



# SCHOOL EXCLUSION AND ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

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Children and Young People's  
Centre for Justice



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## Acronyms

CYCJ - Children and Young People's Centre for Justice

ASB - Anti-Social Behaviour

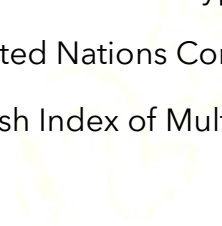
ASN - Additional Support Needs

PSNA - Persistent Non-Attendance

ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

UNCRC - United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

SIMD - Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation





## Introduction

School exclusion and anti-social behaviour sit at the intersection of children's rights, educational policy and wider social justice concerns in Scotland. For the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice, these issues are not simply matters of school discipline, they are indicators of how systems respond to children in distress, how inequality is reproduced or challenged, and how far Scotland realises its commitment to inclusion and children's rights.

Exclusion and anti-social behaviour (ASB) are often linked in policy discourse, including whether exclusion prevents or exacerbates such behaviour, yet the relationship between them remains insufficiently understood and under-researched within the Scottish context (McAra & McVie, 2010). First, the report defines both school exclusion and ASB, before situating this work in the Scottish policy context, bringing together the literature on school exclusion and ASB, supported by a small number of interviews with teachers about their understanding and perception of the relationship between exclusion practices and behaviour.

### Defining School Exclusion

In Scotland, exclusion is a formal disciplinary measure available to education authorities where a child or young person's continued attendance at school would be considered seriously detrimental to order and discipline or to the educational wellbeing of others. The legal basis is set out in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 (as amended), and national guidance makes clear that exclusion should be used only as a "last resort" (Scottish Government, 2017b). It is intended to be proportionate and protective rather than punitive, accompanied by clear procedures and support for reintegration.

Regulation 4 of the Schools General (Scotland) Regulations (1975) provides that an education authority shall not exclude a pupil from school unless the authority:

- "Are of the opinion that the parent of the pupil refuses or fails to comply, or to allow the pupil to comply, with the rules, regulations, or disciplinary requirements of the school;" or
- "consider that in all the circumstances to allow the pupil to continue his attendance at the school would be likely to be seriously detrimental to order and discipline in the school or the educational well-being of the pupils there."

The law does not make a distinction between types of exclusion, a child or young person is either excluded from school or they are not. However, Local Authorities may refer to *'temporary exclusions'* and *'removals from the register.'*

- Temporary exclusion - When a pupil is excluded from school but remains on the school's register and is expected to return. Sometimes referred to as *'suspension.'*
- Removal from the register - When a pupil is excluded from school and the pupil's name is removed from the school register, the local authority having decided that the pupil should not return to that school. Sometimes referred to as *'Permanent Exclusion,'* or *'Expelled.'*

## **Informal Exclusions**



If an assessment is made that a child is unable to remain in school either on a temporary or permanent basis, because their behaviour is, or is likely to be, detrimental to their or others' safety or wellbeing, this should be recorded as an exclusion. Currently, there is no legal basis for *'informal exclusions,'* such as, sending pupils home early.

In the 2024/25 academic year, there were 10,647 cases of exclusion recorded in publicly funded local authority schools in Scotland. All recorded exclusions were temporary, no pupils were removed from the register (Scottish Government, 2025a).

The 10,647 exclusion cases in Scotland in 2024/2025 involved 7,277 pupils (certain children and young people excluded more than once) all of which were temporary. Although permanent exclusions have effectively disappeared in recent years, the volume of temporary exclusions represents significant lost learning time (Scottish Government, 2025a, 2025b).

## **Defining Anti-Social Behaviour**

The Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004 defines anti-social behaviour (ASB) as behaviour that causes alarm, distress, nuisance or annoyance (legislation.gov.uk, 2026). Over half of the recorded exclusions in 2024/2025 related to behaviours commonly categorised as *'anti-social'* including physical aggression, verbal abuse and persistent disobedience, a picture that has remained broadly consistent over the past decade (Scottish Government, 2025a). Whilst legislation and policy articulate a commitment to inclusion, the exclusion data raises important questions about whether exclusion is consistently operating as a measure of *'last resort'* to address such behaviour. Behaviours leading to exclusion





may reflect distress, unmet need or attempts at communication (Valdebenito et al., 2025) and teachers may lack the time, training, support and resources required to respond effectively (Hulme et al., 2025; National Education Union, 2023).

Scotland's approach to promoting positive behaviour in schools, is set out in *Fostering a Positive, Inclusive and Safe Environment* guidance (Scottish Government, 2025b), the guidance recognises the multitude of potential responses to challenging behaviour, recognising exclusion as one.

Children who experience school exclusion face poorer educational, social and health outcomes, are more likely to have lower attainment, reduced school attendance, and less likely to find employment or training once they have left school compared to their peers (Daniels et al., 2003; McAra & McVie, 2010; Parsons, 2009; Scottish Government, 2017). Furthermore, the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime demonstrates that formal system interventions, including school exclusion, is associated with an increased likelihood of later involvement in offending and youth justice systems (McAra & McVie, 2010). Whilst formal exclusions in Scotland have decreased significantly, they have been replaced by a "hidden" form of exclusion, otherwise outlined as 'informal exclusions' (e.g. working alone, being sent out of class) that often goes misreported, unreported or unnoticed and leaves vulnerable children without adequate education or support (McCluskey et al., 2019; Power & Taylor, 2020; Sierra-Martínez et al., 2025; Who Cares? Scotland, 2005). Exclusion of any form can weaken attachment to school, disrupt protective relationships and increase association with similarly disengaged peers, thereby compounding existing vulnerabilities linked to poverty, identity, adversity and/or additional support needs (ASN) (Gill, 2017; Keung, 2010; Levitas et al., 2007; OECD, 2019; Sanders et al., 2020). However, evidence indicates that even in the context of adversity, strong attachment to school can function as a protective factor, promoting long-term wellbeing and resilience (Abate et al., 2024; World Health Organization, 2020).


Scotland's incorporation (Scottish Government, 2024b) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into domestic law reinforces duties on public authorities to uphold children's rights to education, participation and non-discrimination. The UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) establishes the right to education (Article 28), protection from discrimination (Article 2), the primacy of the child's best interests (Article 3), and the right to be heard (Article 12) as foundational principles. Within this framework, school exclusion cannot be understood only in terms of school order or as a punitive sanction, but it must also be assessed in relation to all children's right to development, dignity and participation. A rights-based lens reframes the response to ASB not merely as a temporary disciplinary response, but as a potentially meaningful intervention point in a child's life.

