

Schools, Learning and Education
Review of Organisation of Classes Policy
Report on consultation – February 2023

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This is a consultation report prepared by the Schools, Learning and Education service to review the Organisation of Classes Policy for primary schools.
- 1.2 The purpose of this report is to:
 - 1.2.1 Provide details of the consultation process including the total number of responses received during the consultation period;
 - 1.2.2 Provide a summary of the findings;
 - 1.2.3 State how the Schools, Learning and Education service reviewed the policy following the representations received during the consultation period;
 - 1.2.4 State the summary of actions for the Schools, Learning and Education service following the consultation.

2. Background

- 2.1 It is standard practice for policies and guidelines in the Schools, Learning and Education service to be reviewed on a three yearly cycle. The Organisation of Classes policy was last reviewed in 2020.
- 2.2 In August 2022 a review group was formed consisting of experienced headteachers and Education Officers. Following the consultation period, two parents joined the group to support the analysis of the feedback, review the policy and plan actions.

3. Composite Classes in Stirling

- 3.1 Each academic session, Stirling Council's staffing exercise is used to identify the number of teachers allocated to each primary school, based on the total number of pupils on the roll for each school. It is then the responsibility of the headteacher to group children into registration classes to make the best use of the available teachers and classrooms in meeting the needs of all learners. This may include the formation of composite classes.
 - 3.1.1 In 2022-23, 92 of the council's 281 primary classes were composite, equating to 33% of the total number of classes.
 - 3.1.2 All classes within the council's primary schools with less than 100 pupils were composite or multi composite.
 - 3.1.3 In primary schools with between 101 and 199 children, 26 out of 86 classes were composite, equating to 30% of classes.
 - 3.1.4 In primary schools with between 200 and 299 children, 18 out of 73 classes were composite, equating to 25% of classes.
 - 3.1.5 In primary schools with between 300 and 399 children, 8 out of 54 classes were composite, equating to 15% of classes.
 - 3.1.6 In primary schools with over 400 children, 6 out of 34 classes were composite, equating to 18% of classes.

4. Review Process

4.1 The review was undertaken in three phases:

- **Phase 1** (20 September 2022 – 8 November 2022 (6 weeks), Consultation Phase including online ‘Engage’ survey, focus groups of children, parents/carers and staff.
- **Phase 2** (8 November 2022 – 23 - December 2022) - Analysis of Feedback and drafting of updated policy.
- **Phase 3** Feedback (March 2023)

The group carried out a number of steps within the review process:

- An audit of Scottish Local Authority class organisation policies;
- Consultation with a range of stakeholders through focus groups of parents/carers, pupils, school staff and headteachers;
- An online consultation via the Engage platform;
- A review of complaints received by Stirling Council over the last 3 years in relation to the organisation of classes.

4.2 The consultation ensured a balance across learning communities, in addition to a range of sizes and contexts of schools.

Learning Community	Parent Council	Staff Focus Group	Pupil Focus Group	Review Group	Headteacher Focus Group	Engage (no of responses)
Balfron	Drymen PS	Strathblane PSNC			Balfron LC	Yes (82)
Bannockburn			Bannockburn PSNC	Parent Rep		Yes (42)
Dunblane	Dunblane PSNC			HT Rep		Yes (136)
McLaren		Callander PS	Doune PS	HT Rep		Yes (72)
Stirling			St Ninians PS	Parent Rep		Yes (92)
St Modan’s	St Margaret’s PS Our Lady’s PS			HT Rep		Yes (42)
Wallace	Bridge of Allan PSNC				Wallace LC Headteachers Focus Group	Yes (138)

5. Audit of Scottish Local Authority class organisation policies

5.1 Information was sought regarding the main criteria used in the population of composite classes from all local authorities.

5.2 30 out of 32 local authorities responded: 12 were based on age first, 15 on ability first, and 3 on headteachers’ discretion.

6. Feedback from Focus Groups

6.1 Feedback was sought from various service users: parents/carers; pupils; staff and headteachers. Similar questions were asked of them all (worded appropriately for each group).

6.2 Key collated feedback - Pupil focus Groups

6.2.1 Questions:

What has gone well in terms of how classes are organised?
What could we improve in terms of how classes are organised?
If the “make up” of your class was changing, what would help in terms of arrangements for changing?
If you were worried or upset at school about your class changing, what would you do to get help?
Any other comments?

6.2.2 Summary of Pupil Comments

- Early communication – “Me and my family finding out before the holidays.” “Knowing who your new teacher is before summer.”
- If I was upset I would talk to my teacher, my headteacher, my parents, my friends.
- More opportunities to get to know your new class before the summer holiday.
- Being informed of our new classes sensitively and having time to process the news.
- Spending time with your old classmates at break and lunchtime.
- Some more time to spend with your old friends/class.
- “I think it is good how we still do STEM and other learning together.”
- Making new friends and speaking with people from different classes is a good thing.
- “Being in a P6/7 composite class is good because we get to see what P7 will be like.”
- Ensuring appropriate challenge and differentiation.
- “I like how I am a role model for some of the younger children in the class.”

