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## **Highland Children's Forum**

### **Not in Full Time Education Consultation Report**

#### **2018: Views from Young People**

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## About the Project

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The aim of the Not in Full-time Education (NIFTE) consultation was to explore with young people, parent-carers and professionals the main issues facing young people's inability to access school-full time.

The consultation was in response to anecdotal evidence of an increasing number of young people in Highland with additional support needs who were not accessing their right to a full-time education.

Three separate, but linked, consultations were carried out: with young people who are not in full-time education; with parent carers and with professionals. The wording of issues for discussion were varied for each group in recognition of the different relevant experience and understanding of each group. Each consultation sought examples of good practice, barriers/challenges, and suggestions for improved practice. Young people and parents were asked about the impact of school experience. Young people were asked about what helped them get back to school. Professionals were asked to reflect on aspects of their practice. While each report had particular emphasis, there were some clear cross-cutting themes emerging.

This report details the finding of the young people's consultation and explored key areas around: a good day and a bad day in the context of school; what helped children and young people to reintegrate to school; the impact of school experiences on children and young people; the impact on families and recommendations for improved practice from the children and young people.

This analysis draws on information gathered between January – June 2017 from 30 young people from across the Highlands in: 3 focus groups; 15 one-to-one interviews and 1 questionnaire.

Two other reports are available analysing the responses from parent carers and professionals. A briefing report, comparing and contrasting the findings from the three reports is available on the Highland Children's Forum website.

## Participant Information

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Participants were aged between 10 and 21 years old and were evenly spread across remote, rural and urban areas of Highland. While the participants include both children and young people, for the purpose of this report, all participants are described as young people.

Additional needs as identified by the children:

<b>Additional Need</b>	<b>Number</b>
Mental health problems	14
LGBT+	8
Interrupted learner	6
Learning difficulty	6
Social, emotional and behavioural challenges	5
Autistic Spectrum Disorder	5
Young carer	4
Care experienced	4
Witness to domestic abuse	4
Long term health condition	4
Hearing impaired	1

Educational status of the young people at the time of the consultation:

<b>Educational status</b>	<b>Number</b>
Part-time	15
Full-time	4
Special educational provision	4
Not attending	3
Left school	3



## Good day – Positives about School

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Consultations began by asking the young people to talk about a good day at school to provide characteristics of school that were positive and even missed when young people were not at school.

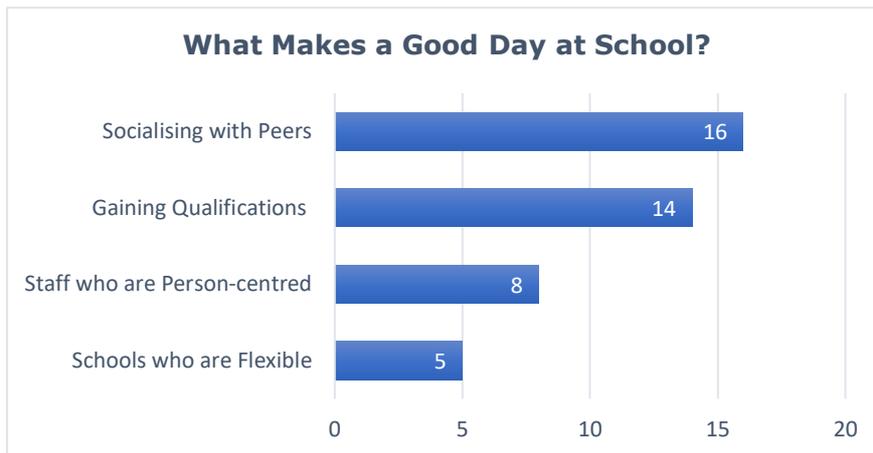


Chart Indicating What Makes a Good Day at School

23 young people made 57 comments in regard to what made a good day at school. 3 young people felt not going to school was what enabled a good day.

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**‘it was a total relief not having to go anymore.’**

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### Socialising with Peers

The majority of young people provided responses about seeing their friends and being around people their age being a positive thing about school. Comments suggest that this is about maintaining friendships both in and outside school.

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**“I have a laugh with [a friend]”**

**“It’s important to get stuff sorted out for after school, when I’m meeting them and that”**

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### Gaining Qualifications

Almost half the young people provided “Good Day” responses about particular subjects or gaining qualifications in school. This reflects that young people acknowledge the value of learning at school and its impact on their future. The difficulty in maintaining full time education did not reflect a reluctance to learn. Art, Physical Education and Computer Design and Technology were most often mentioned as popular subjects.

