

Report on Unite Survey of City of Edinburgh Council Schools' H&S Communications



Executive Summary

Health and Safety (H&S) groups began to be established in City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) Schools and Early Years settings in June 2020. The accepted understanding was that these groups would be fully developed by the start of the school term in August and be the key conduit for Health and Safety communications and processes within each school. Despite a series of concerns around the composition, workings and communications of these groups raised by Unite the Union (as a direct consequence of member pleas) by the run-up to the mid-term break (16th October 2020) there remained no clear understanding around how and whether these groups operated. Consequently, Unite CEC branch decided to survey members working in schools to find out what they knew about the groups and how vital H&S information was being communicated.

The survey was conducted online, between 26th October 2020 and 6th November 2020, with the help of the Unite Organising Department who made direct individual contact with the 300 plus members being surveyed. The sample cut almost exactly across the boundaries between Facilities Management (49.5% of respondents) and Communities & Families (50.5% of respondents) and covered people working in all job types (except Teaching and Head Teacher roles) and venue types (Secondary, Primary, Special, Early Years).

The survey results exposed stark knowledge disparities between Facilities Management (FM) and Communities & Families (C&F) staff working in schools as well as serious information gaps experienced by some staff groups, particularly those who may be less fully conceived of as being part of the school learning community (e.g. Cleaners, Passenger Drivers and Escorts, Caterers, School Crossing Patrol). The results also demonstrated that, whilst communications with staff in High Schools and Early Years settings may be reasonably good (but with considerable room for improvement), communications in Primary and Special schools fell below standards that might be reasonably expected.

Survey questions focussed on:

- Staff knowledge of the school H&S group
- Communications processes between this group and those working in and around the school
- How H&S information is communicated with staff
- Knowledge of SORT (Schools Operational Risk Toolkit)

C&F staff were more able to declare knowledge of the H&S group, SORT and communications processes for H&S information than FM staff. Considering the whole school workforce, C&F staff (37.5%) were almost 3 times as likely to have awareness of the H&S group than FM staff (13%). C&F staff (38.5%) were 4 times more likely to have received H&S communications from the group than FM staff (8.5%). Knowledge of SORT was lower in both departments but more than 3 times higher in C&F (19.5%) than FM (6%).

More generally, H&S communications had better results and information was being received by 82% of the whole schools' workforce (C&F and FM) with just under two thirds of these communications being spoken (e.g. team meetings, toolbox talks, 1:1s). However, 28% of FM staff and 4% of C&F staff still indicated that they had received no Health and Safety information in the previous month.

The survey analysis focuses on an array of positive and negative outputs whereby the positive is considered as generally good H&S communications (although must still be improved and complacency avoided) and negative considered as poor, misunderstood or non-existent H&S communications that consequently increase H&S risk.

The positive outputs from the survey show that C&F staff are mostly receiving the H&S communications although there is room for improvement in the nature of the two-way communications that would be expected between schools' H&S groups and staff. Also shown is the reasonably good communications within Secondary Schools and Early Years settings, although this again has improvement potential. Additionally, the high number of total respondents and respondents by venue (except Special Schools) who received some form of H&S communication must be considered as positive but with work still to be done in those groups who receive none.

The most negative of the outputs is the disparity between FM and C&F staff. This is obvious when looking at all three analytical themes (Department, Job Type and Venue). Overall, the positivity rates in FM are the reverse of those in C&F strongly indicating that if C&F staff receive good communication FM staff do not. Whilst general H&S communication for FM staff is not quite so bad as that through H&S groups there is still considerable work to be done to achieve even statistical parity.

A further negative output from this survey is that there appear to be groups of staff working in and around schools that find themselves beyond all H&S communications processes. These staff are:

- Cleaners (though not all)
- Caterers (not all)
- Drivers and Passenger Escorts
- School Crossing Patrols

These were the staff groups, in the main, who indicated that they had not received any H&S communications. It is feasible that, in many cases, these groups are simply forgotten about in the communications process as they are often quite invisible within schools as the nature and scheduling of their work doesn't lend itself as well to greater participation in the life and culture of the school as may be the case for other groups.