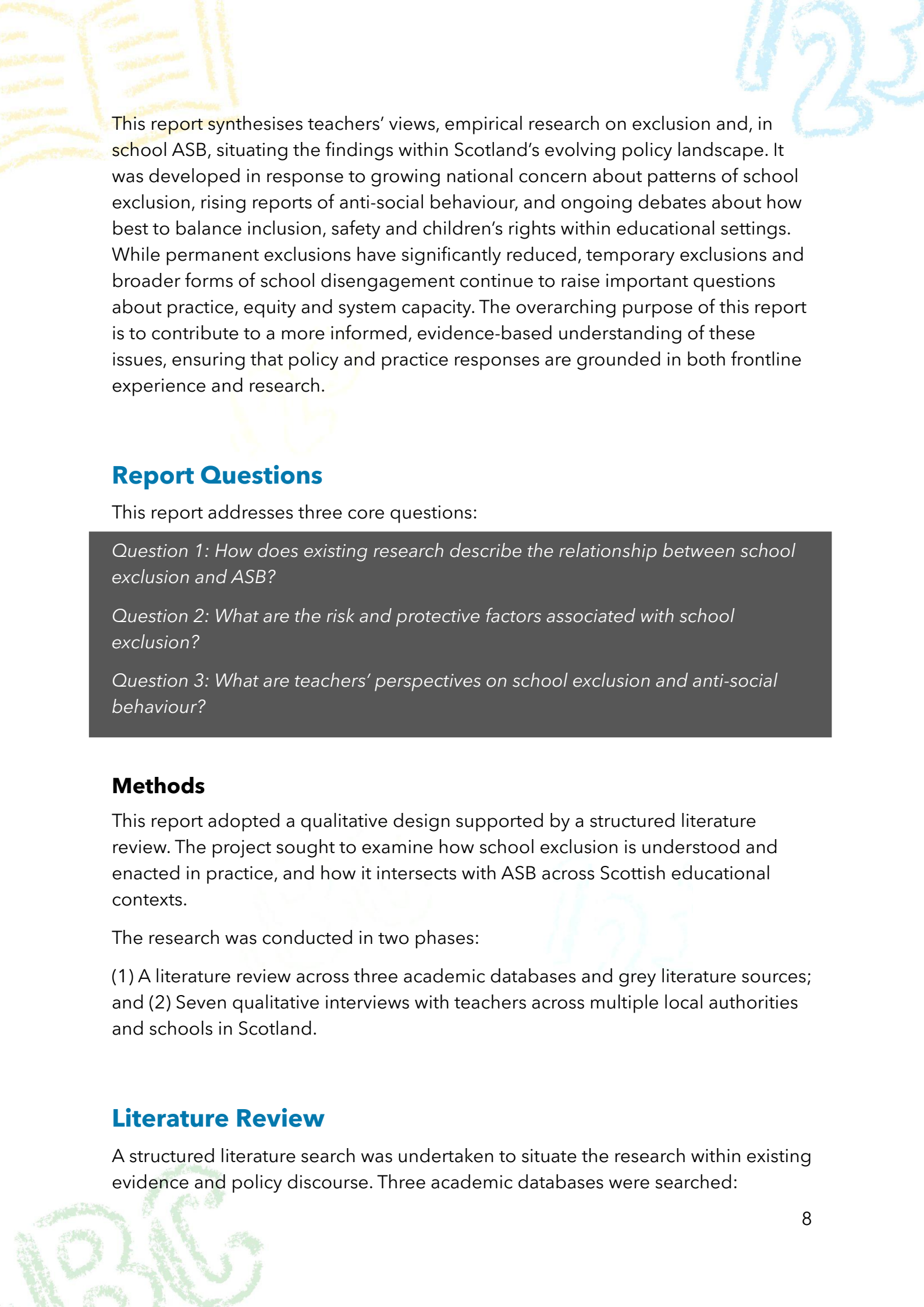


Recent Scottish policy developments highlight the urgency of this debate. The Scottish Government (2024) *Improving Relationships and Behaviour in Schools: Joint Action Plan 2024-2027* acknowledges that post-COVID-19 pandemic educational environments have become more complex. Teachers are reporting rising disruption, aggression, misogynistic language, mobile phone misuse and in-school truancy, despite reducing exclusion rates (Scottish Government, 2024a). Importantly, the plan situates behaviour not as an isolated disciplinary matter but within a broader ecology of poverty, trauma, austerity and rising ASN. This aligns with justice-oriented interpretations of exclusion as a systemic response rather than an individual failing.

Patterns of inequality across exclusions are persistent and stark (Paget et al., 2018), with national data evidencing persistent structural inequalities over time (Troncoso et al., 2024). Boys are excluded at more than twice the rate of girls. Children living in the most deprived communities are several times more likely to experience exclusion than those in the least deprived areas. Pupils registered for free school meals face markedly higher exclusion rates than their peers. Children with ASN account for 77% of exclusion cases. Higher exclusion rates are also evident among pupils identified as disabled and certain ethnic minority groups (Scottish Government, 2025a). This is supported by The Poverty Alliance (2021) *Review of the Poverty-Related Attainment Gap* which demonstrates that educational inequalities begin in early childhood and widen across the learner journey, reinforcing the structural nature of behaviour, disengagement and exclusion. This has led to the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools Scotland Bill (2025) highlighting concern about how distressed behaviour is understood and responded to, and called for more trauma-informed staff training to enable schools the opportunity to respond to behaviour in a manner that directly promotes children's rights and dignity.

Central to this discussion is the perspective of teachers, who occupy the frontline of policy enactment and response to pupil behaviour. While exclusion statistics and policy frameworks provide structural insight, it is teachers who must interpret guidance, assess risk, balance competing rights within the classroom and make immediate judgements about safety, learning and relationship dynamics. Research demonstrates that teachers' perceptions of behaviour, risk and support availability significantly shape disciplinary responses (Fallon et al., 2022; Karasova & Nehyba, 2025; Li & Ma, 2025). Teachers' professional judgement is enacted within contexts often characterised by rising complexity, constrained resources and increasing expectations around inclusion and rights compliance (Action for Children, 2024; Bourke, 2023; Bramley et al., 2025; Latorre-Coscolluela et al., 2025; Oxley, 2023; Scottish Government, 2024). Understanding teachers' experiences is therefore critical to interpret exclusion patterns and responses to ASB in schools.





This report synthesises teachers' views, empirical research on exclusion and, in school ASB, situating the findings within Scotland's evolving policy landscape. It was developed in response to growing national concern about patterns of school exclusion, rising reports of anti-social behaviour, and ongoing debates about how best to balance inclusion, safety and children's rights within educational settings. While permanent exclusions have significantly reduced, temporary exclusions and broader forms of school disengagement continue to raise important questions about practice, equity and system capacity. The overarching purpose of this report is to contribute to a more informed, evidence-based understanding of these issues, ensuring that policy and practice responses are grounded in both frontline experience and research.

## Report Questions

This report addresses three core questions:

*Question 1: How does existing research describe the relationship between school exclusion and ASB?*

*Question 2: What are the risk and protective factors associated with school exclusion?*

*Question 3: What are teachers' perspectives on school exclusion and anti-social behaviour?*

## Methods

This report adopted a qualitative design supported by a structured literature review. The project sought to examine how school exclusion is understood and enacted in practice, and how it intersects with ASB across Scottish educational contexts.

The research was conducted in two phases:

(1) A literature review across three academic databases and grey literature sources; and (2) Seven qualitative interviews with teachers across multiple local authorities and schools in Scotland.

## Literature Review

A structured literature search was undertaken to situate the research within existing evidence and policy discourse. Three academic databases were searched:

- British Education Index (BEI)
- ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre)
- Web of Science (WoS)

Sample British Education Index (BEI) search strategy:

*TX ( "school exclusion" OR "permanent exclusion" OR "anti-school behaviour" OR "antischool behav\*" OR "removal from register" OR "expulsion\*" OR "non-permanent exclusion" OR "illegal exclusion" OR "alternative provision" OR "temporary exclusion" OR "exclusion from school" OR "disciplinary exclusion" OR "pupil exclusion" OR "school suspension" OR "disciplinary action" OR "informal exclusion\*" OR "hidden exclusion\*" OR "de facto exclusion\*" OR "managed move\*" OR "reduced timetable\*" OR "part-time timetable\*" OR truan\* OR "school disengagement" OR "school attendance problem\*" ) AND TX ( "anti-social behaviour" OR "antisocial behav\*" OR ASB OR "youth offending" OR "persistent disruptive behav\*" OR "juvenile delinquency" OR "youth crime" OR "disruptive behaviour" OR "challenging behaviour" ) AND TX ( child\* OR adolescent\* OR youth OR "young people" OR student\* OR pupil\* OR learner\* ) AND TX ( school\* OR "educational setting\*" OR "primary education" OR "secondary education" )*

Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine searches and ensure reach while maintaining relevance.

### **Inclusion criteria**

- Peer-reviewed articles published in English
- Research focused on school-aged children and young people
- Studies examining links between exclusion, behaviour, deprivation, trauma, or policy

Grey literature was also searched to ensure policy and practice relevance. This included Scottish Government publications, Education Scotland reports, local authority guidance, third-sector reports, and youth justice briefings.

The literature review informed the refinement of interview questions and provided a framework for analysing teachers' narratives, particularly in relation to structural inequality, policy-resource gaps, and relational practice.