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**“I want to learn, but it’s better at [off campus provision]. I need Maths and English for the job I want”**

**“I am also catching up with my education and planning my future”**

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### Staff who are Person-centred:

Young people did not use the term “Person-Centred”, however, eight young people made “Good day” comments about teachers that reflect positive relationships built on respect, flexibility and responsiveness.

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**“She asks me how I’m doing every day. I look up to her, her opinion matters to me, she helps me with my personal issues.”**

**“Teachers know I’ve been ill, there might be times I’ll be late in. They understand that and can work with it.”**

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### Schools which are Flexible

A minority of young people made comments about flexible approaches that contributed to a good day of education. These included the more relaxed atmosphere of the support base; alternative off-campus activities; being able to start later in the morning (in an off-site provision) and being outdoors.

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**“I like the support provided in the pupil support base. Its more relaxed.”**

**“I like getting out for life skills.”**

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## Bad Day – Negatives about School



Young people were asked about what made a bad day in school.

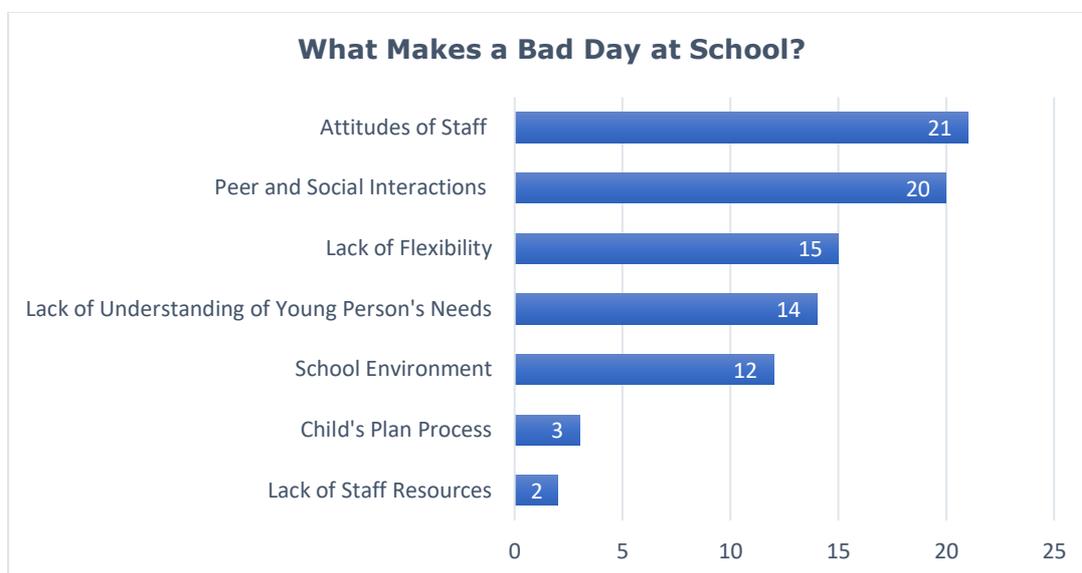


Chart Indicating What Makes a Bad Day at School

27 young people responded to this question with 150 comments about what made a bad or challenging day at school. 3 young people commented about their own trust issues having a negative impact on school relationships.

### Attitudes of Staff

Most young people spoke about the negative attitudes of staff within schools; including senior staff, office staff and teachers. The comments made reflect alternative values to those listed above for good teachers: lack of understanding; young person didn't feel liked; lack of respect; lack of fairness and over-controlling.

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**“I felt a lot of teachers were just there to do a job - they didn't know or understand the pupils, didn't know you personally.”**

**“Office staff would still tell me off for being late even though I'd been given permission to be in at a different time.”**

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### Peer and Social Interactions:

A majority of young people made a comment about social interactions. 13 comments were made about bullying, 10 about the young person's own anxiety and 10 about young people recognising that their own behaviour contributed to a bad day.

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**"Most pupils are judgmental about your home situation; your weight; clothes; makeup"**

**"Bullying throughout my entire life in primary school and through to high school where they put me in the same class as some of the old bullies."**

**"it was my fault. I didn't really know the difference between right and wrong when I started."**

**"I felt the walls closing in on me."**

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### Lack of Flexibility

The young people spoke about a lack of flexibility in school, including the fact that they struggled with the early start to the school day and felt that the workload and number of classes were too much. The structure of the school timetable and classes was also mentioned.

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**"School starts too early."**

**"Too many subjects, I couldn't concentrate properly."**

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### Lack of Understanding of Young Person's Needs

Staff not understanding the young person's needs was an issue for some of the young people who felt that they had to explain their needs to teachers. For some it was feeling that there was always work to catch up on. Some particular needs, such as being Looked After, were not always met.