Recommendations

This survey was carried out by Unite the Union with the intention of providing understanding around issues raised in connection with H&S groups in schools, their composition and communications approaches. The results show that, whilst there may be a good deal of positive communications environments, that positivity does not extend to the whole estate and nor does it include the whole schools' workforce irrespective of job role and reporting department. Therefore, we make the following recommendations:

1. C&F undertake a survey of all schools' H&S groups to ascertain the composition (by department and Job) of these groups, how often and how they communicate to and from staff
2. C&F instruct all H&S groups to ensure communications include all staff of each department
3. C&F instruct all H&S groups to ensure that FM staff are included in the composition of groups
4. FM instruct key staff (e.g. FT's, Cleaning and Catering Supervisors) to request membership of these groups and report to FM on the outcome of the request
5. FM instruct all staff who obtain membership of their H&S group to ensure that communications are available to and invited from all FM staff linked to the school
6. FM and C&F to examine ways to ensure that no staff are marginalised or forgotten in the H&S communications processes going forward

Full Report

Unite the Union, City of Edinburgh Council branch surveyed members working in City of Edinburgh Council schools between 26th October and 6th November 2020. The purpose of the survey was to gain an insight into the communications climate within schools in the context of the CoViD-19 pandemic and associated Health and Safety requirements. The stimulus to take a survey approach was the desire for more accurate information following a large volume of enquiries being received by branch reps and, arguably, a lack of proportionate response to the anecdotal evidence provided to senior CEC responsible management. This report intends to convey the key messages and results of this survey work.

The survey was conducted online, between 26th October 2020 and 6th November 2020, with the help of the Unite Organising Department who made direct individual contact with the 300 plus members being surveyed. The sample cut almost exactly across the boundaries between Facilities Management (49.5% of respondents) and Communities & Families (50.5% of respondents) and consisted of those whose jobs are:

- Early Years workers (11%)
- School Crossing Patrol staff (1%)
- Passenger Operations Drivers and Escorts (3%)
- School Cleaning staff (26%)
- School Catering staff (8%)
- School Clerical and Reception staff (14%)
- Business Managers (4%)
- Janitorial/Facility Technician staff (16%)
- School Technicians (e.g. Science, Woodwork) (4%)
- Pupil Support staff (14%)

As well as covering the jobs and the two key service areas' (FM and C&F) of staff working in schools the survey also touched upon a full range of relevant venue types:

- Early Years' settings (14% of respondents)
- Primary Schools (48% of respondents)
- Secondary Schools (28% of respondents)
- Special Schools (10% of respondents)

Some members identified themselves as working over different venues or venue types (e.g. Secondary School and Early Years settings) and some identified as having more than one role (e.g. Cleaner and Caterer). A small number identified as working across departments (e.g. Caterer and Clerical).

The survey was intended to examine broadly the H&S communications processes and structures within Edinburgh Schools but not within each individual school or venue, therefore these were not identified as part of the survey. However, based on Unite's membership data we estimate that around 100 to 150 venues were covered in the survey.

The key questions asked were:

1. Do you know if there is an active Health & Safety Committee within your school?
2. Do you know how to communicate health and safety concerns to the H&S committee?

3. Have you had any health and safety communications from this committee if it has been established and is operational within your school?
4. Have you had, seen, or read any of the following communications on health and safety within the past month from the school? (emails, toolbox talks, staff meetings, 1:1 support, other written communications such as minutes, posters, texts or letters)
5. Do you know what SORT is in connection with schools' health & safety?
6. A write in box was also available for additional comments

Data from the survey was analysed according to 3 distinct elements:

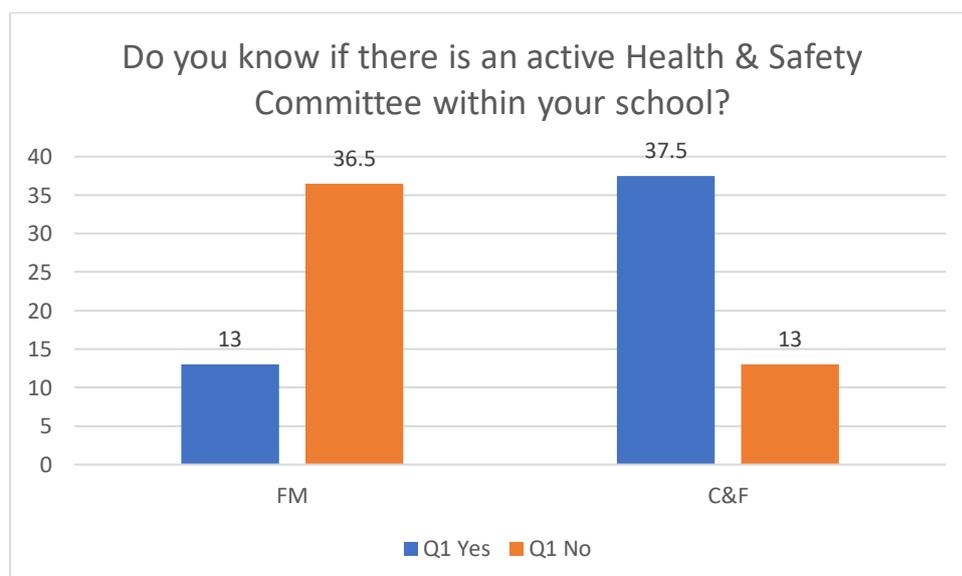
1. Departmentally (i.e. FM staff and C&F staff) to see what differences and similarities occurred with staff groups whose reporting lines (and therefore potentially communications) were distinctly different
2. By job type (e.g. cleaner, PSA, BM, FT etc) to examine the reach of the communications processes to those with different roles to undertake in schools
3. By venue type (across department and job type)

The important cross-cutting theme of positivity (responses indicating H&S knowledge and/or communications being received by the respondent) underpins the analysis.