6.3 Key collated feedback - School Staff Focus Groups

6.3.1 Questions:

What works well currently?
What are the challenges?
How about if learning groups were used?
What are the challenges of using learning groups?
What if friendship groups were used?
What are the challenges of using friendship groups?
What if the criteria used was ‘at the discretion of the headteacher’?
If children have been in a composite class one year, should they not be the following year?

6.3.2 Summary of School Staff Feedback

- Currently, clear criteria that support discussions with parents and children; new friendships and relationships being developed between children across classes and year groups; effective peer support from older to younger children.
- Once the classes are created, class teachers plan for learning and teaching in the same way in a composite class and a non-composite class.
- Current policy works well for organising classes. Opening up criteria means it will be more difficult to arrange classes.
- Separation of friendships has caused child and parent upset.
- Parents can lack understanding about how learning is planned in composite and non- composite classes.
- ASN being the third criteria sometimes creates an uneven split across year groups;
- Some children are always in composite classes or move around from composite and non-composite frequently.
- There should be some aspect of school flexibility or school professional knowledge included in the policy.
- Teaching staff to be involved in class creation; workshops for parents to continue.

6.4 Key collated feedback - Headteacher Focus Groups:

6.4.1 Questions:

What works well currently?

What are the challenges?

How about if learning groups were used?

What are the challenges of using learning groups?

What if friendship groups were used?

What are the challenges of using friendship groups?

What if the criteria used was 'at the discretion of the headteacher'?

If children have been in a composite class one year, should they not be the following year?

6.4.2 Summary of Headteacher Feedback

- Currently fair, consistent approach; works well; clear criteria.
- Age is best – straightforward policy to follow and lessens issues; allows for flexibility as appropriate; something that everyone understands.
- If learning groups were used: numbers going into next class is dependent on spaces so if the ability group is 8 children and the spaces are 5, this would not work when numbers do not configure; can be damaging to children's confidence; lowers their aspirations; ability is not fixed; difficult to measure; which skill or ability carries more weight than others?
- Inconsistent. Friendships continually change and are not always as clear cut as one parent may claim. Differing views from children/parents; does not build resilience or encourage inclusion.
- Children not in friendship groups can result in feelings of isolation.

- Inconsistent. Friendships continually change and are not always as clear cut as one parent may claim. Differing views from children/parents; does not build resilience or encourage inclusion.
- At the discretion of the headteacher: would be difficult for the headteacher; it could result in parental or children's anxiety; it would be unfair to have no criteria.
- Feedback regarding a repeat of a child being in a composite class: all classes have mixed ability and differentiated learning; being in a composite class is not a disadvantage; composite classes are common in small schools and does not impair academic achievement.
- This argument is based solely on the presumption that being in a composite class is a disadvantage.

6.5 Key collated feedback - Parents/Carers

6.5.1 Feedback was sought from parent/carer focus groups from a range of Stirling primary schools and via the Stirling Network Forum for Parent Councils.

6.5.2 Questions:

What works well currently?

What are the challenges?

How about if learning groups were used?

What are the challenges of using learning groups?

What if friendship groups were used?

What are the challenges of using friendship groups?

What if the criteria used was 'at the discretion of the headteacher'?

If children have been in a composite class one year, should they not be the following year?

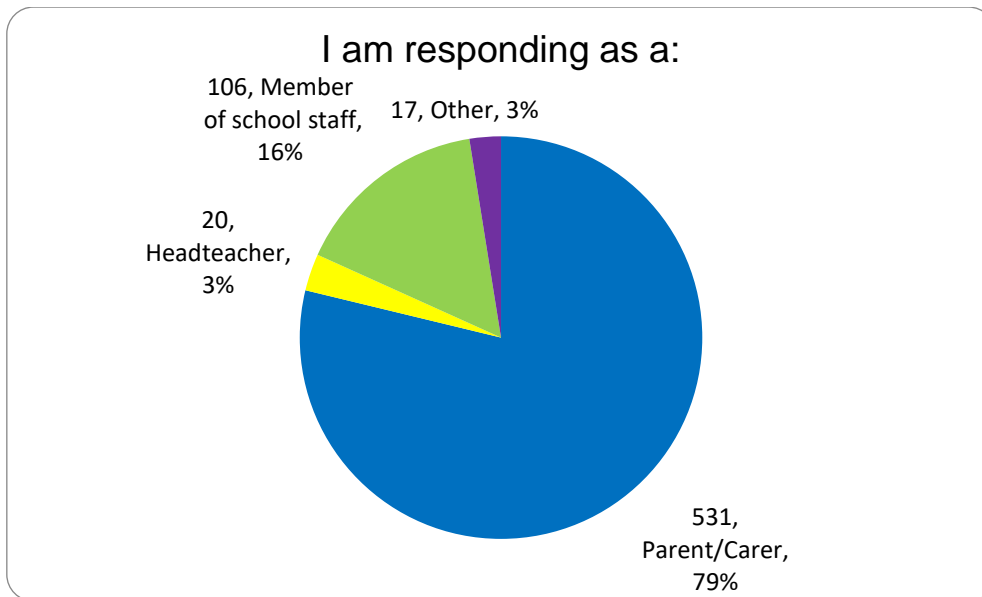
6.5.3 Summary of Parental Feedback

- Currently there is no ambiguity; fair system; younger children can learn from older children e.g. good role models; having a balance of ASN needs is more inclusive; good communication, as early as possible.
- Clear criteria are important – “How is the head supposed to explain to parents otherwise?” “You're never going to keep everyone happy.”
- “Age is the fairest way, as long as the headteacher can use their judgement too.”
- A change of friendships can also be positive.
- Parents might misunderstand why their child is in a composite class and be worried that they are being kept back. They may be worried they are going to repeat the same learning they did the previous year.
- The current policy can mean that a group of children may be isolated from their own year group regularly.
- Learning groups allow for appropriate pace and challenge; school being able to ensure resources for support are allocated effectively; and children are pushed on academically.

