

# Approaches to recording and monitoring incidents of bullying in schools

National thematic review

February 2023



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## Foreword

This report examines how schools are recording, monitoring and responding to incidents of bullying. It recognises the caring and inclusive approaches used by staff to prevent and respond to bullying and support our children and young people to develop and sustain positive relationships with their peers and with adults.

We all recognise the impact that bullying behaviour has on the wellbeing of children and young people, and how it can affect their participation, attainment and inclusion. Being bullied is traumatic, as well as impacting on learning, bullying also affects families and relationships. It is important that we work collectively to make a positive impact on the wellbeing of children and young people through effective anti-bullying approaches. This includes the importance of monitoring and dealing with incidents of bullying and doing everything we can to address the underlying reasons for the bullying behaviour.



**Gayle Gorman**  
Chief Inspector of Education

I am encouraged that HM Inspectors have identified key strengths in how schools are dealing with bullying. However, the report also identifies important aspects for improvement in relation to recording and monitoring of bullying incidents. It highlights that the technical aspects of the recording of bullying can be challenging to use and there remains more to be done to achieve consistency. The experience of learners and parents whose views were sought as part of this thematic review varies.

I know that Scotland's schools, their learners and communities will benefit from the findings of this thematic review and use these findings as they take forward their work in continuing to tackle bullying in all its forms and wherever it occurs.

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## Background

Following the publication of Scotland's national guidance on anti-bullying (Respect for All) in November 2017, Scottish Ministers tasked a short life working group<sup>1</sup> to develop a more consistent national approach to recording and monitoring incidents of bullying in schools. The group identified the Bullying and Equalities Module (BEM) within the SEEMiS system<sup>2</sup> as the most appropriate tool for schools and local authorities to use to record and support them to monitor bullying incidents.

Since August 2019, all schools and local authorities have been expected to use the BEM within the SEEMiS system to record and monitor bullying incidents.

In 2020, the short life working group requested that an evaluation be undertaken to ensure that the new arrangements promote a consistent national approach to the recording and monitoring of incidents of bullying. This report provides an evaluation of how the new arrangements have been implemented across primary, secondary and special schools and comments on how well these are supporting children and young people.

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1. Scottish Advisory Group on Relationships and Behaviour in Schools (SAGRABIS) is a group of representatives from key education stakeholders (teaching unions, professional organisations, stakeholder organisations, COSLA, Education Scotland and Scottish Government) that gives advice to national and local government about behaviour and relationships in Scotland's schools.

2. SEEMiS is the Scottish local government's Education Management Information System (MIS) provider. As the standard MIS within Scottish Education, all local student data is processed and managed by SEEMiS software.

## Introduction

During September and October 2022, HM Inspectors visited 35 schools (19 primary schools; 11 secondary schools; three special schools; and two all-through schools) across all 32 local authorities (see appendix 2 for details). Three of the schools visited also provide Gaelic Medium Education.

During each school visit, HM Inspectors spoke with a range of key stakeholders including headteachers, other senior leaders, teachers and support staff. They also spoke to children and young people as part of focus groups.

HM Inspectors reviewed relevant policies and documentation. They explored whether policies reflected clearly the appropriate national guidance and outlined the school's approach to reporting, recording, monitoring and addressing incidents of bullying.

HM Inspectors invited learners, parents and carers to provide their views on their own school's approaches to anti-bullying using an online questionnaire. HM Inspectors received 8,233 responses from learners (see appendix 2) and 1,663 responses from parents and carers (see appendix 3)<sup>3</sup>.

HM Inspectors' findings are summarised in the remainder of this report under the headings below:

- **Recording incidents of bullying;**
- **Monitoring incidents of bullying; and**
- **Responding to incidents of bullying**

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3. The responses to online questionnaires were completed by a selection of learners and parents and are therefore not representative of the views all parents or learners across Scotland.

# Key findings

## 1. Recording incidents of bullying

All school leaders recognise the value of recording incidents of bullying. Around two-thirds of schools are fully implementing national guidance by recording incidents of bullying on BEM. However senior leaders and school staff find BEM challenging to use. Schools also have difficulty in agreeing with their stakeholders a shared definition of bullying. In addition, senior leaders are concerned about the potential negative impact on individual children and young people of recording incidents of bullying that can identify them on BEM. In addition, only 43% of children and young people and 30% of parents are aware of how incidents of bullying are recorded. Senior leaders should improve their communication with learners and parents so that they are informed of the arrangements for recording incidents of bullying.