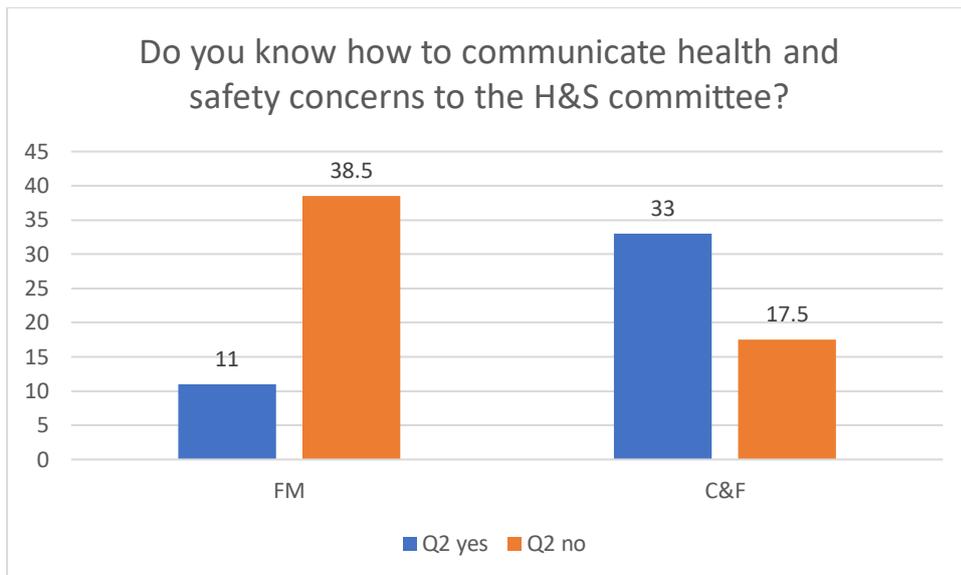
Key Findings

1. Departmental analysis

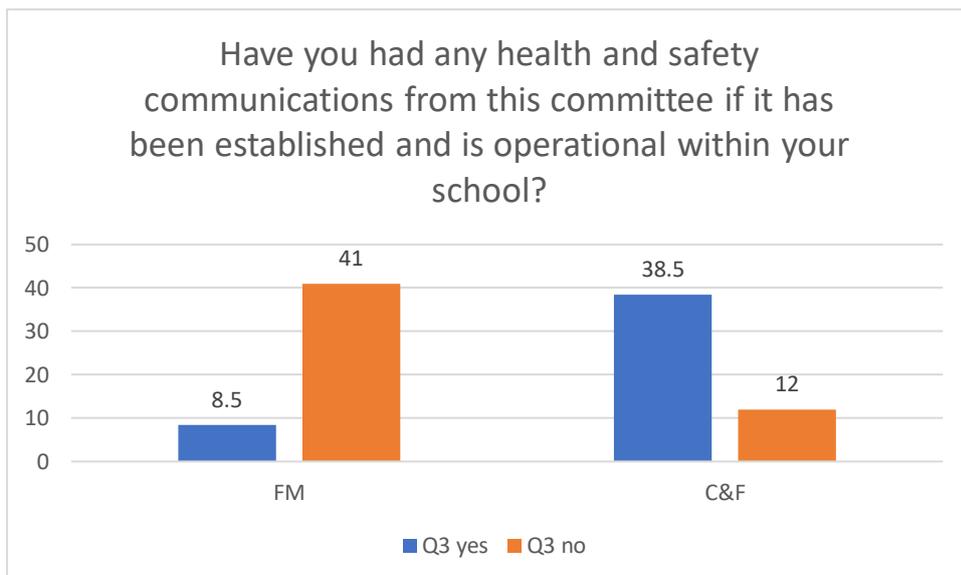
Figures are given as percentages of those surveyed for questions 1,2,3 and 5. Those given for question 4 are treated separately as the question allowed for more than one answer, some people did not answer this question and some responded that they had no information. Those not responding and those responding negatively have been removed from one of the analyses of this question. The significant percentage of those responding negatively to question 4 is given separate attention.



The responses to question 1 show a much greater knowledge of the existence of the school H&S groups in C&F staff than FM staff. Full response was made to this question.

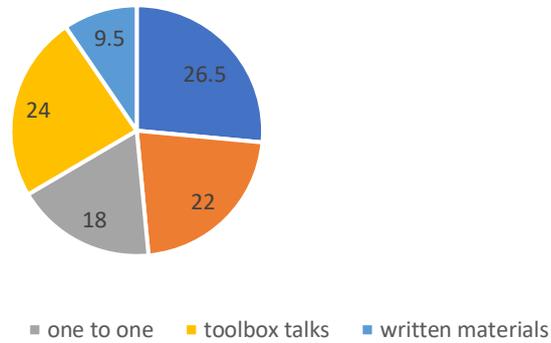


Question 2 results show a similar picture of disparity between FM and C&F. However, both groups see a decrease in positive responses to this question. A full response was given to this question.



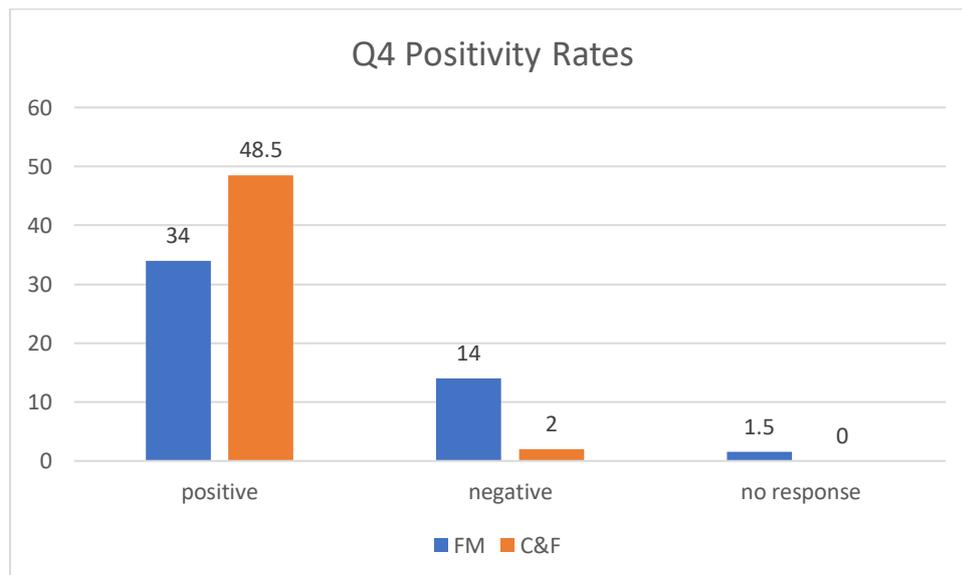
Once again responses to this question demonstrate disparity between FM and C&F. Additionally, the responses indicate that whilst C&F staff may receive more communications from the H&S group (than communicate to) FM staff seem less likely to receive communications from this group. A full response was made to this question.