- This could expose children's ability and could make children and parents vulnerable; learning groups can change.
- In society, there is diversity and accepting this is a core skill. Demonstrating a range of ability and normalising this can be seen as a positive.
- If friendship groups were used, children can maintain positive relationships; individual, vulnerable pupils could be considered, where the relationships will have an effect on their wellbeing; can be difficult to decide if 'friendships' should be voiced by the children themselves or by their parents.
- Sometimes children's relationships can benefit from being mixed up a little; friends do not always make positive influences or positive learning partners; friendships can change; it is a life skill to learn to get on with different people; children fall out and friendships/interests change.
- At the discretion of the headteacher would be difficult for the headteacher; it could result in parental or children's anxiety; it would be unfair to have no criteria; expectation that headteacher knows the community and can listen to and respond to individual families sensitively, balancing their needs with the needs of the school; the headteacher will be under a huge amount of pressure from parents to "get it right".
- Feedback regarding a repeat of a child being in a composite class: could be very difficult; hard choices to make; 'How could it be possible to meet everyone's needs?'; "I wouldn't want that. My child loves the class she's in and is doing well."; taking turns so that not always the same children being isolated.

7 Engage Online Survey

- 7.1 An online consultation was carried out via Stirling Council's Engage platform. Links to the survey were shared by schools in school newsletters, through Stirling Council social media and paper copies of the survey were made available in schools. This consultation was open to parents/carers, headteachers and other members of school staff in Stirling Council primary schools.
- 7.2 A total of 674 respondents completed the survey. This was broken down into those who were parents/carers, headteachers, other members of school staff and other.



7.3 91% of respondents were linked to a Stirling Council Primary School or Learning Community.

There were responses from all Stirling Council primary schools. The highest numbers of responses came from Dunblane PS, Bridge of Allan PS, Newton PS, Riverside PS, Callander PS, Cambusbarrow PS and Allans PS. The highest proportion of responses was from Dunblane Learning Community.

7.4 The summary below provides information on responses to each of the questions in the survey. Not all respondents answered every question in the survey.

Percentages noted for combined categories e.g. agree/strongly agree are accurate but may not match the sum of each category on graphs due to rounding.

7.5 What has gone well in terms of how classes are organised? (tick all that apply)

479 respondents answered this question.

Top selections were:

- Transition opportunities in June – 63% (300 responses)
- Clear communication from school – 62% (299 responses)
- Quality of learning and teaching – 57% (273 responses)
- Opportunities for year groups to mix- 48% (230 responses)
- Support for children and families – 41% (198 responses)
- Consistency of policy across the local authority – 29% (141 responses)

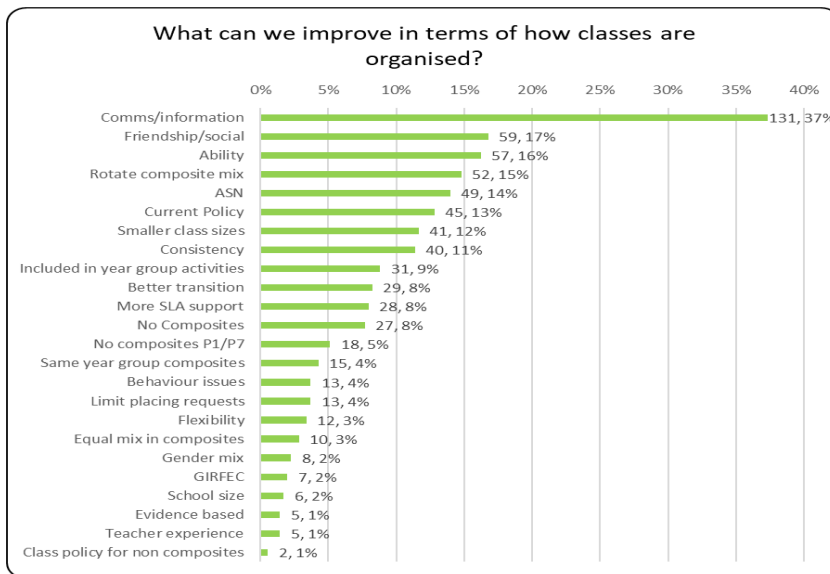
7.6 What can we improve in terms of how classes are organised?

351 respondents answered this question.