Senior leaders and staff record important information on BEM and pastoral notes about those involved in bullying incidents, including learners and staff, and where and when the incident took place. Most senior leaders also record the particular type of bullying experienced, including any underlying prejudice, such as racist or homophobic incidents. A few schools are also using the pastoral notes function within the SEEMiS system to record incidents of bullying. Therefore, there is potential for duplication as information may be stored in more than one place for the same incident. Of those schools using only BEM to record incidents of bullying, only a minority record the outcome once the investigation has been concluded.

Most senior leaders do not consider BEM to be the most effective recording system for incidents of bullying. They identify challenges when using BEM to record incidents of bullying. These challenges include difficulties in navigating the system and the length time required to complete the recording and updating

### Respect for All:

Supplementary Guidance on Recording and Monitoring of Bullying Incidents in Schools



**Respect for All: Supplementary Guidance on Recording and Monitoring of Bullying Incidents in School, 2018**

‘The Bullying and Equalities Module within the SEEMiS system has been identified as the most appropriate tool for schools and local authorities to record and monitor bullying incidents.’



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of incidents. Senior leaders have found that BEM is not flexible enough to detail fully each incident and the actions taken to support the children and young people involved.

Nearly half of schools have created their own parallel system, in addition to using BEM to record incidents of bullying. These systems include commercial software packages, local authority monitoring and tracking systems and in-house tools such as spreadsheets. By using their own systems alongside BEM, schools can record important details about the impact of bullying incidents on children and young people and what actions staff take to support them. For those schools not using BEM to record incidents of bullying, almost all are using their own preferred systems.

Almost all schools include a definition of bullying within their anti-bullying policy. This is informed by national guidance. However, this is not always well understood by stakeholders such as staff, parents and learners or reflected in practice when recording and responding to incidents of bullying. In response to questionnaires, 40% of children and young people report they have experienced bullying in school at some point. Senior leaders find that the definition of bullying in the national guidance is open to interpretation. They believe that the definition of bullying does not support them in identifying which behaviours are of a bullying nature. Behaviours such as fall outs and disagreements between peers are a normal part of growing up, where children and young

people form and build relationships. Staff, parents and learners find it challenging to agree which behaviours should be considered as bullying. In a few schools, senior leaders record incidents of bullying after it has been confirmed that bullying has taken place. Therefore, incidents not deemed to be bullying are not recorded on BEM. As a result, there is a risk that bullying is under-reported, making it difficult for reliable patterns and trends to be identified.

Almost all headteachers are concerned about the impact of recording incidents of bullying on a child or young person's individual record. They feel that the recording of incidents of bullying on BEM may result in children and young people being seen as 'victims' or 'bullies'. A few headteachers welcome the generic and inclusive language used on BEM that avoids labels such as 'victims', 'perpetrators' or 'bullies'.

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## 2. Monitoring incidents of bullying

The use of BEM to monitor incidents of bullying is not yet consistent across schools. Overall, senior leaders do not consider BEM to be the most effective tool to support them to monitor incidents of bullying and as a result, they often develop alternative systems. This allows them to identify more readily the scope and scale of bullying issues in their schools. They use their analysis of data on bullying to support improvements in school policy and practice.

Although around two-third of schools use BEM to record incidents of bullying, only half of those schools use BEM to identify specific issues, trends and other relevant patterns. About a quarter of schools have developed their own parallel systems to identify patterns and trends of incidents of bullying. In about a third of schools, senior leaders do not currently have a whole school process in place for monitoring incidents of bullying. This means that staff are not aware of patterns and trends as they arise and therefore limits the capacity of staff to be proactive.

Senior leaders express disappointment regarding the limitations of BEM to assist them in monitoring incidents of bullying. They find the system time-consuming and report it does not allow them to extract information in a format that is helpful to them when identifying patterns and trends. When using BEM to draw conclusions on patterns or trends of bullying behaviour, senior leaders need to carry out intensive manual processing of the data. This includes identifying any protected characteristic that may feature in each recorded incident of bullying. A single incident of bullying involving a group of learners or an incident involving more than one protected characteristic leads to multiple entries on BEM. As a result, staff attempting to identify patterns or trends of prejudice-based bullying need to manually filter and analyse each individual incident. To address these challenges, around a quarter of schools have developed their own systems to help identify patterns and trends.