Q4: Have you had, seen or read any of the following communications on health and safety within the past month from the school?



Question 4 asked about the process and types of H&S communications without consideration of its source. The question enabled respondents to write in answers as well as indicate selected types of communications. The analysis is expressed as a percentage of all types of communications mentioned. Some 30% of respondents mentioned 2 or more types. “Written materials” refers to posters, texts, meeting notes and the printed version of toolbox talk sometimes being given to staff instead of conducted as a group event.

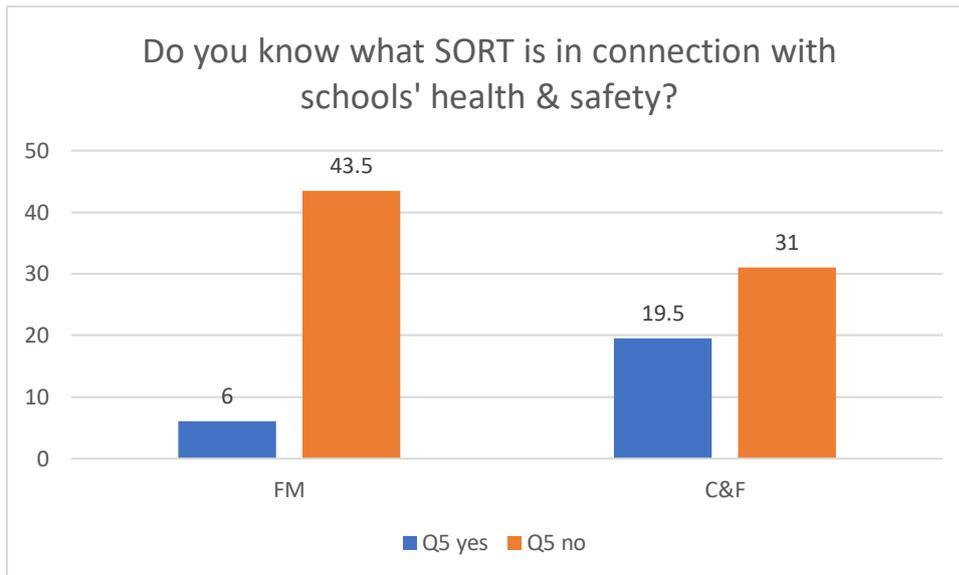
This analysis is taken from the responses of the 82% of people who mentioned one or more type of communication, therefore provides information on the breakdown of the types of communication processes available. Spoken updates (staff meetings, 1:1 meetings and aspects of toolbox talks) form the bulk of H&S communications within schools with written communications taking up just over one third.



A small number failed to answer this question and almost 16% of respondents indicated having had no communications on H&S. This latter group (having no H&S communication) comprised almost 90%

FM workers most of whom were cleaners. The FM group having had no communication represented 14% of all respondents to the survey.

