



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 15 May 2012

Session 4

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

15th Meeting 2012, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab)

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

John Butcher (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)

Alan Jones (Scottish Division of Educational Psychology)

Linda Whitmore (Enable Scotland)

Kristina Woolnough (National Parent Forum of Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 15 May 2012

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:02*]

Additional Support for Learning

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning and welcome to the 15th meeting in 2012 of the Education and Culture Committee. I remind members and people in the public gallery that mobile phones should be switched off at all times. We have received apologies from Liz Smith, who is unable to be with us this morning.

Our only item of business today is to take evidence on additional support for learning. The Scottish Government recently published its first annual report on progress that is being made in implementing the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, as amended. Our discussion will focus on the main issues that arise from that report.

The committee recently considered a petition from Enable Scotland—a member of which is among the witnesses today—that calls for better training for teachers and support staff on additional support. The committee agreed that some of the main themes that arise from that petition should also be discussed today.

I welcome to the committee John Butcher, who is representing the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, additional support for learning network—which is quite a title; Alan Jones, who is chair of the Scottish Division of Educational Psychology; Linda Whitmore, who is development officer for children and young people at Enable Scotland; and Kristina Woolnough from the National Parent Forum of Scotland. Good morning to you all.

I want to get straight to the questions, so I invite Marco Biagi to start us off.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): Good morning. About 100,000 pupils are recorded as having additional support needs, but in 2010-11 fewer than 200 complaints of various types were recorded. Is that a sign that the system is working?

John Butcher (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): That is an interesting look at it. Yes—I think that the system is working for the vast majority of children in Scotland. We have some fantastic education across Scotland that meets children's needs in their entirety.

The issue of why we get complaints is multifaceted. People always want more and they always need to understand what their child's additional support needs in school are. We have reached a situation in this country—as others have done—where finances are tight and local authorities are reviewing how they deliver services to children with additional support needs. However, in general, the number of complaints reflects a system that meets children's needs.

Kristina Woolnough (National Parent Forum of Scotland): There is probably not a correlation. Making a formal complaint is an arduous procedure for parents. We are all rightly encouraged to address difficulties, challenges and issues at a local level, so it takes quite a lot for something to be logged as a formal complaint. I imagine that, for many families and parents of children with additional support for learning needs, there are issues and concerns daily. Therefore, we cannot use that figure as a benchmark, nice as it would be to do so. There is still a long way to go to make education accessible to all and to help children to meet their potential. A lot of good work and fantastic practice takes place, but it is not consistent across Scotland and not even between schools within local authorities.

Linda Whitmore (Enable Scotland): We have quite a lot of anecdotal evidence that supports the view that many parents are dissatisfied but do not make a formal complaint. Some of the reasons for that are that they feel intimidated by the prospect, they do not know their rights and they do not understand the options of mediation and independent adjudication. For some parents, it is just too much to take on to go down the route of a formal complaint, but that does not mean that they are fully satisfied with the system. Although the majority of parents might well be fully satisfied, a significant number are not satisfied and feel that their children are not adequately supported in the classroom. However, for a number of reasons, those parents do not make a formal complaint.

Alan Jones (Scottish Division of Educational Psychology): I agree with the points that have just been made. I add that the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, along with other Scottish policies such as the getting it right for every child programme and, arguably, the curriculum for excellence, are relatively new. A lot still needs to be worked out about how we support parents and schools to understand and make the best of those policies.

Educational psychology and psychologists are involved, particularly through getting it right for every child. At meetings and assessments of needs and at other times when people talk about the issues and how to support someone, a lot of mediation is required so that people feel heard,

empowered and respected. There is still a big job to be done on that, because the widening, under the 2004 act, of what are seen as needs to include emotional and social needs and others requires a lot of mediation for parents. We could still get a lot better at that.

John Butcher: Along with my colleagues in the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, I believe that meeting children's needs is best done where the children are being educated. We need to be careful not to create systems in which everything is taken away from schools and some expert comes in to meet needs or to advise on mediation services or resolve disputes. The vast majority of schools have good pastoral care and support systems and they talk to parents. Disputes are resolved at that lowest level all the time, which is why the number of people who take issues up the system is very small.

