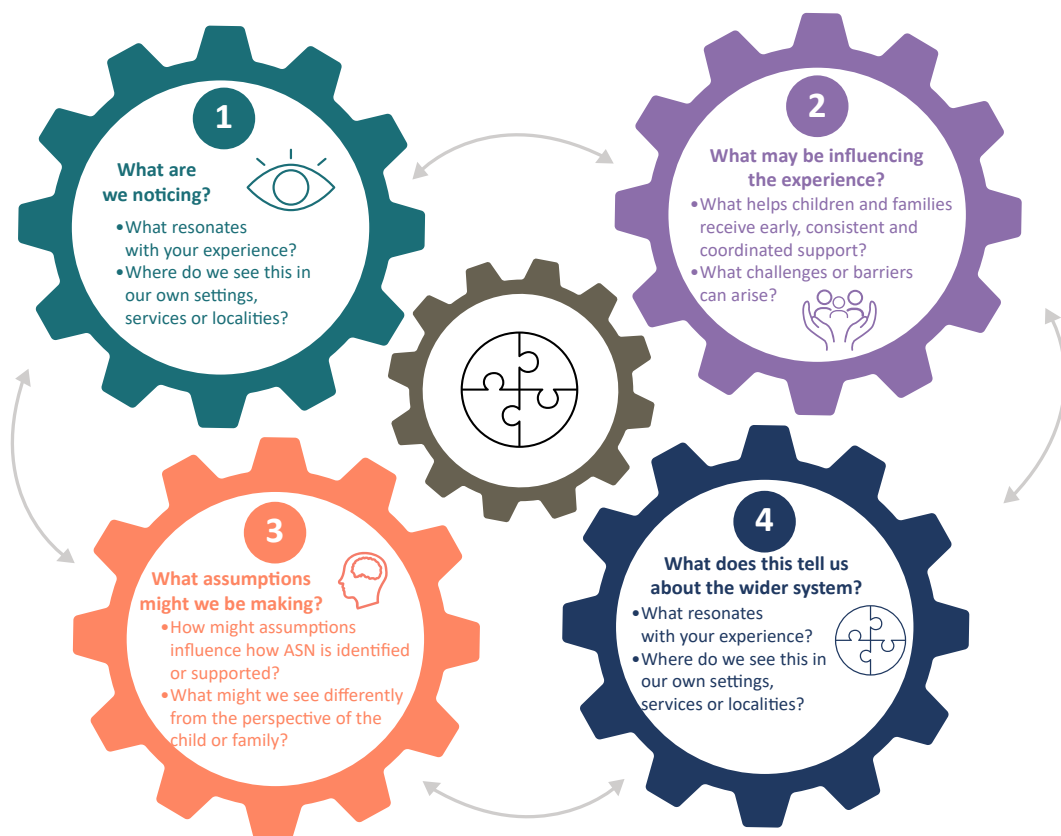
And

Reflect on what today's discussion has helped us see differently about ASN. What could we influence or do differently.

This approach recognised that taking time to understand challenges, assumptions and opportunities from multiple perspectives can generate deeper insights and inform meaningful improvement.

Opportunities to strengthen support for children with ASN

Emerging Themes, Key Learning, and Opportunities for Improvement.



The first Action Learning session provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on current experiences of supporting children with ASN within early learning and childcare settings and to explore where there may be opportunities to strengthen support, bringing together perspectives from across local authority, private, third sector and childminding provision. Consideration was also given to both the challenges and enablers influencing the delivery of inclusive practice and support for children and families.

While experiences varied across local contexts, a number of common themes emerged. There was strong agreement that the sector is committed to inclusion and increasingly confident in identifying and understanding children's needs. However, the growing complexity of need, pressures on workforce capacity, variation in access to support, and the challenges associated with securing timely interventions and specialist input were also highlighted. Alongside these challenges, examples of effective practice that demonstrated the value of collaboration, workforce development, early planning, and strong partnerships with families were also shared.

The following section presents the five key themes in response to the following question:

Reflect on a real experience where there were opportunities to strengthen the support provided to a child with ASN. What happened, and what can we learn from this experience?

Together, these themes capture the main insights, learning, and opportunities for improvement identified by participants and provide a foundation for ongoing discussion and exploration through the Action Learning Set.