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‘Recording and monitoring of bullying incidents is essential and can provide valuable information on the scope and scale of the issue in order to guide improvements in policy and practice and inform anti-bullying interventions.’

**Respect for All: Supplementary Guidance on Recording and Monitoring of Bullying Incidents in School, 2018**

Schools which have systematic approaches to monitoring report a reduction in incidents of bullying. Around two-thirds of these schools analyse data, including about protected characteristics and prejudiced-based bullying, to identify the scope and scale of bullying in their school and to drive improvement. Examples of improved policy and practice as a result of effective data analysis include adaptations to the school environment, amendments to the health and wellbeing curriculum, targeted support for individuals and professional learning for staff. There is significant scope for schools to strengthen their arrangements for using data to identify patterns and trends of incidents of bullying to help guide improvements in practice.

The frequency of monitoring of bullying incidents varies significantly across schools, ranging from daily to termly depending on the school’s preferred approach and the number of incidents recorded. A few senior leaders shared that their local authority, as part of its approaches to quality assurance, includes discussion of incidents of bullying including patterns or trends. Senior leaders value these discussions.

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### **3. Responding to incidents of bullying**

Staff across schools are committed to creating a safe and secure environment where bullying is openly acknowledged, discussed and challenged as

unacceptable behaviour. Most learners think that their school does not accept bullying. Schools adopt a wide range of strategies to prevent and respond to incidents of bullying, placing a high degree of importance on developing positive relationships. That being said, a few children and young people believe that their school does not deal effectively with bullying. They highlight concerns about confidentiality and the actions their schools may take to follow up incidents of alleged bullying.

Senior leaders recognise that creating an inclusive ethos and culture is the most effective way of reducing and responding to incidents of bullying. In most schools, the anti-bullying policy and day-to-day practice reflect an ambition to ensure a strong ethos of fairness, equality and respect. Most parents agree that their child’s school promotes respect and positive relationships and that their child is treated fairly and with respect. In most schools, the anti-bullying policy is complemented by other important documents such as positive relationships and behaviour policies. This guidance is supporting staff and learners to consider bullying as part of a continuum of behaviours.

Most children and young people know who to speak to if they, or someone they know, are being bullied. However, senior leaders recognise that not all children and young people are confident in reporting incidents of bullying. Most schools are supporting children and young people to develop valuable skills in repairing friendships and resolving relationship

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issues. In most schools, staff teach children and young people how to recognise their own feelings and behaviours and manage their emotions. These approaches are helping children and young people to have the confidence and resilience to deal appropriately with conflict and develop strategies to help restore respectful relationships. Senior leaders recognise that a high-quality school climate and positive relationships support respectful interactions between learners and encourage learners to speak to adults about any concerns.

In almost all schools, staff provide appropriate support to children and young people who both display and experience bullying behaviours. Staff who deal directly with incidents of bullying use a range of approaches to support learners. This includes pastoral support, approaches to resolving conflict within relationships, and specialised peer mentoring programmes. In almost all schools, staff take part in a range of professional learning opportunities that support them to improve their approaches in responding to incidents of bullying. A majority of schools are also developing the role of children and young people to respond to bullying incidents through peer support. This includes, for example, anti-bullying ambassadors, playground buddies and peacemakers. This is enabling children and young people to deal appropriately with conflict and develop skills in supporting others. In addition, schools provide targeted support to meet the identified individual needs of learners. They often do this through

effective partnerships with external agencies, including counselling services, campus police officers, and social work support.

In almost all schools, support staff work well with learners ensuring that they feel safe and cared for. Communication from senior leaders ensures that support staff know of ongoing or new relationship issues between children. In most schools, support staff use a range of approaches to support learners such as daily check-ins, monitoring children and young people in the playground, providing valuable one to one support to individual children and role modelling positive behaviours. Support staff report they feel confident in supporting children and intervening if they witness negative interactions.