Top suggestions were:

- Communication/information – 37% of suggestions (131 responses)
- Friendship/social – 17% of suggestions (59 responses)

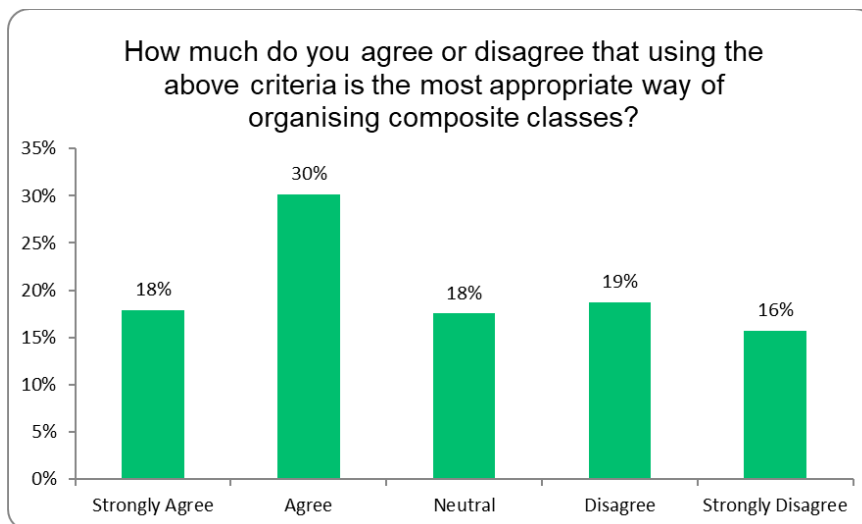
Ability – 16% of responses (57 responses)
 Rotate composite mix – 15% of responses (52 responses)



7.7 How much do you agree or disagree that using the above criteria is the most appropriate way of organising composite classes? (as current policy)

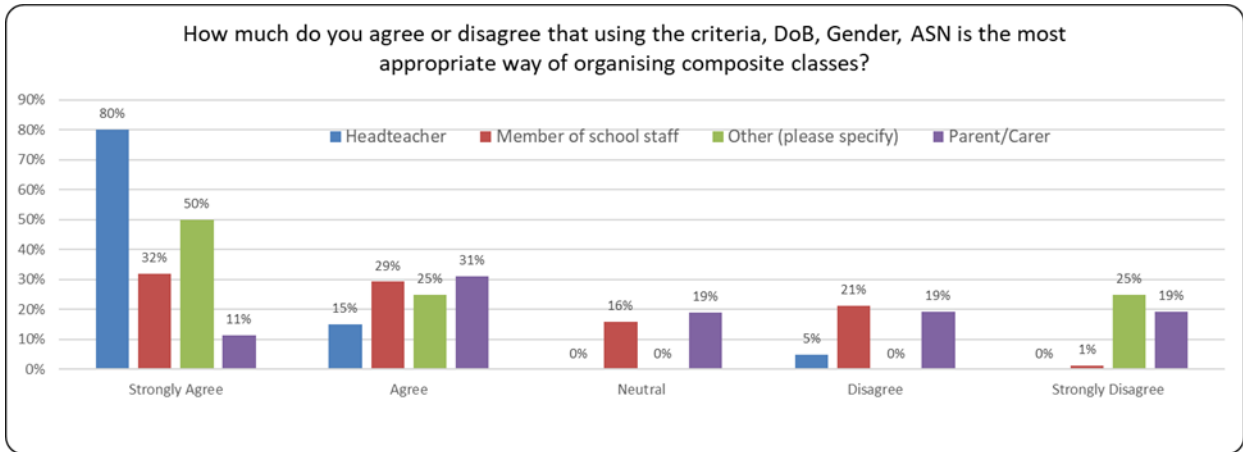
491 respondents answered this question.

Strongly agree/agree – 48% (236 responses)
 Neutral – 18% (86 responses)
 Disagree/strongly disagree – 34% (169 responses)