## Participant Recruitment and Sample

Seven teachers participated in the study. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, including reaching out to professional networks and local authority contacts. The sample included teachers working across:

- Primary schools
- Secondary schools
- Additional support needs schools

Participants were drawn from seven different local authorities across Scotland, with a mix of urban, rural and semi-rural contexts. Participants ranged from newly qualified teachers to principal teachers, depute headteachers and headteachers, allowing for a breadth of operational and strategic perspectives.

The diversity of roles supported exploration of both classroom-level experience and system-level decision making regarding exclusion.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Given the professional sensitivity of discussing exclusion practices, ethical considerations were central. Full ethical approval was sought from the Social Work and Social Policy Departmental Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary. Consent was obtained prior to interviews. Participants were assured that no identifiable school or authority would be named.

Data was de-identified at transcription stage. Care was taken when reporting quotations to avoid indirect identification through contextual detail.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviews were chosen to allow flexibility, depth, and responsiveness to individual experience while maintaining thematic consistency.

Interviews allowed participants to provide concrete examples and reflect critically on lived practice. This format enabled the identification of both shared patterns and variation across authorities.

All interviews were conducted confidentially, over Microsoft Teams. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim thereafter. Participants were anonymised and assigned identifiers (P1-P7) to protect identity and encourage open discussion.



## Results

### **Question 1: How does existing research describe the relationship between school exclusion and ASB?**


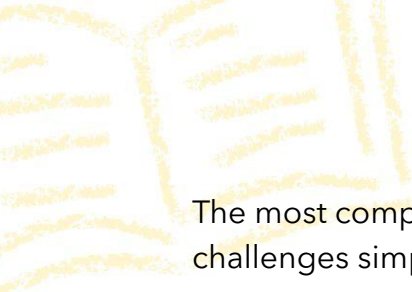
#### **Cause and Effect**

Existing research does not conceptualise the relationship between school exclusion and antisocial behaviour (ASB) as straightforward cause and effect. Rather than exclusion being merely a justified response to disruptive conduct, or ASB being an inevitable consequence of exclusion, the literature frames the relationship as developmental, mediated, relationship-based, and shaped by institutional practice.

Across studies, exclusion and ASB are strongly associated. Alloway et al. (2013) demonstrate that self-reported conduct problems are the strongest predictor of experiencing school exclusion in adolescence. Sanders et al. (2020) take this further suggesting that conduct problems often results in disengagement with school, finding both direct and indirect links between school exclusion and later criminal justice involvement. Reid (2010) positions persistent non-attendance or truancy as part of a reinforcing cycle linking exclusion, criminal behaviours and long-term social marginalisation, resulting in the overrepresentation of excluded pupils in youth justice populations (Day, 2025; McAra & McVie, 2010; Reid, 2010; Sanders et al., 2020).

However, the association between ASB and exclusion does not imply an inevitable pathway. Research suggests that behaviours categorised as anti-social often emerge within contexts of relational breakdown, labelling and perceived injustice prior to removal from school (Munn & Lloyd, 2005). Rather than reflecting inherent pathology, Hilton (2006) conceptualises ASB as a rational response to alienating school processes. Similarly, Fitzsimmons et al. (2021) identify relational disruption and insecure attachment as key factors underpinning behavioural escalation that may culminate in exclusion.

Emerging evidence further indicates that unmet neurodevelopmental and mental health needs frequently sit beneath behaviours that lead to exclusion. Day (2025) demonstrates that persistent disruptive behaviour may reflect unmet neurodivergent needs rather than deliberate misconduct. Tobias (2019) argues that PSNA can signal anxiety, trauma and environmental stress, while Alloway et al. (2013) suggest that exclusion is less a consequence of cognitive challenge itself and more a response to unmet need. Taken together, this body of research reframes exclusion not as a predictable outcome of ASB, but as a system response to behaviours rooted in relational and developmental complexity.





The most comprehensive intervention synthesis (Valdebenito et al., 2025) further challenges simple causal viewpoints, evidencing that while school-based programmes can produce reductions in exclusion, they show limited effects on broader ASB, such as conduct problems or substance misuse. Reducing exclusion alone does not automatically reduce ASB, mirroring the findings from the *Improving Relationships and Behaviour in Schools: Joint Action Plan 2024-2027*, in which teachers reported an increase in behavioural difficulties in schools despite exclusion numbers reducing (Scottish Government, 2024a). This suggests that the link between exclusion and ASB extends beyond the disciplinary landscape.

Research proposes that educational institutions and community support networks have a crucial opportunity (where they adopt relational, restorative and trauma-informed approaches), to prevent exclusion by responding to unmet need, deescalating potential ASB (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021; McCluskey et al., 2019; Oxley, 2023). Where disciplinary systems are punitive, inconsistent or resource constrained, exclusions serve to intensify marginalisation (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021; McCluskey et al., 2019; Oxley, 2023). Lloyd et al., (2003) illustrate that multi-agency approaches may reduce formal exclusion but warn that “*partial inclusion*” practices may still exacerbate marginalisation and create the conditions for ASB.

### **Impact on Development**

Research has reframed school exclusion as a potential developmental turning point rather than a simple indicator of pre-existing ASB. McAra and McVie (2010) evidenced that, at age 12, young people who would later become persistent serious offenders were largely indistinguishable (in terms of early risk factors such as poverty, family adversity and behavioural difficulties) from those who would desist. Finding instead that divergence occurred following formal system intervention, including school exclusion (McAra & McVie, 2010). This is further supported in research that attests that exclusion may influence development, particularly during early adolescence, a period that is characterised by identity formation, heightened peer influence, and increased sensitivity to institutional responses (Hirschfield, 2008). Rather than merely reflecting antisocial tendencies, exclusion may reshape social pathways, disrupt school attachment, reduce access to prosocial relationships, and increase exposure to antisocial peer networks, subsequently contributing to the consolidation of a negative self-identity (Hirschfield, 2008; McAra & McVie, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014).

The importance of timing is reinforced by Valdebenito et al. (2025), finding that preventative interventions were generally more effective in primary than secondary settings when children have greater developmental plasticity, and when behavioural patterns and school attachment are forming. Once disengagement and sanctioning patterns become embedded, interventions appear less effective



(Valdebenito et al. 2025). The transition from primary to secondary school (which involves significant structural, relational and identity shifts), emerges as a particularly sensitive phase. West et al. (2010) demonstrate that poor transition at these stages predict increased ASB, lower self-esteem, psychological distress and reduced attainment. Although exclusion was not directly measured, their research argues that disengagement and antisocial identity formation during this period increase exclusion risk.

Delays in supportive interventions, and disciplinary responses, can be damaging to current and future life outcomes. Research shows that school exclusion has both direct and indirect effects on increasing ASB and exposure to negative peer associations (Sanders et al., 2020, Valdebenito et al., 2025).


However, McAra and McVie, (2010) found that exclusion is neither a sufficient nor necessary cause of ASB and associations are not concrete. Many excluded pupils do not engage in offending behaviours, and many serious offenders were never excluded. Instead, its impact is contingent upon developmental timing, relational context, and the presence or absence of protective supports.

### **Unmet Needs**

Research conducted with young people suggests that a key mechanism linking exclusion and ASB is unmet ASN. Saxton et al. (2025) identified four central factors shaping exclusion outcomes:

- Educational context;
- Provision matching need;
- Timing of support and;
- Quality of relationships and decision-making processes.

A recurring theme was late identification of ASN, with behaviours associated with autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) frequently misinterpreted as misconduct. Disciplinary sanctions were often applied before assessment or support, contributing to deteriorating mental health, academic disengagement and ASB. Many young people believed earlier identification of ASN would have significantly altered their educational experiences and outcomes (Saxton et al., 2025). Similarly, research shows that neurodivergent children often experience repeated behavioural sanctioning prior to ASN being formally recognised. In several cases, diagnosis and appropriate support arrived only after prolonged difficulty (Day, 2025). When persistent disruptive behaviour, (the most common recorded reason for exclusion in Scotland) (Scottish Government, 2025a) is reframed as an expression of distress, trauma or sensory overload, rather than intentional ASB, and where interventions were trauma-informed and involved families, incidents of exclusion and ASB were reduced (Day, 2025).