- Getting the right support at the right time
- Growing confidence, skills, and capacity across the workforce
- Creating consistent and inclusive experiences for all children
- Working in partnership with families and services
- Embedding inclusive practice in everyday ELC experiences

Theme 1: Getting the Right Support at the Right Time

Reflections highlighted growing confidence across the sector in recognising emerging needs and support for children. Examples were shared of children with ASN being identified earlier and practitioners working proactively with families and partner agencies. However, there were also reflections on the challenging aspects of accessing specialist advice, assessments, interventions, and additional resources within the timescales required. Delays in accessing support were often described as reducing opportunities to intervene early and adding pressure for children, families, and practitioners.

Key Learning

Early identification and early intervention are closely connected. Positive outcomes are strengthened when identified needs are matched by timely access to appropriate support and resources.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Strengthen pathways to support and intervention.
- Improve access to specialist advice and assessment.
- Enhance planning around key transitions.
- Explore approaches that reduce delays and support earlier intervention.

Theme 2: Growing Confidence, Skills, and Capacity Across the Workforce

There was widespread recognition of the commitment and expertise that exists across the workforce. Shared examples emphasised mentoring, coaching, outreach support and professional learning approaches that had strengthened practitioner confidence and capability. At the same time, increasing complexity of need, workforce pressures, and recruitment challenges were identified as factors affecting capacity across the sector. Staff wellbeing was also highlighted as an important consideration in sustaining inclusive practice.

Key Learning

Building workforce confidence and capability contributes both to effective support for children and to longer-term system improvement.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Increase access to professional learning and development opportunities.
- Expand mentoring, coaching, and outreach support approaches.
- Strengthen workforce planning and capacity-building activity.
- Continue to consider the wellbeing and support needs of the workforce.

Theme 3: Creating Consistent and Inclusive Experiences for all Children

Examples of effective local practice demonstrated how clear pathways, collaborative approaches, and inclusive cultures can support positive experiences for children and families. However, variation in access to support, services, and processes across local areas and provider types was also identified. There was a shared view that children and families should experience equitable access to support regardless of geography, provider type, or local arrangements. Emphasis was placed on ensuring childminders, private providers and third sector organisations are recognised as valued partners within local systems.

Key Learning

Greater consistency across systems can help support more equitable experiences and outcomes while recognising the importance of local flexibility.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Improve consistency of support pathways and processes.
- Strengthen inclusion of all provider types within local systems.
- Improve awareness and understanding of available supports and services.
- Develop a shared understanding of graduated approaches to support.

Theme 4: Working in Partnership with Families and Services

Strong partnership working was consistently associated with positive experiences and outcomes. There were several examples of effective collaboration between families, ELC settings, health professionals, education services, and wider partners, particularly where there was shared planning and clear communication. Alongside these examples, challenges were identified where information sharing, service coordination or communication between agencies was less established. Families were consistently recognised as key partners whose knowledge and experience are central to understanding and responding to children's needs.

Key Learning

Collaborative and relationship-based approaches support more coordinated planning and enable support to be tailored around the needs of children and families.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Strengthen multi-agency collaboration and communication.
- Improve information sharing at key stages and transition points.
- Increase opportunities for family engagement and support.
- Develop more coordinated approaches to assessment, planning and decision-making.

Theme 5: Embedding Inclusive Practice in Everyday ELC Experiences

Numerous examples were shared of inclusive practice being embedded within everyday experiences, environments, and interactions. These included nurturing approaches, predictable routines, visual supports, environmental adaptations, outreach support, and coaching models that had strengthened participation and engagement. There were also reflections on the continuing need to build confidence and capability within universal provision so that support is consistently available within children's everyday experiences. Finally, there was a particular emphasis on promoting independence, participation, and belonging while maintaining high expectations for all children.

Key Learning

Inclusive practice is strengthened when it is embedded in everyday provision and supported through ongoing workforce development, reflective practice, and collaborative learning.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Share and promote effective inclusive practice.
- Continue investing in capacity-building and outreach support models.
- Strengthen approaches that support participation, independence and belonging.
- Further develop inclusive environments and responsive everyday supports.

Summary

Together, these themes reflect both the strengths and challenges currently shaping support for children with ASN across the ELC sector. While pressures relating to increasing complexity of need, workforce capacity, access to support and consistency across systems were recognised, there was also a strong commitment to inclusion and a shared focus on improving outcomes for children and families. The discussions reinforced the importance of early intervention, strong partnerships, and collaborative working, and provide a valuable foundation for future Action Learning Set sessions.