- 82% of staff were able to report that they had had or seen/read some communications over health and safety in the workplace
- 16% had had no H&S communications
- 10% of all respondents were cleaners who stated that they had had no communications on H&S



Question 5 refers to the Schools Operational Risk Toolkit and the results indicate that only around 1 quarter of staff in schools know of the acronym SORT. Again, figures from FM are starker than those from C&F but even in this cohort knowledge of SORT is low.

2. Job Types

The analysis in this section focuses mainly on the positivity rates (positive responses to survey questions) amongst the workers performing different job roles in schools

- All **Business Managers** taking the survey responded positively to each of the 5 key questions
- Those staff (excluding Business Managers) who indicated they were already involved in their school's H&S group were also able to respond positively to each of the key questions (just under 3% of sample and were either PSA's, Early Years or Admin/Clerical, no FM staff indicated involvement)
- 90% of **admin/clerical** staff responded positively to questions 1,2,3 and 70% responded positively to the question on SORT (Q5). All indicated that they had received some form of H&S communication (Q4)
- Similarly, some 90% of **School Technicians** (not to be confused with FM Facilities Technicians) responded positively to all questions and all indicated they had received H&S communications and knew what SORT is

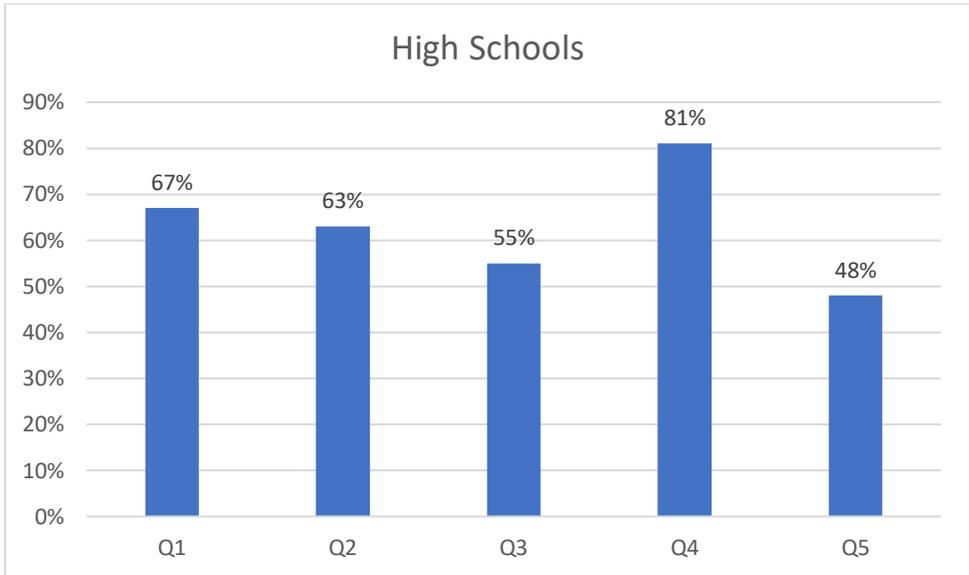
- 85% of **Pupil Support** workers were aware of the H&S groups (several indicated they were members of their school’s H&S group) but this dropped to 60% for the two communications questions (Q2 and Q3). There was 100% positive response from this cohort on the general H&S question (Q4) and 36% of this group responded positively to the SORT question
- **Early Years** staff seemed slightly less well informed than their C&F counterparts in schools as their responses to the H&S group questions showed 60-70% positivity rates over the 3 main questions (Q1, Q2, Q3). All reported receiving H&S information and 33% indicated a knowledge of SORT
- Of FM staff **Facilities’ Technicians and Supervisors** (inc **Catering and Cleaning Supervisors**) were best informed and followed similar patterns in each sub-group. 55% of each group were able to respond positively to questions 1 and 2. The positive response to question 3 from these groups was considerably lower, averaging 35%. Some 20% of this group also indicated that they had had no H&S information. Knowledge of SORT averaged 27% for these groups as a whole with, no significant variation between groups
- **School Crossing Patrol and Passenger Drivers and Escorts** responded in low numbers (single figures each cohort). Grouped together for the purposes of analysis this group responded with zero to 10% positivity rates across the key questions and 30% (mainly drivers) having had any H&S communications. None responded positively to question 5 on SORT
- Similarly, **Cleaners’** responses showed a zero to 5% positivity rates on the questions around the H&S groups (Q1, Q2, Q3). 40% of this group indicated that they had had no H&S communications and 5% stated a knowledge of SORT (Q5)
- Of the **Catering** cohort responding 33% responded positively to question 1. There were zero positive responses to the H&S group communications questions (Q2, Q3). The general communications question (Q4) showed 60% positivity. 10% of this group failed to answer question 4. None could respond positively to the SORT question