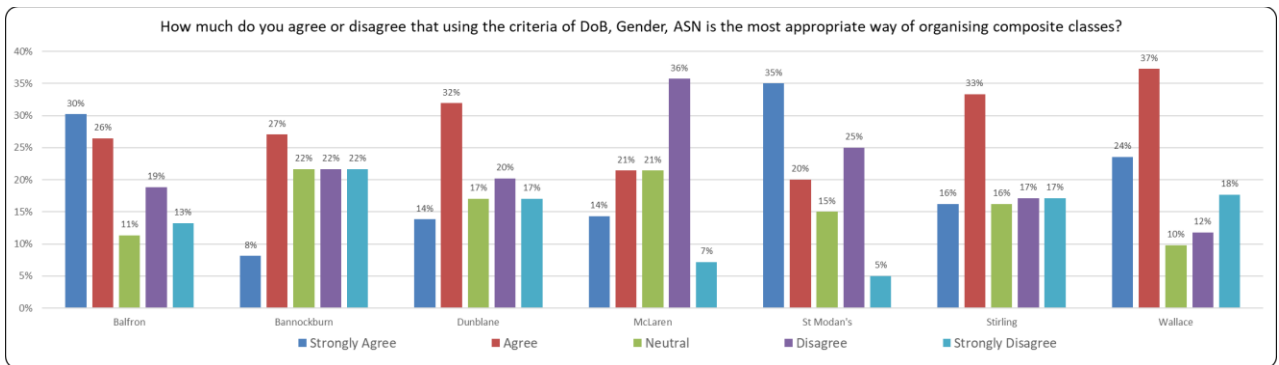


7.8 When analysed by respondent, there were some differences between the groups:

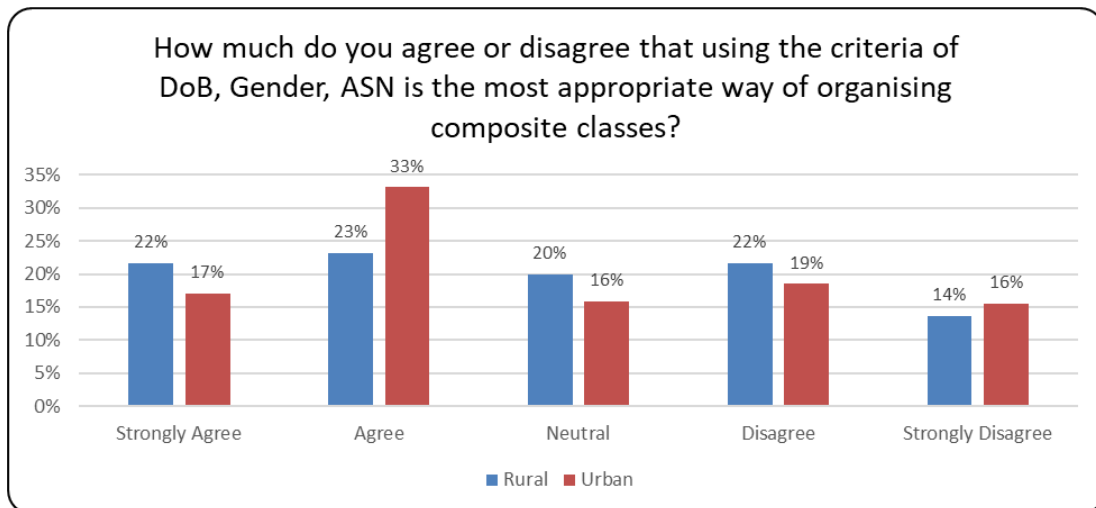
Headteachers – 95% Agree/Strongly agree, with 1 headteacher (5%) of an ASN provision disagreeing on the basis of ASN setting.
 School staff – 61% Agree/strongly agree, 22% disagree/strongly disagree
 Parents/carers – 43% Agree/strongly agree, 38% disagree/strongly disagree



7.9 There was some variation by Learning Community, however, this information was less reliable since some respondents did not select the correct learning community for the school.



7.10 Urban/rural analysis:



7.11 If you disagree, which of these criteria do you feel should be considered? Please rank in order of preference with 1 being the most important.

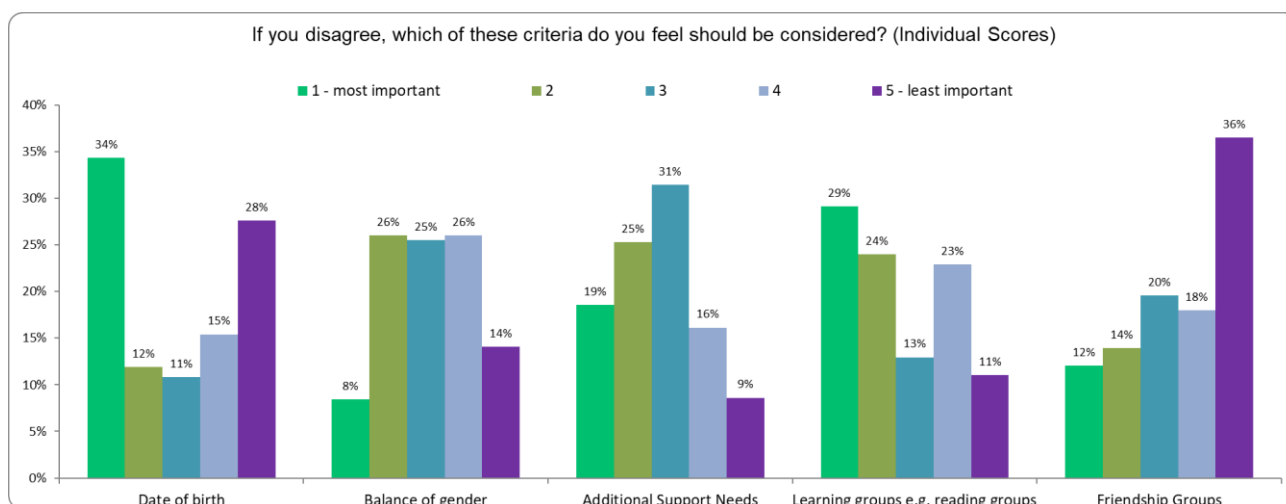
383 respondents answered.

129 of respondents who agreed/strongly agreed with current criteria answered.

Of those 169 respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with current criteria (starting with date of birth), 31 selected date of birth as their first or second choice of criteria.