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**"it's hard to explain to teachers why I am off – they don't read the notes."**



**“Someone would tell you one thing and then someone would tell you another and it was hard to keep it all in your head. It’s hard to remember things because you were just too stressed out to even think.”**

**“Because I missed so much of a year its hard catching up on the work. The school gave me work, it didn’t help me that much. I didn’t learn a lot.”**

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### **School Environment:**

The school environment having a negative impact on young people’s attendance at school was raised as an issue. This referred to the space of the building and playground, but also to the busyness and noise. Break-times were mentioned as problematic by a minority of young people.

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**“Cramped corridors. Feel intimidated by all the tall people when I am short. People muttering, laughing, makes me paranoid.”**

**“Noise in classes and corridors. Screaming at break and lunch. People are always arguing in classes.”**

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### **Child’s Plan Process:**

A minority of young people reported that Child’s Plans or other meetings were not child-centred and that there was a lack of support to meet their learning and support needs.

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**“I was never listened to – not once.”**

**“I could hardly speak at meetings I was in tears all the time ... usually about 8 people round a massive table it was horrible.”**

**“No help and support for my hearing [impairment].”**

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## Impact of School Experience

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Young people recognised that their school experience impacted on their mental health and their educational achievements. They also recognised that there was a financial and an emotional impact on their families.

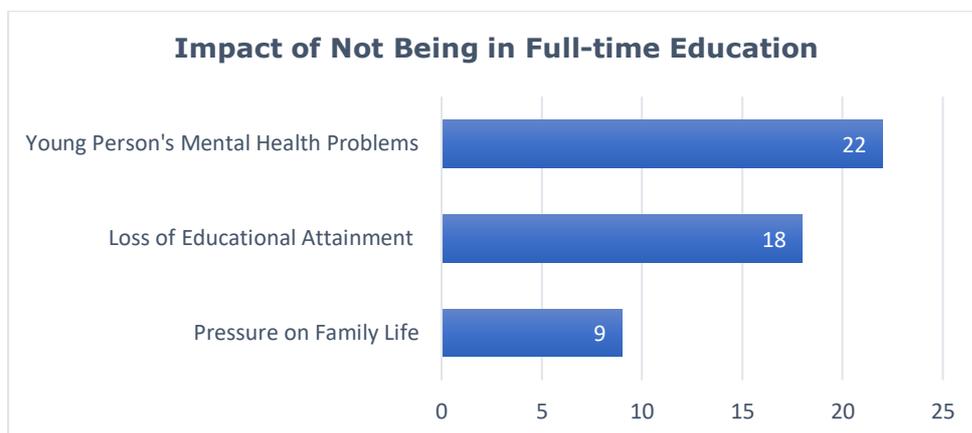


Chart Indicating the Impact of Not Being In Full-Time Education

### Young Person's Mental Health Problems

Many of the young people experienced a range of changes to their mental health such as anxiety, loss of self-confidence, depression. A few felt that the difficult experiences they had encountered at school had actually had a positive impact by helping them to build resilience.

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**“Catching up with my classes really preys on my mind.”**

**“It decreased my confidence.”**

**“I tried to bottle it up at school because I felt people would talk about me –[I'd] be the topic of the school.”**

**“My experience and the range of experiences and changes I've gone through has made me better at being able to relate to everybody.”**

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### Loss of Educational Attainment

For some of the young people the loss of learning meant that they could not achieve what they might otherwise have been able to. Catching up



was challenging so the sooner the young person could be in a learning environment where they could cope, the better it would be.

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**“It’s definitely put me back quite a lot. When I came back I had so much to catch up on.”**

**“People said I did really well in school but I know I could have done so much better.”**

**“I wanted to learn but didn’t get the chance. Now at [off site provision] I am learning a lot - but would have done better if I had been here earlier, I would have been at college by now.”**

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### Pressure on Family Life

The impact of their school experience on the rest of their family was an issue for some young people who spoke about the emotional and economic impact on their families of them not accessing school full-time education.

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**“I was horrible to my Mum, I had to act calmly all day and would go home grumpy and stressed. I felt horrible after.”**

**“I knew my parents weren’t happy about me not being in school.”**

**“It was hard for Mum to get a job because I was constantly getting sent home from school all through primary school.”**

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## What Helped Young People Return to School

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The responses to this question were divided into what the young person did themselves; what the school did; what the family did and what other people did.