3. By Venue

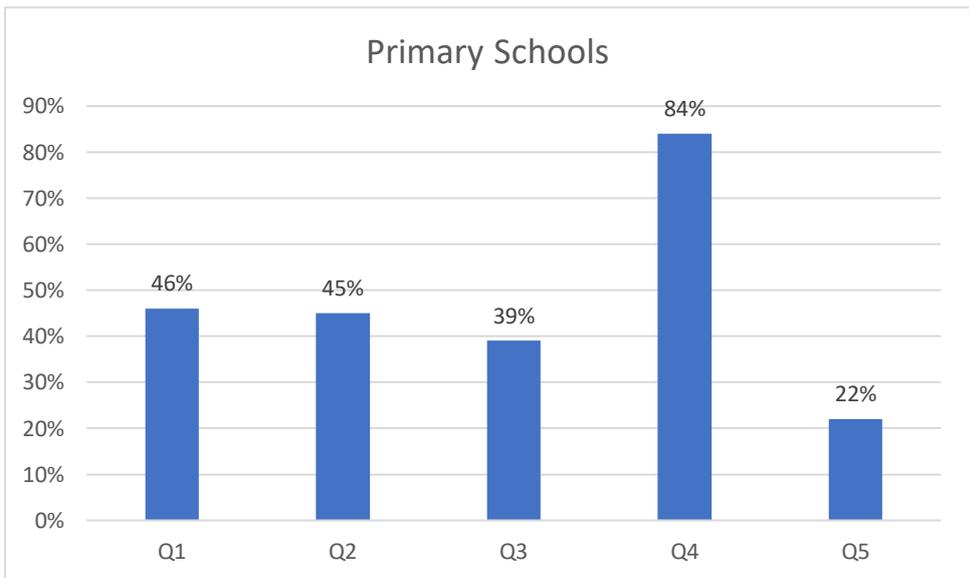
These figures show the positivity response rates to each of the survey questions. Those not responding to question 4 were removed from this analysis, thus allowing the question to be adapted for the positivity rate perspective.

The results by venue show higher positivity rates in High Schools and Early Years settings than in Primary and Special schools. Variations in the figures may be accounted for by the size of sample at each venue type and by the composition of those surveyed from each venue type in terms of home department.

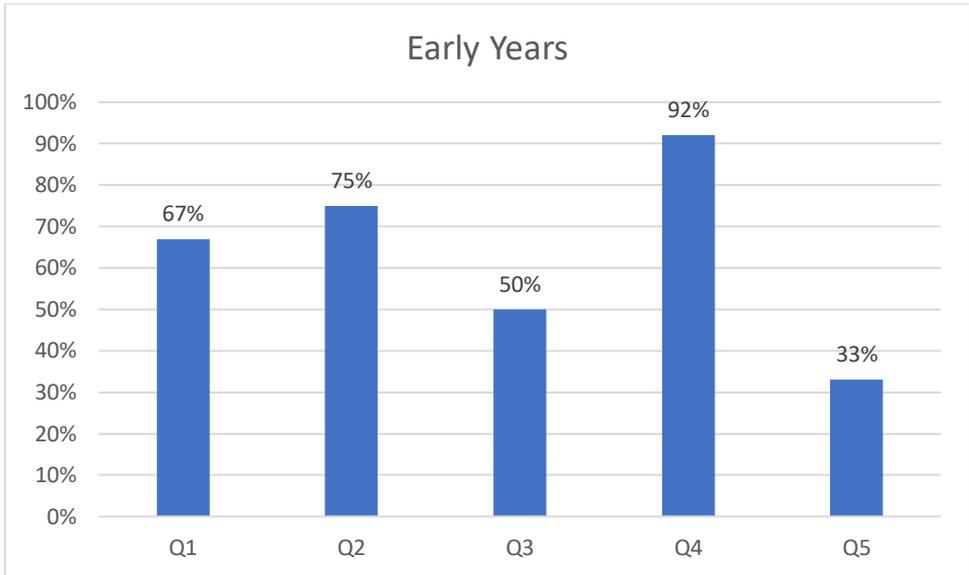
Venue Type	% of total respondents	% FM	% C&F
High Schools	28	42	58
Primary Schools	48	75	25
Early Years	14	25	75
Special Schools	10	72	28