In order of score, with highest first:

1. Learning Groups (score 3.37)
29% (108 responses) selected this as most important and 24% (89 responses) as No. 2. 11% (41 responses) selected this as least important.
2. Additional Support Needs (score 3.29)
19% (69 responses) selected this as No.1, 25% (94 responses) as No. 2 and 31% (117 responses) as No.3. 9% (32 responses) selected this as least important.
3. Date of Birth (score 3.1)
34% of respondents selected date of birth as No.1 (127 responses) and 12% selected as No.2 (44 responses). 28% (102 responses) selected this as least important.
4. Balance of Gender (score 2.89)
8% of respondents selected this as No.1 (31 responses), with 26% (96 responses) selecting this as No.2. 14% (52 responses) selected this as least important.
5. Friendship groups (score 2.47)
12% selected this as most important (45 responses) and 36% as least important (136 responses).



7.12 Are there any other criteria which you feel should be considered?

185 respondents answered this question.

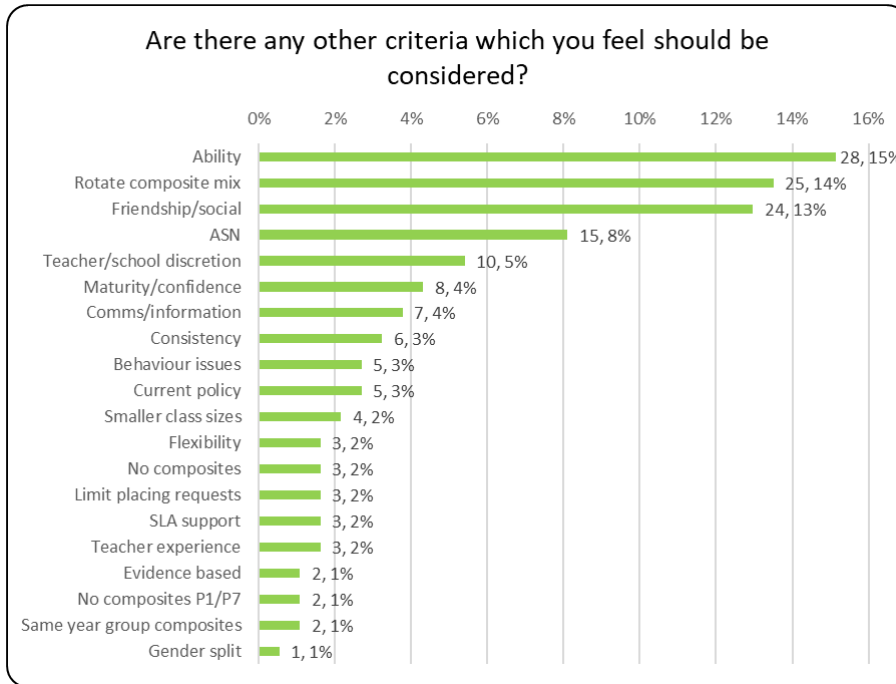
Ability was the most common feature of comments (15%, 28 comments).

25 respondents (14%) thought that children involved in composite classes should be rotated.

24 respondents (13%) commented on friendship/social considerations.

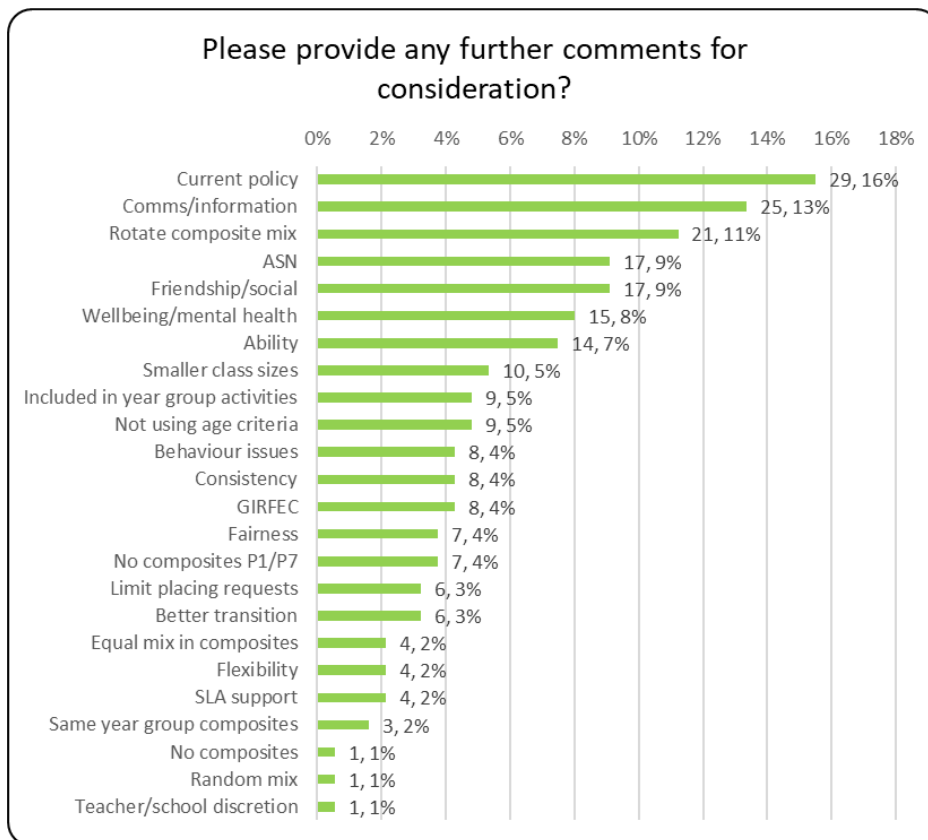
ASN was mentioned by 15 respondents (8%).