Across studies, pupils with ASN are consistently overrepresented in exclusion statistics (Munn & Lloyd, 2005; Lloyd et al., 2003; Day, 2025). However, qualitative accounts complicate narratives of inherent ASB. Hilton (2006) demonstrates that young people frequently interpret their behaviour as a response to curriculum frustration, perceived injustice or relational breakdown. Fitzsimmons et al. (2019) further link challenging behaviour to insecure attachment and trauma histories, showing that relationship breakdown within school often precedes exclusion. Crucially, research shows that a sense of belonging mediates behavioural outcomes. Pupils who experienced strong school attachment demonstrated improved attendance and reduced behavioural difficulty (Cockerill, 2019).

Research conceptualises PSNA as an early warning sign of environmental stress, anxiety and unmet ASN rather than defiance (Tobias, 2019). Reid (2010) similarly positions PSNA as both a precursor and consequence of exclusion. PSNA increases the likelihood of involvement in crime and antisocial peer networks, particularly during unsupervised daytime hours. The longer non-attendance persists without relational intervention, the more entrenched disengagement becomes. Intervention evidence also suggests once exclusion patterns have stabilised the influence of supportive interventions weakens. However, intervention can be challenging with structural barriers preventing schools from implementing restorative and trauma-informed approaches early enough to prevent behavioural escalation. By secondary school, behaviour systems are often more rigid and accountability pressures higher, reducing flexibility for preventative adaptation (Oxley, 2023). Interventions were most effective where schools adapted provision flexibly and prioritised relational safety (Acosta et al., 2019). When attendance policy operated in isolation from contextual understanding of difficulties, reintegration was challenging (Embeita, 2019).

## **Question 2: What are the risk and protective factors associated with school exclusion?**

### **Structural & Socioeconomic Inequality**

Empirical research consistently demonstrates the overrepresentation of socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils within school exclusion statistics (Scottish Government, 2025a). Pupils receiving free school meals and those living in deprived communities are disproportionately excluded (Munn & Lloyd, 2005; Troncoso et al., 2024), with poverty and neighbourhood disadvantage shaping disciplinary trajectories over time (Lloyd et al., 2003). Reid (2010) further positions PSNA as strongly associated with poverty and as a precursor to both exclusion and ASB, reinforcing how socioeconomic marginalisation contributes to cumulative educational disengagement.





These patterns align with the concept of “deep exclusion” (Levitas et al., 2007: p9), in which disadvantage operates across multiple domains including health, employment and justice system involvement (OECD, 2019). McCluskey et al. (2019) situate school exclusion within this multidimensional framework, arguing that removal from school frequently intersects with layered marginalisation rather than occurring in isolation from broader structural forces.

Within this structural landscape, young people with ASN face compounded vulnerability due to the intersection of additional support needs with poverty and adversity (Daniels et al., 2003; King, 2026). Evidence suggests that children with ASN are more likely to experience socioeconomic disadvantage and poorer health and social outcomes, intensifying educational risk (Azpitarte & Holt, 2024; Daniel, 2025; Saxton et al., 2025). Day, (2025) extends this analysis by demonstrating that neurodivergent children are significantly overrepresented in exclusion and youth justice populations, particularly where unmet needs coexist with socioeconomic stress. Supporting this structural framing, Valdebenito et al., (2025), synthesising 67 evaluations across more than 394,000 pupils, find that isolated school-based interventions do not eliminate socio-economic disparities, suggesting that broader structural inequality continues to shape exclusion risk even within preventative systems.

Daniel's (2025) national attainment analysis further illustrates how structural vulnerability is reproduced within educational systems. Structural inequality is not static and pupils with ASN experience widening academic attainment gaps across schooling phases (i.e., primary and secondary). As academic marginalisation intensifies, disengagement risk increases, which in turn heightens vulnerability to exclusion (Christle et al., 2005).

Although, structural disadvantage alone does not automatically result in exclusion. McCluskey et al. (2019) note that Scotland's comparatively low rates of permanent exclusion (relative to England), suggest that national policy frameworks and preventative ethos mediate how disadvantage translates into disciplinary outcomes. This indicates that the policy and practice responses may play a crucial moderating role. Sanders et al. (2020) provide further nuance suggesting that structural adversity does not directly predict justice system involvement but instead school exclusion operates as an institutional mediator. The research found that, structural disadvantage increased baseline risk, but exclusion amplified that risk, highlighting the role of school level factors in shaping outcomes. Furthermore, schools serving high poverty communities varied significantly in exclusion rates depending on leadership, relationships, academic support structures and clarity of expectations and boundaries Christle et al. (2005). Similarly, evidence indicates that contextual factors influence intervention effectiveness. Schools with a strong and consistent ethos, relational practice and



structured supports were more effective at mitigating risk even within disadvantaged contexts (Valdebenito et al., 2025).

Qualitative evidence further demonstrates how structural inequality interacts with institutional interpretation. Pupils from lower Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) areas are more likely to experience deficit-based labelling and lowered expectations in relation to both behaviour and academic attainment (Hilton, 2006; Munn & Lloyd, 2005). Such interpretations can shape teacher-pupil relationships, contributing to social marginalisation within school and increasing the likelihood that behavioural difficulties are viewed through a disciplinary rather than supportive lens.

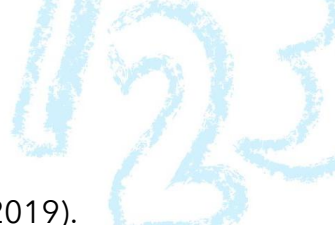
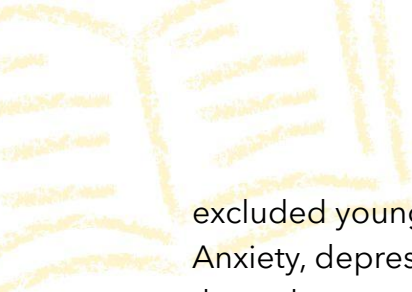
### **Additional Support Needs**

Scottish policy guidance asserts that '*all behaviour is a form of communication*' (page 20, Scottish Government, 2017a). However, the literature consistently identifies a policy-practice gap. While trauma-informed and inclusive frameworks are endorsed, inconsistent implementation means pupils with ASN continue to experience exclusionary discipline. Where support is reactive, accessed only after crisis, exclusion may already have already occurred (Day, 2025; McCluskey et al., 2019).

In 2003 research found that over 40% of permanently excluded pupils had identified ASN (Daniels et al., 2003). More recent analyses suggest this overrepresentation has persisted, reinforcing the structural nature of the issue, with McCluskey et al., (2019). describing this as the layering of disadvantage, whereby ASN intersects with forms of adversity (e.g. poverty, trauma, displacement), compounding exclusion risk across multiple domains.

Research by Alloway et al. (2013) challenges the deficit-based assumptions about ASN finding that adolescents engaging in ASB displayed working memory standards, largely within the average range of the classroom. Instead attesting that behavioural dysregulation appears to emerge through interaction between individual differences and institutional, expectations and norms toward behaviour. This is demonstrated by the gap in identification of need, as adolescents' self-reported behavioural difficulties were more predictive of exclusion than teachers ratings (Alloway et al., 2013). Furthermore, students with ASN frequently experience breakdowns in mainstream teacher-pupil relationships prior to exclusion, with attachment insecurity, emotional dysregulation and mistrust of authority often intensified by traditional behaviour disciplinary responses (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021).

Mental health vulnerability further compounds risk. Research consistently indicates a high prevalence of undiagnosed or untreated mental health needs among



excluded young people (Cole, 2015; Cole et al., 2019; McCluskey et al., 2019). Anxiety, depression, trauma exposure and attachment disruption may manifest through aggression, withdrawal or oppositional behaviour. Without intervention, behavioural expressions of distress intensify, increasing the likelihood of engagement in ASB and subsequent exclusion (Tobias, 2019). Reid, (2010) positions literacy and numeracy difficulties (common among ASN pupils) as contributing to PSNA.