Reflections on Support for Children with ASN

Emerging Themes, Key Learning, and Opportunities for Improvement.



Participants were invited to reflect on what the initial session helped them see differently about supporting children with ASN and what could be influenced or done differently as a result.

“Reflect on what today’s discussion has helped us see differently about ASN. What could we influence or do differently”

Drawing on experiences from across a range of roles, experience, and settings, the discussion explored both the opportunities and challenges associated with delivering inclusive support for children and families.

Several recurring themes emerged from these reflections. Together, they highlight opportunities to strengthen support through clearer pathways, workforce development, earlier intervention, stronger partnerships, and more inclusive approaches that promote participation, belonging and positive outcomes for children with ASN. The following themes capture the key learning, areas of influence and opportunities for change identified through the initial session.

- Clear pathways and access to support.
- Building workforce confidence, capacity, and leadership.
- Earlier intervention through strong family partnerships.
- Strengthening collaboration around the child.
- Embedding inclusive and relationship-based practice.

Theme 1: Clear Pathways and Access to Support

There was a consistent view that clearer pathways and a greater understanding of available support would benefit both practitioners and families. Reflections highlighted the challenges associated with navigating services, understanding referral processes, and accessing information across different systems and agencies. Variations in local processes, resources and support arrangements were identified across settings, provider types and local authority areas. While examples of effective pathways were shared, there was a shared recognition that support is not always experienced consistently, highlighting opportunities to strengthen coordination, accessibility, and continuity across services.

Impact

Clearer pathways and more accessible information have the potential to improve equity of access to support, reduce delays in intervention, and create greater consistency in children's and families' experiences across settings, services, and local areas. This could enable practitioners to respond more confidently and ensure support is accessed earlier and more effectively.

Opportunities to Influence Change

- Develop clear pathways from universal to targeted and specialist support.
- Improve signposting and access to guidance; strengthen information sharing and transition arrangements.
- Review consistency of support processes.
- Ensure equitable access to resources and support across provider types and local areas.

Theme 2: Building Workforce Confidence, Capacity and Leadership

There was broad recognition of the commitment, skills, and expertise that exist across the workforce, alongside the increasing complexity of children's needs and the pressures experienced across the sector. The importance of professional learning, mentoring, coaching, networking and opportunities to learn through practice was widely recognised as a means of building confidence and capability. Examples of ASN leads, specialist practitioners and distributed leadership models demonstrated how expertise can be nurtured and shared, creating opportunities to strengthen inclusive practice and build capacity across teams and settings.

Impact

Building practitioner confidence and leadership can support more consistent and effective responses to children's needs, strengthen inclusion and help create sustainable approaches to support. It also provides opportunities to share expertise more widely and reduce reliance on a small number of specialists.

Opportunities to Influence Change

- Expand mentoring, coaching, and peer-learning opportunities.
- Develop ASN lead or champion roles.
- Strengthen professional learning.
- Support practitioner networks.
- Continue to invest in workforce capacity, wellbeing, and leadership development.

Theme 3: Early Intervention Through Strong Family Partnerships

There was a strong emphasis on the importance of identifying and responding to emerging needs as early as possible, rather than waiting for a formal diagnosis before support is put in place. The value of early conversations, timely intervention, and proactive approaches that focus on understanding and responding to children's individual strengths and needs was consistently recognised. Families were consistently recognised as key partners whose knowledge, experiences, and perspectives are central to building a holistic understanding of children and informing effective support. There was a shared view that strong relationships with families, underpinned by open communication and shared understanding, are essential in supporting children throughout their ASN journey.

Impact

Early intervention and strong family partnerships can improve outcomes, strengthen confidence for families and practitioners, support a shared understanding of children's needs, and reduce the likelihood of concerns escalating over time.

Opportunities to Influence Change

- Promote needs-led approaches to support.
- Strengthen early identification processes.
- Create opportunities for family learning and engagement.
- Develop resources that help build shared understanding.
- Ensure family voice informs planning and decision making.

Theme 4: Strengthening Collaboration Around the Child

There was a strong emphasis on the importance of collaboration in supporting children with ASN. Reflections highlighted the value of building and maintaining effective relationships with health visitors, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and other partners to support coordinated planning and decision-making. Alongside examples of effective partnership working, there were also reflections on the challenges created by fragmented systems, variation in access to services, and inconsistencies in practice across different localities. There was a shared view that stronger connections between services, greater visibility of available support, and improved opportunities for shared learning could help create more joined-up and consistent experiences for children and families.