Teacher/school discretion was noted in 10 comments (5%)



7.13 Any further comments for consideration?

187 respondents commented in this section.



7.14 Summary of Engage survey:

- Effective communication and well planned opportunities for transition are considered key to successful restructuring of classes.
- 131 respondents felt that communication could be improved in relation to organisation of classes.
- Opportunities for year groups to continue to mix when some children are in composite classes was considered important.
- More respondents agree/strongly agree with the current policy than disagree/strongly disagree.
- A higher proportion of school staff, including headteachers, than parents agree/strongly agree with the current policy than parents/carers.
- Of the 169 respondents who disagreed with the current policy, the highest number selected date of birth as their first criteria (34%). When first and second choice were taken into consideration, learning groups had the highest score. 45 parents/carers selected friendship groups as their first criteria.
- Other considerations suggested included rotating children involved in composite classes (21 comments).

8 Review of Complaints in relation to Organisation of Classes

8.1 Complaints received by Stirling Council over the last 3 school sessions and the current school session in relation to organisation of classes were reviewed. There were a total of 8 Stage 1 and 5 Stage 2 complaints since the beginning of session 2019/20.

Of these, one Stage 1 complaint was upheld, 4 Stage 2 complaints were partially upheld and 7 complaints were not upheld. One Stage 1 complaint was resolved.

Complaints which were upheld or partially upheld related to consideration of a child's individual circumstances, application of the policy in relation to gender balance and planning for learning opportunities across the year group. The complaints all came from 3 primary schools.

9. The support materials for schools, parents/carers and learners have been updated following the consultation:

Leaflet for parents/carers:

<https://www.stirling.gov.uk/media/7191/howclassesareorganised.pdf>

Leaflet for learners:

<https://www.stirling.gov.uk/media/7218/movingclasses.pdf>

PowerPoint for schools who may wish to use it at parent presentations:

<http://source.stirling.gov.uk/pages/classorganisationpresentation.ppt>

10 Following all the above steps, the review group then considered the key messages from their research and the feedback gathered.

10.1 Key Messages from Consultation

- All children in the focus groups agreed with the current criteria.

- Almost all headteachers agreed with the current criteria.
- The majority of school staff agreed with the current criteria.
- 43% of parents/carers agreed or strongly agreed, and 38% disagreed or strongly disagreed with current policy, which has age as the first criteria. Of those who disagreed and were asked what criteria should be used, 34% of respondents selected date of birth as No.1 (127 responses) and 12% selected as No.2 (44 responses).

“Age is the fairest way, as long as the headteacher can use their judgement too. You need to trust that they know the kids.” (parent)

“Please do not change the current criteria, to me it makes the most sense grouping children in age primarily with a balance of gender applied.” (parent)

“Date of birth does not necessarily correspond to developmental age so seems a somewhat arbitrary criterion.” (parent)

- Focus groups of all stakeholders recognised the importance of clear communication at as early a stage as possible regarding organisation of classes.

“Meet the teacher is good, you can ask questions about how it will work. Teachers are always really good at answering and are able to allay fears.” (parent)

What works well? “Me and my family finding out before the holidays. Knowing who your new teacher is before summer.” (pupil)

“I feel the criteria is fair, but that there should be more communication around the individual circumstances as to why a child is in a composite. Parents naturally default to thinking it’s about ability when the age balance is not consistent.” (parent)

- The importance of effective transition arrangements was recognised across the focus groups.

“I would like to spend some time with my new class before the holiday.” (pupil)

“Transition events and sessions prior to the change of the school year ensure that pupils meet their new teachers and build relationships.” (parent)

- Opportunities for children in composite classes to continue mixing with peers in their year groups is important.

“Build on cross stage activities such as the Friday school drama/STEM/ICT clubs run at my child’s school.” (parent)

“You get to make new friends and you get to see your old friends at break and still get time to do some learning with your old class.” (pupil)

- There was inconsistent understanding from parents/carers in most focus groups of how learning and teaching is organised in primary classes, including composite classes.

“Parents might misunderstand why their child is in a composite class and be worried that they are being kept back. They may be worried they are going to repeat the same learning they did the previous year.” (parent)

“There is an assumption amongst most parents that if a child is put into a composite class their education is negatively affected. I believe the leadership teams within schools need greater confidence to explain how a class normally works and the benefits of composite classes eg smaller class sizes means more individualised time with each child. I suspect parent’s assumptions come from a place of fear and lack of understanding about how their child’s learning fits into the overall delivery of lessons and teaching.” (parent)

“I think parental/carer perception of composite classes is often negative simply due to the fact they are not informed of CfE model for learning, GIRFEC and the fact that in single year group classes differentiation is key to meeting the needs of all learners. Perhaps a consistent, Stirling Council leaflet/campaign to appease concerns would be worthwhile.” (teacher)

- The benefits of having clear and unambiguous criteria was recognised by both parents/carers and staff. Almost all parents/carers in focus groups recognised the need for clear criteria rather than decisions being entirely at the headteacher’s discretion.