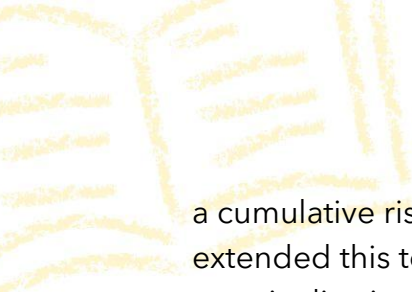
Evidence suggests that ASN does not inherently predict exclusion, instead suggesting that institutional response either mediates or amplifies risk factors. Oxley, (2023) highlights how punitive behaviour management systems may disproportionately affect pupils who lack emotional regulation skills or adaptive coping strategies, conversely, restorative and collaborative approaches demonstrate reductions in exclusion and improvements in school environments. Day (2025) provides evidence that trauma-informed, whole-family interventions reduced exclusion and PSNA from 55% at intake to 12% eight months post-intervention, demonstrating that when needs are recognised and addressed relationally and systemically, education outcomes are altered.

## **Relationships**

Breakdowns in supportive school relationships consistently precede exclusion with excluded pupils frequently describing deteriorating teacher relationships, characterising them by conflict, mistrust and escalating disciplinary exchanges (Daniels et al., 2003). Munn and Lloyd (2005) found that excluded pupils emphasised feeling misunderstood, unfairly treated or given up on, suggesting that relational breakdown forms part of the exclusion pathway rather than being incidental to it. Positive relationships are central to Scotland's preventative approach to exclusion and reductions in permanent exclusions are attributed partly to sustained investment in relational practice and whole school responses (McCluskey et al., 2019; Scottish Government, 2013, 2017a, 2024a).

Where supportive school relationships are absent, pupils are at increased risk of exclusion, with repeated disciplinary encounters being interpreted as evidence of rejection and injustice (Hilton, 2006). Over time, this reduced school attachment and increased confrontational behaviours. Behaviour framed as defiance was frequently described by pupils as a response to perceived unfairness or exclusionary processes and contributed to identity formation as well as behavioural escalation (Hilton, 2006).

Research shows strong attachment to school functions as a protective factor against offending behaviours and incarceration, while detachment exacerbates risk (McAra & McVie, 2010). Although Arnez and Condry (2021) caution against a simplistic school-to-prison pipeline, instead arguing that exclusion can function as



a cumulative risk marker within broader processes of marginalisation. Research has extended this to include peer dynamics, outlining that exclusion increases marginalisation from prosocial peers, unsupervised time and exposure to antisocial peer networks, disrupting the protective factors of supervision and structured routine within school (Alloway et al., 2013).



Schools function as protective environments not only because of adult relationships but because they structure peer interaction within prosocial norms. Structured extracurricular provision, mentoring schemes and supervised activities all strengthen prosocial affiliation and reduce engagement in antisocial networks (Alloway et al., 2013; Reid, 2010). Peers can mediate relational risk with positive peer transitions reducing ASB, while poor school transitions break those bonds and increase the likelihood of lower levels of school attachment (West et al., 2010). Strong relationships operate as a crucial protective factor, with research repeatedly exhibiting that the presence of at least one trusted adult within school significantly mitigates behavioural escalation (Daniels et al., 2003; Fitzsimmons et al., 2021) and promotes feelings of feeling value, participation, attachment and belonging (Cockerill, 2019; McCluskey et al., 2019). Excluded pupils frequently identify the absence of such relationships as central to disengagement from school (Cockerill, 2019; McCluskey et al., 2019).

Such a protective attachment does is not merely interpersonal, operating at micro level (teacher-pupil), it is also systemic operating at the macro (institutional/school) level. McCluskey et al. (2019) put forward that Scotland's reduced permanent exclusion rates cannot be explained solely by individual teacher warmth. Rather, they reflect a whole school ethos and approach, restorative frameworks and shared expectations regarding inclusion. Relational consistency across staff appears more protective than isolated positive relationships (McAra & McVie, 2010).

When children or young people experience humiliation or stigma at a macro level this influences identity development. Where pupils internalise deficit narratives, being "bad," "disruptive," or "a problem" oppositional identities may appear or solidify (Hilton, 2006). Protective practice therefore includes identity affirming interactions, strength-based approaches and the avoidance of stigmatising language. This is particularly significant for marginalised groups who may already experience stigma beyond school contexts (Munn & Lloyd, 2005).

### **Institutional and Policy Context**


Policy frameworks themselves function as either risk or protective factors within exclusion outcomes. In Scotland, *Included, Engaged and Involved* (Scottish Government, 2017a, 2019) positions exclusion as a failure of prevention rather than an inevitable disciplinary response. The guidance emphasises staged





intervention, restorative practice and multi-agency collaboration. McCluskey et al., (2019) describe this as a strong national ethos of prevention, underpinned by GIRFEC and the SHANARRI wellbeing indicators, which embed child wellbeing within educational settings. The staged intervention model promotes graduated support, moving from universal provision to targeted and specialist input, before exclusion is considered. Local authority oversight, data monitoring systems and collaborative one service or, otherwise, single point of provision approaches are shown to be protective mechanisms contributing to Scotland's comparatively (to other parts of the UK) low permanent exclusion rates (McCluskey et al., 2019).

However, policy aspiration does not guarantee consistent practice, with ongoing informal exclusion practices and tensions between inclusion and classroom safety (McCluskey et al., 2019). Hilton, (2006) raises concerns that inclusion rhetoric may coexist with punitive approaches or structural, resource or academic pressures within schools. In this context, structural strain and accountability systems prioritising attainment outcomes over relational inclusion, may narrow schools' operational flexibility, with implications for how behavioural and exclusion thresholds are enacted in practice (Audit Scotland, 2025; Oxley, 2023).

A whole-school ethos of inclusion, reinforced by leadership, inspection frameworks and shared professional norms, is associated with lower exclusion rates (McCluskey et al., 2019; Scottish Government, 2017a). Co-ordinated multi-agency support across education, psychology, social work and third sector services has been shown to address underlying needs before behavioural challenges intensify (Day, 2025; Lloyd et al., 2003; Tobias, 2019). Early intervention which takes a trauma-informed family support models illustrate measurable reductions in exclusion, PSNA and support re-integration into school, when needs are addressed relationally and systemically (Day, 2025; Tobias, 2019). Where data monitoring systems and structured intervention frameworks recognise and prioritise early identification of attendance or behavioural concerns, they reduce the likelihood of pupils falling through the gaps (McCluskey et al., 2019). Viewing PSNA and/or behaviour concerns as an early warning signal, enables proactive responses that reduce the likelihood of formal exclusion and promote school attachment (Reid, 2010). However, structural and cultural barriers, such as, funding pressures, leadership risk aversion and entrenched punitive cultures may prevent the adoption of alternative, relational behaviour management approaches and sustain exclusionary systems (Oxley, 2023). Lloyd et al. (2003) extend this argument by suggesting that while a whole-school commitment to early intervention can reduce formal exclusion, it does not automatically guarantee meaningful inclusion. Where such commitment is inconsistent or insufficiently embedded, preventative strategies may instead result in forms of informal exclusion, whereby pupils remain physically present in school but are marginalised





from the mainstream curriculum, peer relationships, and full participation in school life.

### **Question 3: What are teachers' perspectives on school exclusion and ASB?**

#### **Structural Inequality & Deprivation**

Across all interviews, school exclusion was consistently associated with broader structural inequalities. Teachers described young people most at risk of exclusion as disproportionately from areas of socioeconomic deprivation.