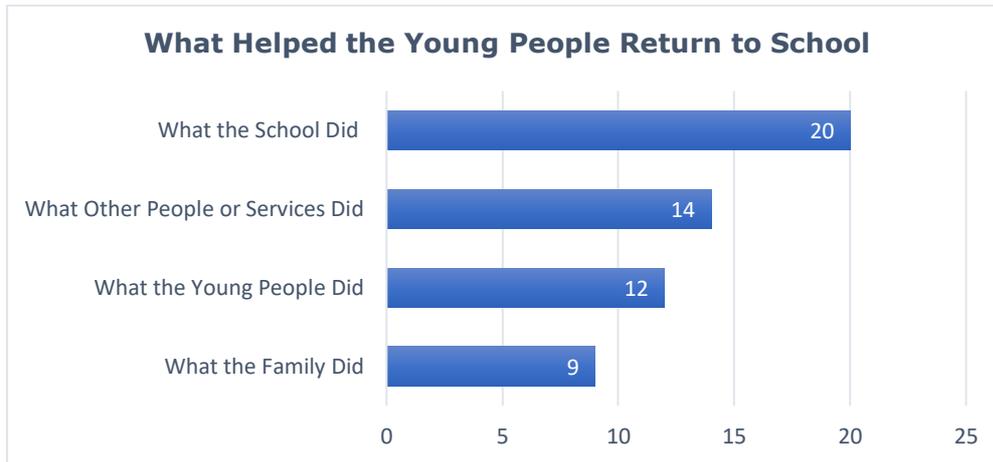


Chart Indicating What Helped Young People Return to School

### What the School Did

Many of the young people were able to comment about what schools had done to help them return to school. These included: listening to the young person; being flexible; providing options; demonstrating empathy and building the relationship with the child or young person.

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**“If I needed to go home earlier I could. They had everything arranged because my parents couldn’t drive. Arranged appointments for me and my mum to come in and meet guidance teacher.”**

**“Began to go back to school [with] a timetable change and started working 1-1 just under an hour a day - when I could manage.”**

**“Gave me time out and stuff. She understands what I’m going through and stuff and she helps.”**

**“Didn’t tell you off for everything, if it wasn’t that bad he would be a bit sort of ‘silly’ about it. Strict with big stuff but fair. Didn’t shout. Just like Mr X. Really fair, he’s nice. Encourages you to do work. He tries so hard to get me to behave. He doesn’t have to help me but he does. He likes me.”**

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### What Other People or Services Did

The young people described the way in which other people had helped such as being understanding, flexible and providing options. Other young people talked about people who 'stuck up for' them e.g. sorting transport issues. Friends helped by listening, staying in touch and visiting.

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**"She was like a mother - I could talk to her about anything, I could even just sit and have a cup of tea with her. .... She smiles at you when you went in the room, never got on at me about my tie or my hair, never stood cross armed. I can pick up on an atmosphere or negativity straight away."**

**"Phoenix Centre psychologist helped me to work out what I wanted and came along to a school meeting with me and my Mum to work out what was needed."**

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### What the Young People Did

The young people spoke about the efforts they had made themselves to cope and reintegrate into school, and the importance of feeling 'normal'. Some said that learning to speak out about their issues was helpful.

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**"It took a lot of hard work. I wanted to not be in school but I knew I had to go to get my qualifications/results."**

**"You feel like you don't want to let some of the teachers down because they help you, care about what happens to you."**

**"I just wanted to feel normal again."**

**"Now I can explain to people - people I feel safe with."**

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### What the Family Did

For some young people the support of their families was vital in helping them get back into school for instance by: not forcing the young person to attend when they were not ready; by listening; being strict about the going to school when the young person could manage; trying to get

schools to understand the issue; helping the school develop plan for reintegration. One young person appreciated being home schooled.



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**“My mum and dad tried to get primary school to help and they kept high school from forcing me in to school when I was not ready.”**

**“They came up with plan and suggested it to the school. School eventually agreed to the gradual plan. We slowly built up an extra hour a week until summer hols when I was part time. After holidays, I was back fulltime and I had non-contact periods for time out.”**

**“My mum would manage to convince me to go to school. Even just for an hour and even if I thought it was annoying.”**

**“It’s nice and calm at home. I like staying and learning at home.”**

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## Improvements

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The young people were asked about what improvements they would like to see to help make school life better.



Chart Indicating the Main Improvements Suggested by Young People

### Improved Attitudes of Staff

The area for improvement mentioned by most of the young people was that school staff should have better attitudes towards them, including greater empathy and understanding. Young people can feel like “sausages in a machine” rather than individuals coping with different pressures at home and in school.