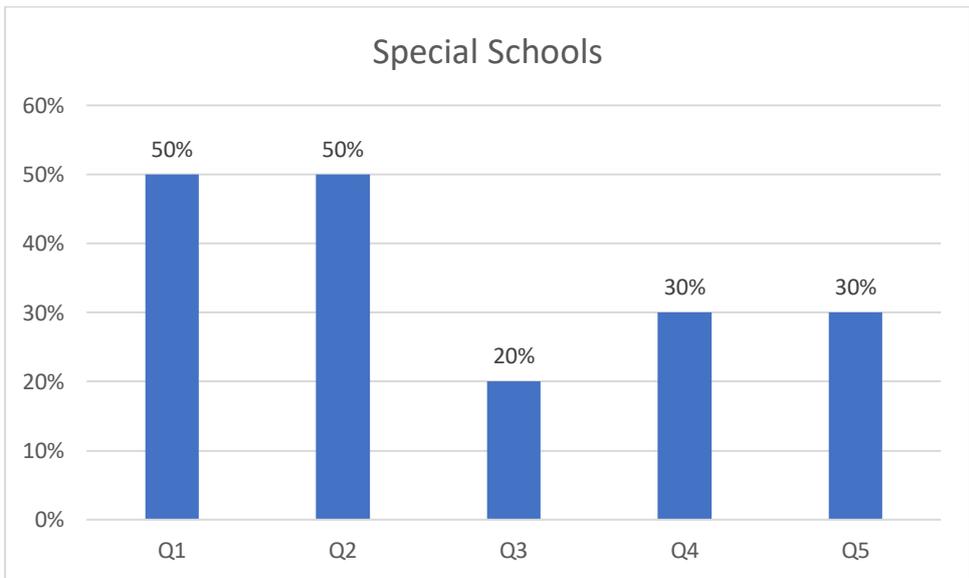
Survey results in High Schools show an overall positivity except in Q5 where there is a narrow negative rate. The response from High Schools is the highest within venues for the knowledge of SORT (Q5)



Primary School responses show marginal negativity rates for questions 1 and 2 with more considerable negativity for question 3. Whilst Primary Schools show the lowest positivity rate for SORT knowledge (Q5) the rate for overall H&S communication is relatively high.



Early Years settings show the highest positivity rate for overall H&S communications (Q4) and are broadly comparable to results in High Schools. There may be some cautionary statistical anomaly in these figures (as evidenced by higher positivity in Q2 than Q1) due to the lower numbers of respondents.



Special Schools show the lowest overall positivity rates in the survey (only Primary School responses to Q1, Q2 and Q5 are lower but by narrow margins) and far lower than any for general H&S communications. The smaller sample size may have a bearing on these figures as well as the composition of the workforce surveyed. It is noteworthy that the composition in Special Schools (those surveyed) was similar to that of Primary Schools.

Conclusions

The survey work carried out demonstrates an array of positive and negative outputs whereby the positive is considered as generally good H&S communications (although may still be improved and complacency must be avoided) and negative considered as poor, misunderstood or non-existent H&S communications that consequently increase H&S risk.

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Recommendations

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