*"You could guarantee almost every single time. It's socially deprived children at SIMD1, SIMD2... parents who have been involved with substance abuse issues most of the time." (P7)*

*"It's an anti-social behaviour because they (child) are actually just kicking out at life and society and it's just rubbish." (P2)*

However, teachers were careful to emphasise that deprivation alone does not determine outcomes, instead, it increases exposure to risk factors that may contribute to dysregulation, disengagement, or ASB. Care experience, trauma exposure, parental substance misuse, unstable caregiving roles, and emotional disengagement from education were also frequently referenced as contributing factors.

*"It's not necessarily where they're from, it's what they've experienced." (P4)*

*"A lot of the young people we're excluding have had significant trauma in their lives." (P6)*

A recurring and strongly emphasised factor was the impact of ongoing challenges in the family home. Teachers reported examples of children and young people living in environments that were unsafe or unsupportive due to, parental substance misuse, instability, inconsistent boundaries, poor parental mental health, or strained caregiver relationships. In some cases, parents were disengaged from their child's education due to their own negative educational experiences, while in others, families were overwhelmed by work or financial pressures, poverty or intergenerational trauma. Several teachers mentioned that some children and young people arrive at school dysregulated due to events at home. Where home environments lacked love, care and support, school was seen as the setting where behaviours that exhibit frustration, distress, or anger could arise.

*"Where the relationship with their parent has broken down, we find that there's more antisocial behaviour, there's more of a refusal to follow and conform to rules in school." (P2)*

*"You're often dealing with things that have absolutely nothing to do with the lesson." (P4)*

Suggesting that, exclusion, in this context, risks reinforcing disadvantage by removing young people from what teachers reported may be their most stable and protective environment.

*"For some of them, school is the only consistent place they have." (P1)*

Schools were described as safer than home for many pupils, and exclusion therefore presents a tension between disciplinary response and safeguarding responsibility to all children and young people in school.

### **Implementing Inclusion Policy Without Resource**

A major theme was the widening gap between inclusion policy aspirations and available resources. Teachers acknowledged a strong policy emphasis on 'the presumption of mainstream' education and reducing exclusion figures. However, teachers repeatedly described this inclusion being pursued in a context where systems were increasingly constrained. Teachers reported managing large classes with high levels of additional support needs, often without sufficient learning assistants or specialist input, coupled with limited capacity within social work, CAMHS, and external services, meaning that early intervention thresholds in schools have risen significantly.

*"We're expected to include everyone, but we don't always have the tools to do that properly." (P5)*

*"Thresholds have definitely gone up – what would've had support five years ago doesn't now." (P6)*



As a result, schools are required to manage complex behavioural and emotional needs internally, without training or wider community support, potentially resulting in increased internal exclusion.

*"You're trying to meet such a wide range of needs in one room." (P3)*

*"You're spinning too many plates." (P7)*

Internal bases, specific programmes, nurture rooms, and bespoke timetables were often developed as creative workarounds, but their sustainability depends heavily on staffing levels and funding.

*"The policy is great on paper, but no great in practice unless it's resourced." (P7)*



There was a tension between policy and individual need, evidenced by the need to treat each child as an individual, which contrasted with policy frameworks that may be procedural, not fully integrated or understood, standardised, or outcome driven.

*"It's finding what works for which child... it's not one thing fits everybody." (P4)*

Teachers consistently emphasised that no two young people at risk of exclusion present in the same way. While patterns such as deprivation, dysregulation, trauma or neurodiversity were evident, staff repeatedly described the importance of understanding the "why" behind behaviour for the individual. Behaviour was framed as communication, and effective intervention depended on nuanced knowledge of the young person's context, relationships and emotional world.

*"It's rarely just about what's happened that day, there's usually a whole story behind it." (P6)*

However, participants distinguished between the principles set out in national policy and the operational realities of school-level policy frameworks. While national guidance promotes inclusion and relational practice, school policies governing exclusion thresholds, attendance targets and performance metrics were described as functioning primarily as accountability tools. Teachers suggested that these mechanisms operate at a systems-management level, often prioritising consistency and measurable outcomes over responsiveness to individual circumstance.

*"There's a big focus on the numbers." (P5)*


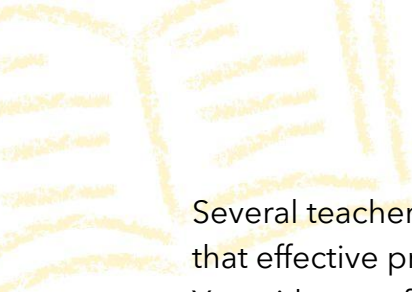
Staff spoke about policies that prioritise statistics, or procedural compliance, sometimes at the expense of flexibility or understanding that the curriculum itself may reinforce existing inequalities (due to limited resource).

*"We're told to reduce exclusions, but the complexity in schools hasn't reduced." (P6)*

*"Sometimes it feels like you're following procedure rather than doing what that child actually needs." (P3)*

Teachers described a tension between the aspirations of restorative and inclusive policy and the practical realities of implementation. While national guidance promotes relationship-based, flexible approaches and reduced reliance on exclusion, participants reported that limited time, staffing and access to specialist expertise often constrain their ability to deliver genuinely tailored support.

*"There's only so much you can do within the time you've got." (P1)*



Several teachers noted that what works for one child will not work for another, and that effective practice relies heavily on professional judgement and relationships. Yet, without sufficient resource and autonomy, the ability to individualise responses is constrained.

Policy was not described as inherently flawed, but as insufficiently resourced to allow schools to consistently respond to children as individuals rather than as cases within a system.

### **Understanding of Exclusion**

For some teachers, exclusion felt a necessary response to serious safety concerns particularly violence or refusal to follow essential instructions. However, was described as complex and sometimes contradictory terms.

*"It's not something anyone wants to do, but occasionally it feels unavoidable." (P6)*

*"If somebody's being assaulted in a school, we have to take a stand to prevent that."  
(P6)*

It was also viewed as a way of setting clear boundaries and reinforcing expectations, ensuring the majority had a positive learning experience, but only when embedded within restorative processes.

*"Sometimes it's about protecting the learning of the other 29." (P3)*

*"If it's used without the follow-up, it doesn't change anything." (P1)*

However, exclusion was also described as ineffective or with limited behavioural impact.

*"It doesn't bother them at all... it's like a weekend." (P7)*

*"Exclusion could also be a bit of a badge of honour for them." (P3)*

Teachers acknowledged that exclusion statistics carry reputational weight, with formal exclusions scrutinised by local authorities and reflected in public data. At the same time, some participants described exclusion as one of the few mechanisms capable of triggering additional attention or support from external services. This reflects a tension within the system: exclusion represents both a reputational risk for schools and, a means of signalling the seriousness of unmet need. In this way, exclusion operates not solely as a disciplinary measure, but also as a mechanism for navigating a resource-constrained landscape in which thresholds for intervention may otherwise remain unmet.

*"Sometimes the only way we can get the supports is by enacting an exclusion." (P2)*

## ASB as Communication

Teachers largely rejected the idea that exclusion directly causes ASB. Instead, they described both school-based disruption and community-based ASB as commonly emerging from underlying factors such as trauma, deprivation, unmet additional needs, and/or 'anti-authority' attitudes (often passed down from parents).

*"Behaviour is communication." (P4)*

*"You have to ask yourself what's sitting underneath that behaviour." (P1)*

*"It's usually a build-up, it's rarely just one incident." (P6)*

*"Anti-authority 100%... they just hate the thought of someone being [in charge]."  
(P7)*

In schools, ASB presented as fighting, verbal aggression, refusal to follow instructions, vandalism, or group-based disruption. In community settings, behaviours were commonly described as more extreme, including property damage, substance misuse and gang activity, this was often put down to 'more freedom' or 'less structure' in a community setting.

*"When they're out and about, they feel like they're untouchable." (P7)*

Schools were seen as relatively regulated environments with immediate consequences. When excluded, young people may experience increased unsupervised time, which can heighten risk of community-based ASB. However, teachers emphasised that exclusion typically, but not always, follows existing patterns of behaviour rather than creating them.