The issue is different for looked-after children, however. We have two parallel worlds. Within the disability world, we often have capable and articulate parents who advocate strongly on behalf of their children and who take issues right through the system to tribunals or whatever, if they need to. However, with looked-after children, the parents are often not in the same position to advocate for them. There is a job to be done to ensure that we meet the needs of looked-after children much more effectively. I suspect that, if those parents could advocate effectively on behalf of their children, the number of complaints would rise.

Marco Biagi: To continue with the general tenor of the discussion, a case in my constituency has highlighted some of the issues for parents of children with additional support needs. The parents in this case have been able to get considerable support through informal local authority measures, but they have had a great deal more difficulty in getting adequate support from the national health service. Do you think that the relationship that the parents of children with additional support needs have with the NHS is as strong when it comes to being able to mediate and having options for complaint, adjudication and so on?

Kristina Woolnough: Broadly speaking, partnership working could be better with all agencies. Parents and children do not really care who does it; we just want to see that it is done. There are quite a lot of professional vested interests. Our broad approach is that it is not about territory, professional patches or whatever; it is about ensuring that the child has what they need.

I agree with Alan Jones that the frameworks, the legislation and the policy—GIRFEC—are there. The issue is about turning the theory into practice. That is done well in some circumstances, but it is

not done consistently well for every child. Perhaps that is a big ask, but we still think that it should be the ambition.

Alan Jones: I agree with that. For me, the vehicle that we have in Scotland—the GIRFEC policy framework—is fantastic. It includes health, which you mentioned, along with education and social work. The point of having a one child, one plan policy is so that support can be given to parents so that they understand their child's needs and the interventions that are available for them, and that their support need is met at a local level.

A meeting will often be organised through the school; under GIRFEC, such a meeting is known as a child's planning meeting. A person such as an educational psychologist will be present to help with mediation and, importantly, to ensure that the parents' view and the child or young person's view are taken into account when it comes to planning and intervention in the child's life. At the end of the day, for change to happen, everyone needs to be on board, and the child or young person is a critical part of that.

The systems and the policy are in place, but we need to work strategically with people to make those core planning meetings the best possible place for voices to be heard. By ensuring that the child or young person and their parents are heard, we will avoid going down the route of having to mediate for complaints and so on, because we will have got it right.

John Butcher: Let us be clear that working with NHS colleagues is not easy. There are issues to do with the extent to which NHS boards and local authorities are coterminous. NHS board areas often extend beyond local authority boundaries and cover more than one local authority area. It can often be difficult to link into the vast machine that is the NHS. Currently, there is no way of getting round that, and that in itself puts barriers in the way of the implementation of GIRFEC.

In addition, NHS resources are often tough to get hold of, and at times it can be difficult to get the right people to the right meetings. I agree with my colleague Alan Jones that planning meetings are best held in schools, where the kids are. School education is the only universal service for children. Ensuring that people have the time, the capacity and the opportunity to attend those meetings can often be difficult—that is true even of co-ordinated support plan meetings. When we take into account the huge numbers of young people who have additional support needs, there is no getting away from the fact that that represents a significant task.

That is before we get to the issue of securing resources. Securing the resources of another organisation involves the crossing of professional

boundaries. Whether we like it or not, people are snobs when it comes to their profession. They will say, "This is my area of expertise—this is what I bring to the party." Getting access to those resources depends on other people agreeing that that is the right thing to do. When a group is made up of different professionals who have different perspectives on what a child needs, it is often difficult to secure resources.

Another factor is that parents have the view that access to resources is the end point and that it will make things better, but that is often not the case. Resources in themselves do not make things better. Good-quality learning and teaching are needed. The quality of relationships with children and the quality of interventions are what matter, and those are difficult tasks. It is true that it can be difficult to reach into the NHS.

10:15

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Some of the themes that have emerged this morning raise a wee concern about the parent's role in being vociferous in pursuing issues. Linda Whitmore said that some parents do not for whatever reason feel capable of pursuing even a complaint. How much is the system driven by the child's needs and how much is it pushed, especially given what John Butcher said about the discrepancy for looked-after children?

John Butcher: As I said, parents are crucial to the additional support needs legislation, because they have a voice. That is right—I as a parent would want a voice to say what support my kid should get in school to meet their additional support needs. Some parents are good at advocating on their child's behalf, but some are less good at that. We cannot get away from the fact that some parents actively do not want to be interested in what happens to their child. That is a sad fact of society.