“You could end up with parents ‘making demands’ about which class their child was in if criteria weren’t clear.” (parent)

“Clear criteria are important. How is the head supposed to explain to parents otherwise? You’re never going to keep everyone happy.” (parent)

- A small number of parents/carers indicated that they felt the same children should not repeatedly be in composite classes, and that there should be a rotation of children in composite classes.

“Basing the decision on age / gender alone means that it’s only ever the same children impacted by composite change. This feels hugely unfair, as they’re moved between classes / friendship groups whilst the majority (born in the middle) experience very little change at all.” (parent)

“I wouldn’t want that. My child loves the class she’s in (composite class) and is doing well.” (parent)

- A small number of parents and children felt that there should not be composite classes involving pupils in Primary 7.

“Not placing the same pupils year after year in composite classes, especially when reaching P7 where it is integral they bond with their peers as they transition to high school.” (parent)

- There were strong feelings expressed by some parents in relation to arranging classes according to learning groups, with polarised views on whether this was positive or negative. Learning groups had the highest score of alternative criteria suggested through the online survey.

“Rather than age it would be more beneficial for children to be organised according to ability.” (parent)

“Children could be really good at reading but not so good at maths, how would this work?” (parent)

“If children are aware they are ‘ranked’, it might not make them feel good about themselves. Children are aware of this kind of thing.” (parent)

“In society, there is diversity and accepting this is a core skill. Demonstrating a range of ability and normalising this can be seen as a positive.” (parent)

- There were strong feelings expressed by parents/carers in some focus groups in relation to arranging classes according to friendship groups, with polarised views on whether this was positive or negative. Friendship groups had the lowest score of alternative criteria suggested through the online survey.

“Can be difficult to decide if ‘friendships’ should be voiced by the children themselves or by their parents. Sometimes children’s relationships can benefit from being mixed up a little.” (parent)

“It would be a big mistake to use friendship groupings. Life’s not like that, children need to develop the ability to make new friends. This is such an important life skill. It’s a good thing for classes to change.” (parent)

“It’s a good thing to be mixing and forming wider friendship groups. It encourages them to make a wider group of friends. Children need to be able to integrate well across all age ranges.” (parent)

“Change is important, it prepares you for the future. It needs to be seen as a challenge rather than an obstacle.” (parent)

“Having ‘friendship groups’ as a criteria would be impossible to manage (children can often be friends today but not tomorrow. This is something that we manage daily in school) and also detrimental to children.” (parent and teacher)

- It was recognised in focus groups and through survey comments that there may be occasions when unique individual circumstances could be considered by the headteacher when organising classes.

“Individual, vulnerable pupils could be considered, where the relationships will have an effect on their wellbeing. Peer relationships are an essential and protective factor for young people. Disrupting these can be deeply disturbing for young people.” (parent)

“Ensure that the mix of children requiring additional support in class is the first consideration above age and gender.” (parent)

“Many children experience social anxiety, which makes forming friendships extremely challenging for them. This is something the school must consider when forming classes; there must be room for further discussion with children and families based on the individual needs of the child.” (parent)

11 Key Considerations based on Review of Organisation of Classes Policy

- 11.1 The use of date of birth as the primary criteria for populating composite classes should continue as it is unambiguous and transparent: for the purposes of school provision, age is not a 'protected characteristic' in the Equality Act 2010. This means that in relation to the provision of education, schools may lawfully use the criteria of age to organise classes.
- 11.2 Sensitivity should be given to exceptional individual circumstances related to Additional Support Needs, with opportunities for communication between home and school. The overall decision should be made according to policy guidelines and criteria with the final decision resting with the headteacher who has knowledge of all children and families in the school.
- 11.3 Using friendship/social groupings as a key criteria may be open to different, and potentially conflicting, opinions from service users. This was noted across the consultation by a range of stakeholders.
- 11.4 Ability or learning groups as a key criteria may be open to different, and potentially conflicting, opinions from service users. This was noted across the consultation by a range of stakeholders.
- 11.5 The current documents require some clarification to ensure ease of understanding for all service users, including more emphasis on how learning is organised.

12 Summary of Actions

- 12.1 The working group of Education Officers, headteachers and parents/carers have met to consider and analyse the feedback from the consultation; summarise the key messages from the feedback; make decisions on amendments and agree actions/next steps.
- 12.2 The policy has been amended for consideration by the Children and Young People Committee;
- 12.3 The leaflet for children, 'Moving classes' has been updated to support children with change using quotes from the focus group feedback.
- 12.4 The leaflet for parents/carers, 'How classes are organised' has been updated to support parents/carers with change using quotes from the focus group feedback. An updated 'Frequently Asked Questions' has been included in the leaflet.
- 12.5 A PowerPoint for headteachers to share with parents/carers has been updated. This can be individualised for each Stirling primary school;
- 12.6 A 'Frequently Asked Questions' section for parents/carers has been included in the updated policy;
- 12.7 Information on effective practice on Organisation of Classes has been shared at a Headteachers Business Meeting in January 2023;
- 12.8 Support will be offered to individual schools who raised specific concerns;

12.9 Feedback is planned for all stakeholders via the Engage platform.