*"It can escalate quickly when there's no early support." (P3)*

Teachers felt that exclusion often reflected systemic and social pressures rather than acting as a primary driver of offending behaviour but did acknowledge that removing school structure could exacerbate ASB.

Importantly, many teachers described the emergence of ASB as a point of potential meaningful intervention. However, this was often described as being constrained by, limited staffing capacity, large classroom sizes, highly diverse and complex needs within a single classroom and reduction funding for in-and-out of school support.

*"By the time it gets to exclusion, you're often firefighting." (P5)*

*"Everything is stressed... with early intervention... but reality isn't like that." (P6)*

*"If you've got 33 in the class, you can only spend so much time with each of them."  
(P7)*

## Relationships, Regulation & Belonging

The most consistent protective factor identified across all interviews was the strength of relationships within school.

*"When they trust you, you see a completely different child." (P1)*

*"It's the relationship that makes the difference, not the sanction." (P4)*

Teachers repeatedly highlighted the importance of trusted adults, safe spaces, nurture bases, and structured extracurricular activities, that are truly young person-centred.

*"They like to know where they stand." (P1)*

*"Consistency from adults is what they respond to." (P6)*

Restorative conversations were viewed positively when implemented with care, depth and consistency, particularly where they promoted accountability and relationship repair rather than serving as a purely punitive measure.

*"If they feel someone's on their side, they're more likely to engage." (P3)*

Emotional regulation strategies, mentoring programmes, breakfast clubs, sports partnerships, and therapeutic interventions were all described as effective. However, most teachers acknowledged that, due to the lack of resource, internal/informal exclusion may happen as they cannot give the child the time.

*"Smaller groups make a massive difference for some of them." (P5)*



*"You're just ran ragged all the time." (P5)*

There was broad agreement that behaviour improves when young people feel seen, valued, and understood and this often arises in smaller class settings (nurture bases, one-to-one work time with a teacher etc). Although, exclusion without relational repair risks reinforcing negative self-perceptions, stigma and disengagement.

*"We're just reaffirming what they believe about themselves." (P1)*

Teachers emphasised that staffing capacity, training in trauma-informed approaches, and early intervention are essential to preventing exclusion and mitigating its link to ASB.

Alongside school-based relationships, participants also highlighted the critical role of supportive home environments. Where young people experienced consistent care, clear boundaries, emotional support and parental engagement with school, exclusion was less likely to occur and any existing ASB more likely to reduce. Alternatively, where home environments were unstable, inconsistent, or lacking in



care, school-based interventions were described as harder to sustain and ASB often intensified. Teachers noted that even strong relationships within school cannot fully compensate for the absence of stability or nurture at home.


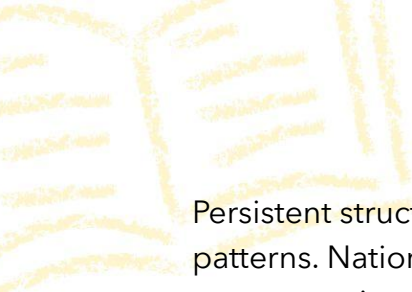
*“If there’s no boundaries at home, it’s very hard for us to suddenly be the ones putting them in place.” (P2)*

## Discussion

This report explored how existing research conceptualises the relationship between school exclusion and ASB, examined the risk and protective factors associated with exclusion, and explored teachers’ perspectives within Scotland’s evolving policy landscape. Taken together, the findings indicate that exclusion cannot be understood as a simple behavioural response nor as an inevitable pathway to antisocial or offending behaviours. Rather, exclusion operates within a complex ecological system shaped by developmental timing, unmet need, relational processes, institutional culture and structural inequality.

Across the literature and teachers’ accounts, exclusion emerged less as a direct cause of ASB and more as something which may exacerbate existing vulnerability. Longitudinal evidence demonstrates that early behavioural difficulties do not necessarily predict future serious offending (McAra & McVie, 2010). Instead, outcomes often diverge following formal system contact, including school exclusion. Teachers’ narratives strongly align with this interpretation. Behaviour was rarely described as sudden or isolated, instead, it reflected accumulated adversity, relational strain and/or unmet needs. The response to ASB, in this sense, appears to operate as a significant moment that can either intensify marginalisation or prompt meaningful intervention, depending on the context in which it occurs (Hirschfield, 2008; McAra & McVie, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014).



The findings indicate that the relationship between exclusion and ASB appears particularly detrimental when it occurs during developmentally sensitive periods, follows cumulative disciplinary experiences, or coincides with weakened school attachment and limited relational support (Hirschfield, 2008; McAra & McVie, 2010; McCluskey et al., 2019). In these circumstances, exclusion may disrupt protective bonds, increase unsupervised time, and consolidate negative self-identities (Hirschfield, 2008). Alternatively, where strong relationships, early identification of ASN, and coordinated multi-agency responses are present, outcomes are improved (McCluskey et al., 2019; Troncoso et al., 2024). Exclusion policy therefore cannot be evaluated solely through headline statistics. The timing, relational context and institutional response surrounding exclusion are central to current and future outcomes.



Persistent structural inequalities remain central to understanding exclusion patterns. National data consistently demonstrate the disproportionate representation of pupils from low SIMD areas, those with ASN, care-experienced young people and other marginalised groups within exclusion statistics (Scottish Government, 2025a). Teachers resisted deficit-based explanations, instead suggesting that deprivation alone does not determine outcomes but increases exposure to risk factors that may contribute to dysregulation, frustration and disengagement. Literature on cumulative and “*deep exclusion*” (Levitas et al., 2007: 9) similarly suggests that institutions can either buffer or intensify structural marginalisation (Christle et al., 2005; Levitas et al., 2007; McAra & McVie, 2010; Sanders et al., 2020). Furthermore, teachers indicated that where inclusion policy is insufficiently resourced, approaches risk becoming stretched, unrealistic or tokenistic, and exclusion may inadvertently reinforce inequalities rather than mitigate them. At the same time, Scotland’s comparatively low permanent exclusion rates demonstrate that policy ethos and governance frameworks can mediate certain structural risks, suggesting that strong opportunities for further progress exists.

Unmet ASN emerged as a critical mechanism linking exclusion and ASB. Behaviour was frequently framed as communication of distress, trauma, anxiety or neurodivergent need (Day, 2025; Saxton et al., 2025). Teachers reported that resource constraints and huge diversity of need within the classroom can lead to delays in identification and appropriate support, something which research suggests increases the likelihood of cycles of punitive sanctions and behavioural escalation. However, both teachers and the literature recognises that institutional and relational responses to ASN mediated risk of exclusion, enhanced school attachment and positive coping strategies (Alloway et al., 2013; Day, 2025; McCluskey et al., 2019). Where disciplinary systems were rigid or punitive, exclusion risk intensified, where relational and restorative approaches were embedded, behavioural outcomes improved (Alloway et al., 2013; Day, 2025; McCluskey et al., 2019). Prevention therefore requires structural flexibility, relational capacity and early intervention.

Relationships were consistently identified as the most significant protective factor against ASB and exclusion. Attachment to at least one trusted adult within school mitigated behavioural escalation and strengthened engagement (Daniels et al., 2003; Fitzsimmons et al., 2021; McCluskey et al., 2019). School relationships provide emotional safety, support identity development and regulate peer affiliation within pro-social norms (McAra & McVie, 2010). Teachers recounted challenge where pupils have limited support networks outwith the school environment, reflecting that when supportive relationships don’t exist ASB can intensify, leading to an anti-social self-identity, which may then be brought and



reinforced within school. This is further compounded when pupils experience stigma, labelling or perceived injustice, which may consolidate oppositional identities (Hirschfield, 2008). Conversely, where pupils feel recognised, respected and fairly treated, school attachment strengthens and behavioural difficulties reduce (McCluskey et al., 2019).