We need to be clear that this should also be about children's voices. At times, the legislation can appear to introduce a parents charter that is about what the parent wants rather than what is in the child's best interests. Separating out the child's best interests and listening to what professionals say about that, rather than just what the parents want, can cause disputes. That is the difficult part for which we need good-quality mediation and dispute resolution.

The legislation does not take it into account that some parents have additional support needs. Parents have needs, wants and desires and their own difficulties, such as mental health issues or social needs, which they bring to the table. When we are dealing with people, complex relationships are often the difficult part of getting to the heart of

what a child needs. Taking that forward is not easy.

Kristina Woolnough: I always feel concerned when the discussion appears to be polarised between professionals and parents, as if we are on different sides. I do not see the situation in that way. I see professionals as the experts in their specialisms and spheres, while parents are often—but not always—the experts in their children. We should all be able to come together. Parents understand resource constraints and all those things. A polarised debate does not lead anywhere and does not improve things for children. We need to move away from polarisation. That is what GIRFEC is all about, which is why it is welcome.

Parents get upset—of course they do—and perhaps professionals feel that they are challenged or in a difficult situation, but we need to get past all that. John Butcher is right to talk about relationships. We need to build individual relationships at the school level. Few parents or others would complain formally because relationships were not working well, as that is too personal an issue.

It is unhelpful to talk about polarisation. We must all keep focused on how we make the system work for children, stop talking about who is unhelpful or obstructive and start talking about where and how the system works well and about all sharing that.

Mediation skills are not the only issue. Well before that point, what is required is people-handling skills and lots of other people skills—I do not know what is in teacher training nowadays, but I mean skills in coaching and managing difficult situations that involve all sorts of adults. What happens should be not about conflict but about finding a way through in a clear and focused way.

Alan Jones: I agree with Kristina Woolnough. A key point, which relates to a previous point, has been hit on. When we talk about finding the right support for children, young people and parents, people ask what the resource is or what the concrete strategy is. Kristina Woolnough highlighted something that educational psychologists work with all the time: the fact that change often comes about by changes in attitudes, mindsets and beliefs about a situation. It is about listening and how we make someone feel empowered by the system that they go through. That is a key issue for many children, young people and parents.

That takes us to the nub of the issue, which is how services work together with one another and with parents. As educational psychologists, we are involved in supporting the conversations that happen in meetings that empower people to think

that they are being listened to and that we are working together. We are also able to break down some of the professional boundaries that have been mentioned because, as I said, the solution is sometimes in a change of attitude or belief about the young person or adolescent. A change in the person's belief about themselves can also create the change. That is a key role that educational psychology services play.

I am sure that you are all aware that, in the current economic circumstances, the funding for educational psychology courses at the University of Dundee and the University of Strathclyde has been withdrawn. I do not want to steal the moment, but that is a key point about how we support the services that get it right for children. We are deeply involved in the support that happens in meetings and conversations. That provides a foundation for working, moving on and collaborating, so we need to ensure that we provide those services.

Linda Whitmore: Getting the right classroom support for the child should be driven not by how articulate the parent is and how well they advocate on their child's part, but by the child's needs. We should always focus on that.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I have a comment on dealing with parents and children. I worked in additional support for learning for a couple of years. Individual education plans are generally dry documents. In many, the language that is used is meaningless to parents, who do not understand what they say, and is certainly meaningless to the child. When they draw up plans, well-meaning professionals need to think about how they can ensure that the plans mean something to the people who must read them. I would get parents in who knew every bit of an individual education plan and knew what it meant. They are the people who would negotiate the system no problem. I have heard parents say that they would sign their child's individual education plan, but when I asked them whether they had any questions about it or would like to discuss it, they would answer that they did not, but they did not want to discuss it because they did not have a clue what it meant. Part of my job was to try to explain that, but I could not break away from the systems that were in place, because they were imposed on us by the local authority or whoever.

There are real problems with how we communicate with parents and, which is more important, with pupils, so that they understand what they are being asked to do.

Kristina Woolnough: One way to avoid that is for professionals to share the pro forma documents with parents before they start to use them. I am a middle-class, educated parent and I do not understand IEPs, either. They do not seem

to encapsulate the actual progress that a child makes.

Alan Jones: Individual education plans are often targeted because they are about educational objectives. They are quite concrete.

