Anonymous submission

Dear sir/madam

I wish to forward my views and suggestions for the committee. I request that these views remain anonymous in any written material but would be happy to discuss them further with any member of the committee.

As a fully qualified teacher of both visually and hearing impaired pupils I have felt for some time that systems of support that exist for children are not adequate and vary hugely between different authorities in Scotland, creating in effect a post code lottery for them and their families. There are many areas of practice that could in my opinion be improved and in many for cases that would cost little or nothing. These issues have given rise to a lot of frustration and so I welcome the chance to give my views directly.

1. The rise in generic ASN services has some advantages e.g. it is easier to liaise with other educational professionals where a child has multiple or dual needs (complex needs, autism, gypsy/traveller etc.) but it has reduced the specialism of some VI/HI services who are now managed by line managers who may have no VI/HI experience, little or no ASN experience or very specific experience in one area of ASN that may be very different and have very different ways of supporting children to HI/VI approaches. HI/VI services themselves can require very different approaches. One size does not fit all.

2. There is wide variation in the numbers of VI/HI teachers in authorities across Scotland (details can be found in the CRIDE survey - published by the Scottish Sensory Centre regularly. The low numbers of teachers in some authorities means the support given is spread very thinly. With adequate numbers teachers could focus on ensuring the pupil is fully supported. eg. supporting peer relationships, deaf/visual impairment awareness raising, staff training, 1-1 support where there are areas of difficulty. The low teacher/pupil ratios in some authorities should be examined and a equal numbers of teachers should be provided across Scotland. The figures for acquiring numbers of VI/HI children for this is problematic. Local authority numbers should not be used as they often rely on automated numbers provided by schools- the schools may not have recorded all the children with a HI/VI (we have often found this to be the case). This explains the discrepancy between numbers provided by LA's and Sensory Impairment services shown in the CRIDE surveys. Numbers given by HI/VI teachers are the only reliable source unfortunately.

3. Both HI and Vi teachers must be able to give 1-1 support to pupils and not just been seen as an advisory service (even when needs are perceived as being low)

4. As highly qualified teachers they must be given the autonomy to decide on levels of support required and not have this over ruled by managers who have no training in HI/VI
5. There needs to be recognition and in fact protection of the HI/VI teachers role to decide on the type or level of support and that this may also entail time spent working for the child in a suitable base. Hot-desking and an insistence on teachers being out of a base and supporting children in schools ignores the fact that much work for the children is done at a distance e.g. liaising with health professionals, sourcing equipment and resources, researching technology etc etc. This is a huge restriction on the support that can be provided for pupils. Again those who know the children best and who understand their needs should decide.

6. They must be able to attend CPD courses, seminars etc that are relevant to them and their pupils needs - not that which is chosen by line managers and may not be relevant to HI/VI teachers. This may cost money but the importance of this must be recognised by local authorities and again the autonomy of the HI/VI teachers in this area should be protected.

7. Educational audiology services must be available to all children. At present some (most) authorities have none, some have access infrequently and some have a full time Ed Aud in their service. It is too much to expect teachers of the deaf to fulfil this role (adequately) as well as all the other roles they do. A central core team of Ed Auds that could visit services regularly would be ideal. An individual employed out with the local authority would also ensure that budgetary restrictions did not effect the advice given for equipment to be purchased.

In summary the wide and varied roles of TVIs and TODs must be recognised and supported. This does not necessarily mean VI and HI teachers cannot be managed by those without experience or qualification in those areas but their distinctive and specialised role should be supported by a central, national department where there is sound knowledge of both visual and hearing impairment. I have seen and heard of occasions when professional jealousies or misunderstandings or lack of knowledge have prevented TVIs and TODs carrying out their role effectively. The insistence on generic planning, CPD, forms of support etc are holding back the support that should be given to visually and hearing impaired pupils. A central, national education body that oversees each authorities VI and HI service could ensure that the professionalism and effectiveness of TODs and TVIs was not being eroded or ignored. This department could also include Educational Audiologists that could advise and support TODs and ICT specialists that could advise on VI equipment and resources.

Talking with colleagues today from other authorities led me to remember another issue facing VI teachers which can affect the attainment of VI pupils. I would suggest a national policy on supporting new braille users that is kept updated with new research, technology, approaches and resources that can be accessed quickly in the event of a pupil becoming blind or a blind or severely sight impaired pupil who requires braille moving into an authority. This area is only briefly covered in the VI teachers training and it may be a long time before this is needed. As mentioned in the Doran Report (p12 I think) VI teachers with suitable skills (e.g. up to date braille and the methodology and technology to teach and prepare braille) should be immediately available. A central national policy, covering all aspects of this area
would ensure each local authority had equal and up to date information that could be picked up and used by teachers who have not needed braille before or for a long time. This would mean there was no wasted time, parents fears could to some extent be alleviated, pupils could have quality teaching and teachers would be under far less stress.

I hope these observations and suggestions are of use to the committee.