Senior leaders recognise that not all learners feel confident about reporting incidents of alleged bullying. Around a fifth of learners indicated that they do not feel confident in reporting an incident of bullying. In discussions with Inspectors, learners shared concerns that reporting incidents of bullying may make the situation worse or may have a negative impact on their relationships with others. A few learners feel that they are not always treated fairly when staff are responding to incidents of bullying. They believe, at times, that some peers receive preferential treatment and that staff do not treat reported incidents seriously enough. Senior leaders should actively work with children and young people to address barriers to reporting. They should provide ongoing reassurance to learners

that their views will be fully considered and valued when investigating incidents of bullying.

In most schools, staff respect the right to privacy for all children and young people involved in incidents of bullying. However, this is not consistent and at times staff have sensitive conversations with learners in corridors or in classrooms. Children and young people also raised concerns with HM Inspectors about their privacy when incidents of bullying are being investigated.

## Summary

Staff in schools are committed to creating a safe and secure environment where bullying is openly acknowledged, discussed and challenged as unacceptable behaviour. In almost all schools, staff provide appropriate support to children and young people who both display and experience bullying behaviours. Staff who deal directly with incidents of bullying use a range of approaches to support learners, and most children and young people know who to speak to if they, or someone they know, are being bullied. Staff support children and young people to develop valuable skills in repairing friendships and resolving relationship issues. In most schools, staff teach children and young people how to recognise their own feelings and behaviours and manage their emotions. However, a few children and young people believe that bullying is not dealt with effectively and some do not feel confident in reporting incidents of bullying. There is a need for senior leaders in schools to ensure they have suitable arrangements in place to encourage children and young people to report, with confidence, all incidents of alleged bullying.

Almost all schools have in place a definition of bullying, but senior leaders describe experiencing difficulty in agreeing a shared definition with stakeholders. They highlight that the national definition is open to interpretation. Definitions of bullying are not always well understood by staff,

parents and learners. Senior leaders in schools should now work in partnership with parents, learners and staff to agree a shared definition of bullying within their school community.

School leaders recognise the value of recording incidents of bullying, and the majority are using the nationally agreed process through the BEM within SEEMis. However, they describe finding the BEM module challenging to use and some schools are not fully implementing national guidance. This is leading to inconsistency in both the use of the BEM module and the recording of bullying incidents. There is now a need for partners to review the functionality of the BEM to make it more practical for schools to record and monitor incidents of bullying.

Schools that have systematic approaches in place to monitor bullying report a reduction in bullying incidents. However, the monitoring of incidents of bullying is not yet consistent across schools. School leaders often develop and use alternative approaches to support the monitoring of bullying trends and patterns. Around a third of schools do not monitor incidents of bullying at whole school level.

HM Inspectors acknowledge that staff use a range of supportive approaches when dealing with children and young people in response to incidents of bullying. However, there is now a need to improve arrangements for the recording and monitoring of bullying and ensure robust and consistent analysis of bullying incidents. This will help schools to identify

trends or themes in bullying and support planning for improvements to both prevention and intervention in tackling bullying.

## Recommendations

- **Scottish Government should work with partners to review the functionality of the BEM within the SEEMis system to make it more practical for schools to record and monitor incidents of bullying.**
- **Schools should work in partnership with parents, learners and staff to agree a shared definition of bullying within their school community. This will help to strengthen approaches to recording and support monitoring of alleged incidents of bullying.**
- **Schools should ensure they have suitable arrangements in place to encourage children and young people to report, with confidence, all incidents of alleged bullying.**
- **Schools must regularly record bullying incidents accurately and monitor this information systematically. This will allow them to identify more readily the scope and scale of bullying incidents and make improvements in policy and practice to support learners wellbeing.**



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# Appendix 1: schools visited

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HM Inspectors would like to thank schools, local authorities, children, young people and parents for their engagement during this review.