I guess that the point is that we must get it right in meetings; jargon should be plain speech. Parents, pupils and young people should feel listened to and empowered. People should not sign up to things that they do not understand and they should be clear about their needs—as described by the people around them—and how they will be supported. That is a job for which we are all responsible.

The Convener: I certainly agree with you about jargon. It does not help that we all talk about ASL, IEPs, CSPs and BLTs. That was a joke, by the way.

There is a serious point to be made here. Although people around the table may understand some of the phrases—perhaps not all of them—the fact remains that parents, in the main, do not. Mr Findlay has made a telling point.

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The committee has recently taken evidence in relation to concerns about the achievements of looked-after children, whether they are looked-after at home, or by kinship carers, foster parents or local authorities. I am particularly interested that an assumption was made that each looked-after child would be assessed for additional learning needs. On the one hand, reading the committee papers made me think that genuine concern is shown to a child that has become looked-after—the system has kicked in to say that something is not right. On the other, we know that the end result is often that looked-after children are clearly disadvantaged and end up in other groups that we would rather they did not end up in.

Our assumption was wrong, so how do we ensure that every looked-after child is assessed for additional support learning needs? What are we missing, when looked-after children are clearly the group who most need that support? Mr Butcher referred to looked-after children as perhaps not having a parent who is able to come to school, or a guardian who is not as sensitive to what is happening in school as an active parent who pays attention to the child would be.

John Butcher: There are different subsets of looked-after children, some of which Jean Urquhart alluded to. The evidence shows that not all looked-after children have additional support needs and that, quite rightly, some flourish in very good foster-care placements and have no education-related additional support needs. Some

flourish in different aspects and different care settings.

It seems that the children who have difficulties are those who are looked after at home and are still with their parents. They are looked after often because there are chaotic lifestyles in their family. There may be substance misuse or poverty issues, all of which affect the whole family. The task is to get those parents to engage actively and to understand the jargon of what we are trying to get them involved in. It is the young people in such circumstances who we think could have improved educational attainment and reach much better destinations as they move out of education.

We should focus on looked-after children in terms of their attainment and wider achievements. We often do not acknowledge the wider achievements that young people make that are not formal Scottish Qualifications Authority results. For young people, doing a Duke of Edinburgh's award, or being involved in sports leadership or community leadership programmes are rewarding experiences that help them to get into the labour market. There needs to be the right targeting of resources and the right supports for looked-after children. It is about the journey that the curriculum for excellence will help us to make, which will be crucial for looked-after children when we choose what path they take in senior phases of education.

Alan Jones: There are two sides to the issue. The fact that there is an assumption that there are additional support needs among looked-after children does one thing that is very important—it raises schools' awareness of those children. As was said, because of the different categories of looked-after children, some are quite hidden. That might be fine; it might mean that they are doing very well, which is all good.

Our saying that there is a much broader range of needs, including social and emotional, is consistent with the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. It is great that we are aware, and that we can raise awareness that perhaps, if a child is not doing so well in some way, is upset, or something else is happening, we might just check.

The other side to that—which Jean Urquhart alluded to—is that we must be careful not to label people unnecessarily. A lot of looked-after children are doing very well and we would want to celebrate that, not say something that we do not need to say.

10:30

Jean Urquhart: I will come back on that point first, in order that I do not forget it. The reality is that the majority of looked-after children are not in the category that you talk about. Professionals are

now looking at other areas of achievement for some of the children, so that it is not all about getting one standard grade—or national certificate, as it will be any minute now. The vast majority of children in the looked-after category are not achieving. If our assumption is that looked-after children will be assessed—apparently, 39 per cent are assessed—do you, individually, agree that they should be assessed? Although the children are all different, we tend to categorise them. We know that a high percentage of people in prison have a background of being looked after and that a high percentage of children who are not attaining at school are looked-after children. What action do we need to take in order to help in that?

The Convener: The assumption is that, since November 2010, children who are identified as looked after have all been assessed as having need of additional support for learning unless otherwise indicated, but only around four in 10 are recorded as receiving such support. Why is there a disparity between the assumption of 100 per cent—which, of course, would not be the case—and the actual figure of 40 per cent, given the very poor recorded outcomes for looked-after children?