Impact

Greater collaboration across services, sectors, and local authorities can strengthen consistency, reduce duplication, and improve access to expertise. Stronger professional networks and more systematic sharing of effective practice could accelerate improvement and support a more connected approach to meeting children's needs.

Opportunities to Influence Change

- Create opportunities for cross-sector collaboration.
- Strengthen professional networks.

- Improve visibility of specialist services.
- Support relationship-building between key partners.
- Share effective practice across local authority and service boundaries.

Theme 5: Embedding Inclusive and Relationship-Based Practice

There was a strong emphasis on the importance of creating environments where all children experience a sense of belonging, can participate meaningfully in everyday experiences, and are supported through positive relationships. There was agreement on the need to move beyond approaches that focus primarily on a child's difficulties or needs, recognising that inclusion is also shaped by the environments, systems, and relationships surrounding the child. There was also a shared view that supporting children with ASN should be a collective responsibility, with all practitioners contributing to inclusive practice rather than support being seen as the role of a single individual or specialist.

Impact

Embedding inclusive and relationship-based approaches can strengthen participation, wellbeing, and belonging while promoting strengths-based practice and collective responsibility. It encourages support to be viewed as part of everyday practice rather than something delivered through isolated interventions.

Opportunities to Influence Change

- Promote strength-based language and approaches.
- Strengthen understanding of relationship-based practice.
- Support whole-setting responsibility for inclusion.
- Encourage reflective dialogue about how support is described and delivered.
- Share examples of effective practice that support participation, independence, and belonging.

Summary

These themes provide further insight into what the initial session prompted participants to think about differently in relation to supporting children with ASN. While many of the reflections reinforced challenges already recognised across the sector, they also highlighted practical opportunities to influence change through clearer pathways, stronger partnerships, greater workforce confidence and more connected approaches to support. Across all themes, there was a clear recognition that improving outcomes for children with ASN relies on a combination of early intervention, collaborative working, inclusive practice and shared responsibility.

Additional Reflections

Mentimeter responses strengthened several themes emerging from the Action Learning session. Responses highlighted the importance of clearer and more streamlined pathways to support, greater consistency in language and approaches, stronger partnership working, and increased opportunities to share learning across local authorities and sectors.

Reflections also emphasised the importance of maintaining a focus on children's strengths and capabilities, developing a shared understanding of early intervention, and ensuring workforce learning and system improvement activities remain closely connected to practice. Concerns relating to workforce capacity and wider resource pressures were also evident, alongside a recognition of the need to identify practical actions that can be taken within individual roles, settings, and services.

Next steps

As the Action Learning Set programme progresses, opportunities will continue to be facilitated in order to explore the themes and issues identified through this initial session. Future sessions will build on the learning gathered to date, drawing on examples of practice from across the sector and exploring approaches that support early intervention, inclusion and partnership working.

The programme will continue to provide a space to test ideas, share learning and reflect on the practical changes that can strengthen support for children with ASN. It will also support ongoing exploration of the conditions that influence access to support, workforce confidence, collaboration, and inclusive practice across different ELC contexts. Learning from each session will be captured and revisited throughout the programme to identify recurring themes, emerging priorities, and opportunities for improvement.

Conclusion

The first Action Learning Set session provided an opportunity to reflect on the current landscape of support for children with ASN within ELC and to consider both the strengths that exist across the sector and the challenges that continue to be experienced. Across presentations, discussions, and reflections, there was a clear commitment to inclusion and a shared recognition of the importance of early intervention, strong relationships and collaborative working in supporting positive outcomes for children and families.

While challenges relating to increasing complexity of need, workforce capacity, access to support, and variation across systems were consistently recognised, the discussions also highlighted a wide range of effective practice and a strong willingness to learn from one another. Clear pathways, confident practitioners, strong partnerships with families and services, and inclusive approaches embedded within everyday experiences emerged as important enablers of effective support.

The themes and reflections captured within this report provide a valuable foundation for future Action Learning Set sessions and ongoing improvement activity. They highlight opportunities to strengthen support for children with ASN through shared learning, collaboration, and continued focus on creating inclusive environments where all children are supported to participate, belong, and thrive.

Additional Resources

[Additional Support Needs in Early Learning and Childcare Action Learning Set Session 1 - Setting the Context: ASN, Inclusion and ELC SWAY](#)

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