## PRIMARY SCHOOLS

- Bearsden Primary School  
East Dunbartonshire Council
- Burgh Primary School  
Scottish Borders Council
- Edinbarnet Primary School  
West Dunbartonshire Council
- Glenlivet Primary School,  
Moray Council
- James Aiton Primary School  
South Lanarkshire Council
- Leuchars Primary School  
Fife Council
- Mount Carmel Primary School  
East Ayrshire Council
- St John Ogilvie RC Primary School  
West Lothian Council
- St John Vianney RC Primary School  
The City of Edinburgh Council
- St Joseph's RC Primary School  
Dundee City Council
- St Joseph's RC Primary School and  
Nursery Class, Inverclyde Council
- St Luke's Primary School and Early  
Years, North Ayrshire Council
- St Mary's RC Primary School  
Midlothian Council
- St Michael's Primary School  
Dumfries and Galloway Council
- St Mungo's RC Primary School  
Clackmannanshire Council
- Stornoway Primary School  
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
- Stracathro Primary School  
Angus Council
- West Barns Primary School  
East Lothian Council

## SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- Westhill Primary School  
Aberdeenshire Council
- Aberdeen Grammar School  
Aberdeen City Council
- Balfron High School  
Stirling Council
- Bellahouston Academy  
Glasgow City Council
- Dalziel High School  
North Lanarkshire Council
- Dunoon Grammar School  
Argyll and Bute Council
- Eastwood High School  
East Renfrewshire Council
- Gairloch High School  
The Highland Council
- Kyle Academy  
South Ayrshire Council
- Linwood High School  
Renfrewshire Council
- Perth High School  
Perth and Kinross Council

## ALL THROUGH SCHOOLS

- St Mungo's RC High School  
Falkirk Council
- Sanday Community School  
Orkney Islands Council
- Whalsay School  
Shetland Islands Council

## SPECIAL SCHOOLS

- Aberdeen School for the Deaf  
Aberdeen City Council
- Hazelwood School  
Glasgow City Council
- St Crispin's Special School  
The City of Edinburgh Council

## Appendix 2: Pre-inspection questionnaire for children and young people

### Response to questions by percentage (8233 respondents)

Q No	Question	%			
		Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Didn't answer
1	I feel safe when I am at school.	80%	6%	13%	1%
2	I understand what bullying is.	96%	1%	2%	1%
3	I learn about bullying regularly at school.	61%	22%	16%	1%
4	I have experienced bullying in school at some point.	40%	46%	14%	1%
5	I know who to speak to if I am or know of someone who is being bullied.	86%	6%	8%	1%
6	I feel confident to report an incident of bullying.	61%	17%	21%	1%
7	I know what happens when I report an incident of bullying.	61%	18%	20%	1%
8	I know how bullying incidents are recorded.	43%	30%	27%	1%
9	My school deals well with bullying.	56%	14%	28%	1%
10	Staff at my school will tackle bullying when they see it happening.	69%	10%	20%	1%
11	Bullying is not accepted in my school	87%	5%	7%	1%

Due to rounding responses may not add up to 100%

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/ less than half	15%-49%
A few less than	15%

## Appendix 3: Pre-inspection questionnaire for parents and carers

### Response to questions by percentage (1633 respondents)

Q No	Question	%			
		Agree	Disagree	Don't know	Didn't answer
1	The school promotes respect and positive relationships.	85%	6%	9%	0%
2	Staff treat my child fairly and with respect.	85%	7%	8%	0%
3	I am aware of the school's anti-bullying policy.	67%	17%	16%	0%
4	I have had a say in developing the school's approaches to bullying.	24%	43%	33%	1%
5	I feel confident to report an incident of bullying to the school.	83%	10%	7%	1%
6	I know how the school investigates incidents of bullying.	42%	26%	31%	1%
7	I know how the school records incidents of bullying.	30%	31%	39%	1%
8	If I was unhappy with the outcome of an incident of bullying involving any child, I know how to make a complaint, including any review or appeal process.	43%	28%	29%	1%
9	The school deals well with bullying.	46%	15%	39%	1%
10	Bullying is not accepted in my child's school.	75%	11%	14%	0%
11	The school signposts families to a range of resources and services to support with anti-bullying.	36%	17%	47%	0%

Due to rounding responses may not add up to 100%

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/ less than half	15%-49%
A few less than	15%



Education Scotland  
Denholm House  
Almondvale Business Park  
Almondvale Way  
Livingston EH54 6GA

**T: +44 (0)131 244 4330**

**E: [enquiries@education.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:enquiries@education.scot.nhs.uk)**

[www.education.gov.scot](http://www.education.gov.scot)

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