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**“Don’t bully kids for being who they are. Don’t bully them because they are expressing themselves in a way THAT THEY NEED.”**

**“Pay more attention to how people are feeling rather than worrying about their grades. Not put so much pressure on people especially when they are already struggling.”**

**“Treat people individually rather than like robots in a factory pretty much.”**

**“I want to see schools treat people better and to provide more support so they don’t fall behind.”**

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### Improved Person-Centred Practice

Whilst the young people did not use the term 'person-centred practice', some of the young people talked about how a small amount of the right support at the right time can make a big difference.

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**“Schools should have people pupils can talk to (youth workers) for health and emotional issues.”**

**“If I'd had the help [when I was on a fulltime timetable] I would have still been in fulltime education.”**

**“When [young people] are moving high schools like ease them in to it, don't force everything on them all at once.”**

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### Improved School Environment

The comments about improvements to the school environment included the need for time-out space i.e. a physical and emotionally safe space to go to where the young person can relax and calm down. Other young people spoke about the need for a physical environment which was not too busy or noisy. Cross gender changing rooms and toilets would provide less embarrassment for transgender young people.

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**“If I get annoyed in class I can go to [SFL] base for time out and help and support.”**

**“A place and one person you can go to when you start to feel annoyed.”**

**“Not so busy corridors would mean less panic attacks.”**

**“Changing rooms - stalls for any gender. Don't think you should have mixed toilets think they should be male female, I would like to use male but don't want to make the boys uncomfortable.”**

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### Improved Communication

Young people commented that communication with individual teachers could be improved to help their understanding of the issues young people were facing. Young people wanted to be better informed and involved in decisions that affected them.

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**“Don’t make plans without asking me. They used to have meetings and I’d only find out at the last minute what was happening.”**

**“All teachers need to know what kid’s problems are so that they can stop things starting.”**

**“I want to see teachers told what the child has and what it is so that they know and can help more and understand.”**

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### Additional Support Needs Training

A few young people suggested improved training and recruitment would be helpful. Guidance teachers should have specific training on emotional understanding. All teachers need to have training to understand young people and the various pressures they may be under.

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**“Hire people who are qualified to be a guidance teacher who know emotion. Know how to deal with people, go on a course to understand how people feel.”**

**“Teachers need to understand the discomfort they cause. Not all teachers knew my personal circumstances and I think they should have, they would maybe be friendly, they need to smile at kids! Not be so stern.”**

**“Help to understand mental illness, what it is and you can’t just ‘get over it’. People talk about it so casually in a derogatory sense rather than it being in a normal sense.”**

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## Tackle Bullying

Suggestions were made about the need to address bullying as this would help with inclusion.

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**“Bullying needs to stop and people need to stop being so judgemental.”**

**“Schools need to do more about bullying and its consequences e.g. self-harm.”**

**“Bullies need to be better dealt with by school, then I’d feel more comfortable and safe.’**

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## Avoid Exclusion

Four young people suggested that avoiding exclusion would be helpful. This report demonstrates that most children and young people want to get a full-time education and recognise the value of it.

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**“They can’t just ‘chuck away’ a child because of their behaviour.”**

**“I want to be in school fulltime.”**

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## Conclusion

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Young people clearly want to be in school and know the benefit of gaining qualifications. The negative impact of not being in full-time education is evident to the young people.

Young people also recognise the importance of school socially, although bullying or struggling to manage their own behavior can make it difficult to manage social interaction with their peers.

The lack of empathy and understanding of school staff was a significant issue for most of the young people. They do not always feel listened to or even liked as individuals. A message from a few of the young people was the difference a warm and empathetic response could make.

The understanding of staff would be improved by better communication amongst teachers. Individual teachers did not always show understanding of the additional support needs of the young people, meaning there was not a cohesive approach to meeting their needs. Most of the flexibility required was simple and not onerous in terms of what would help the young person cope in the classroom.

For young people who are experiencing difficulties in their home life, some sort of code could be used so that class teachers, without knowing the confidential details, would know that something was going on for that young person. This would alert them to potential changes in behavior or concentration, which would require a gentler response.

The noise and busyness of a big school can overload some children and time-out or quieter space is needed to enable them to cope. Improving the physical environment could be about creative use of space rather than any costly alterations to the building. Asking the young people themselves could help find solutions.

The improvements young people seek begin with changing attitudes and school ethos. This depends on recruiting the right people and providing the right training.

This report is only one of three consultations and should be read in conjunction with the briefing comparing and contrasting the results. Recommendations from across the reports are made.