Teachers repeatedly spoke of the importance of meaningful relationships to provide boundaries, support, safety and encouragement for all pupils, but particularly for those experiencing structural disadvantage and/or adversity (McAra & McVie, 2010). However, research suggests that a positive teacher-pupil attachment alone is insufficient to buffer against adversity (McAra & McVie, 2010; McCluskey et al., 2019). Protective attachment operates not only at the interpersonal level but as a feature of institutional culture. Relational consistency across staff and a coherent whole-school ethos appear more protective than isolated teacher efforts (McCluskey et al., 2019). Teachers extended this further, suggesting that preventing exclusion requires schools to operate within multi-agency frameworks that support pupils holistically both in, and beyond the school setting.

The inclusion of teachers' voices highlights the complexity of translating policy into practice. Teachers described exclusion as emotionally difficult and rarely desirable yet sometimes perceived as necessary to protect safety and learning. In certain circumstances, informal exclusion functioned pragmatically as a mechanism to navigate or access support within constrained systems. These accounts reflect wider evidence that policy is mediated through interpretation (Hilton, 2006; Munn & Lloyd, 2005). Teachers reported that, due to funding constraints and the presumption of mainstream education, they are increasingly expected to manage complex needs without adequate staffing, specialist services or multi-agency collaboration. Such pressures complicate the realisation of inclusive aspirations (McCluskey et al., 2019; Oxley, 2023).

## **Future Direction**

Several significant gaps remain in the evidence base on school exclusion and ASB. Much of the research examining exclusion and justice outcomes predates recent Scottish policy developments (Scottish Government, 2017a, 2024b, 2024a). Contemporary longitudinal research is therefore required to evaluate whether institutional effects identified in earlier cohorts persist within current rights-based frameworks.

There is also a need for more comprehensive national data on informal and internal exclusion practices. Although permanent exclusions have declined in Scotland more evidence is required to understand the impact of reduced



timetables, part-time attendance and removal from class. The absence of consistent recording limits transparency and constrains policy evaluation.



Intersectional analysis remains sparse despite patterns of inequality being well documented. Further research is needed to examine how individual characteristics and experiences intersect and interact within exclusion pathways. An intersectional approach would move beyond single-factor explanations and better reflect the layered realities experienced by pupils and support the development of evidenced-based intervention.

Greater attention should also be paid to teacher wellbeing and workforce support within exclusion research. While substantial evidence focuses on pupil risk and vulnerability, comparatively less attention has been given to how sustained exposure to complex behavioural needs, accountability pressures and resource constraints impact teacher capacity. Understanding how stress, burnout, professional confidence and access to specialist support shape decision-making may offer important insight into exclusion pathways. Research that foregrounds workforce wellbeing alongside pupil outcomes would better reflect the relational nature of inclusive practice and strengthen efforts toward sustainable prevention.

Scotland's policy landscape is widely recognised for its emphasis on prevention and relational practice; however, teacher testimony highlights variability in implementation across local authorities and schools. Implementation research capturing the views of teachers, pupils and families is therefore essential. Participatory and co-produced methodologies would strengthen understanding of how exclusion is experienced, how decisions are perceived and what forms of support are meaningful and impactful.


It is of critical importance that children and young people participate within the research process. Although this study synthesises literature that includes young people's experiences, direct participatory research within contemporary Scottish contexts is lacking. The incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots law reinforces the legal and ethical imperative to centre children's voices in decisions affecting them. Participation is not only a rights-based obligation but also an evidence-informed strategy, when young people experience meaningful involvement in decision-making, engagement and trust improve. In this context, participation may therefore function as a protective factor in its own right.

Finally, greater attention should be paid to protective factors. While risk factors are extensively documented, less is known about how schools successfully buffer structural disadvantage. Whilst teachers described innovative and inclusive practices (e.g. nurture bases, 121 interventions), specific to the context they practice, focusing on relational capacity, extracurricular activities, mentoring support and family and school partnerships, these are not well resourced or fully



incorporated through practice. Research examining existing approaches could deepen understanding of how resilience, inclusion and prevention are cultivated within real-life contexts.

Taken together, future research must move beyond establishing associations between ASB and exclusion toward understanding systems, mediation and implementation. A more comprehensive, participatory and longitudinal evidence base is necessary to ensure that exclusion policy evolves in ways that promote positive behaviour by, upholding children's rights, reducing inequality, promoting belonging and supporting positive outcomes.



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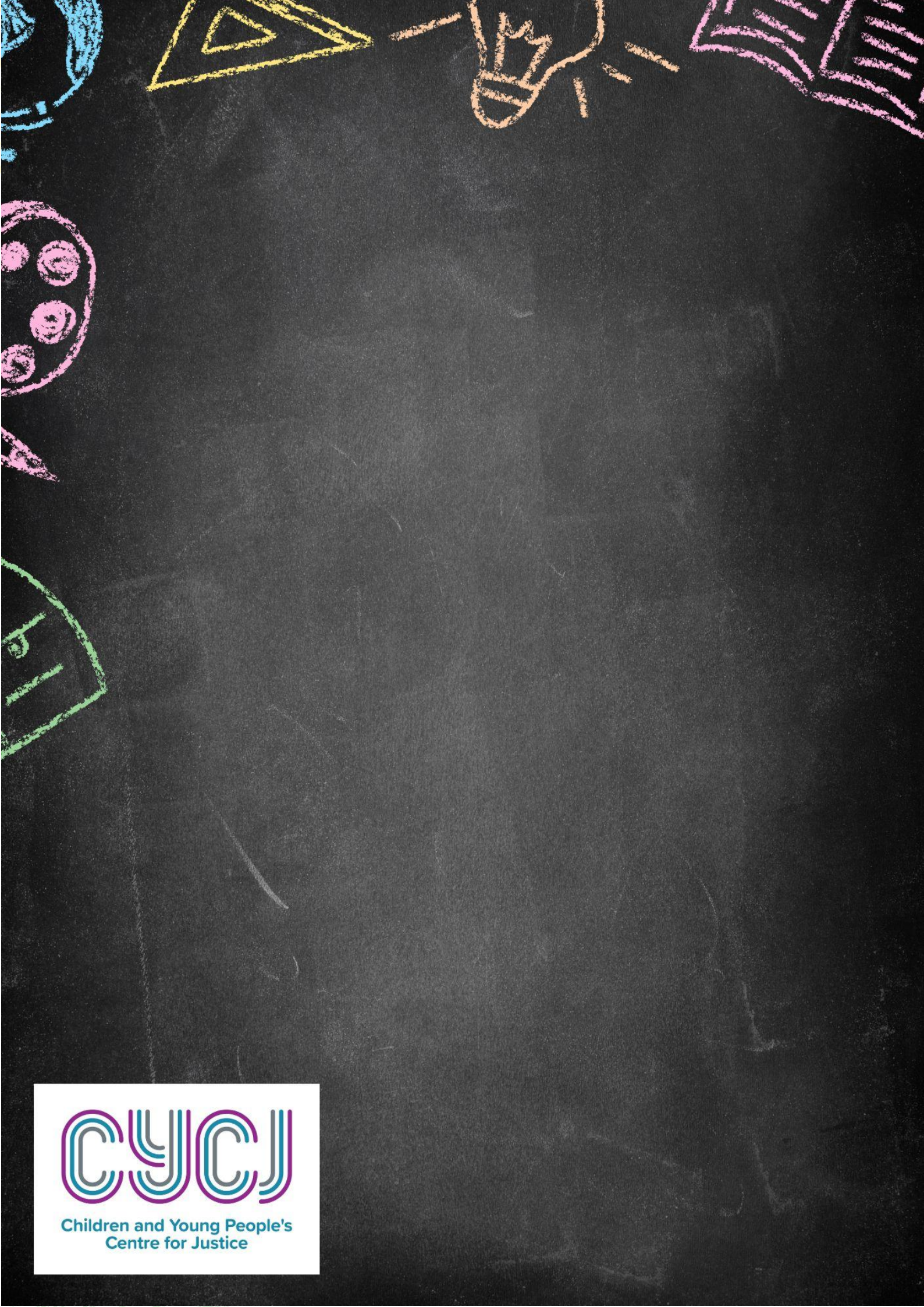
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