Kristina Woolnough: Is it possible that not all looked-after children are being picked up just because of the way in which the information is gathered? To me, it is about meeting need. How we establish that need, what the need is and how we support the child are matters for the professionals. Is it being said that looked-after children are more vulnerable to professionals not doing their jobs properly? Is not it about the system of screening, identification and the provision of support rather than about categories of children? I completely agree that many of these children and young people will need a lot of support but, as you say, not all of them will. Is not it about identification and provision rather than about who they are or where they come from?

The Convener: I do not know the answer to that.

Kristina Woolnough: I do not know the answer, but surely there would not be a problem if professionals were picking the children up properly.

John Butcher: I agree with Kristina Woolnough that it is about meeting learners' needs across the board, and looked-after children are just one part of that. We should be identifying and meeting the needs of all our learners who have additional support needs.

The Convener: There is no argument about that. That is not the question. The assumption should be that, since November 2010, all children who are identified as looked after will have

additional support for learning needs unless otherwise identified.

Kristina Woolnough: There is a built-in prejudice.

The Convener: There may well be. Given that that is the case, why are only about 40 per cent recorded as getting that additional support? That may be the correct figure, but it seems low given what we know about the educational outcomes for looked-after children.

Alan Jones: I add to the point about systems and stuff. I do not wish to put it in anybody's backyard, as it were, but there is an assumption that 100 per cent of the children will be assessed for that need. Obviously, as I suggested earlier, some children might remain unidentified. Schools will not always know whether they have assessed 100 per cent of children, particularly if the children in question are looked after at home and so on.

Of course, this brings us back to the issue of communication and GIRFEC, which we were discussing earlier. The better we get at working together and collaborating, the more likely it is that schools will know about children on accommodation orders who are being looked after at home, and will therefore carry out assessments. The fact that kids are not known about and are therefore not assessed might account for the figure. On the other hand, it might have something to do with the number of kids who have been assessed and found not to have additional support needs.

The Convener: We might be talking at cross purposes here, but I will bring in Neil Findlay at this point.

Neil Findlay: Perhaps I can help out. I know from experience that because of resourcing issues there is pressure on teachers to get children off IEPs and group plans, if possible. I do not know whether that is an element, but I am sure that educational psychologists with their mile-long case loads and with whom no one can get an appointment for six months—you can tell me how long it takes to get an appointment in your area, Mr Jones—know about the pressure to get people out of the system.

Kristina Woolnough: As far as the report is concerned, the National Parent Forum's position is that there must be underdiagnosis and underreporting. We are not sure whether it is to do with how information is gathered or whether there is, indeed, underdiagnosis, but that might explain the figures for looked-after children. However, as Neil Findlay said, there are resource pressures.

Neil Findlay: It must be to do with underreporting or overreporting. If the figure in one local authority is 7 per cent and it is 28 per cent in

another, one must be underreporting or the other overreporting.

The Convener: Or both.

Neil Findlay: Indeed.

Kristina Woolnough: That is our main concern. What is actually going on? What does the report show us? I have been asking local authorities to go away and take a school-by-school approach to the issue, because if they begin to gather such information, they will be able to see where schools are underdiagnosing and therefore underreporting. I am not sure that if you were to put all the different types of additional support learning together you would find much of a problem at the other end of the scale with overreporting and overdiagnosing.

Nevertheless, as we all know, there are children who have not been identified and who are going to high school illiterate. They might or might not be looked-after children, but we still have a problem with diagnosis, identification and provision of proper support. We think that the report is really helpful, but we need to drill down into the figures. Local authorities need to compare schools that have similar pupil rolls and to ask why, for example, one has identified 50 children with additional support needs while another has identified only six. That is the kind of raw data that they need in order to do something.

John Butcher: Schools do record that information and the issue is looked at on a school-by-school basis. Schools should know who all their looked-after children are, but there will always be some who are not recorded. The fact is that children go in and out of being looked after all the time and it is a constant task to get information back from the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration, reporters departments or social work colleagues, and to keep records up to date.

Although there is something in Mr Findlay's point about resources, I do not think that there is pressure to take people off plans. In fact, I think that there is pressure to get people on to plans. We understand where you are coming from, but I note that under Education Scotland's inspection regime for schools, quality indicator 5.3 is "Meeting learning needs". Education Scotland analyses and reports on schools' plans for children and young people, and there are significant examples of that in the report that has been placed before the committee. The constant challenges for schools are to keep up with that paperwork and to resource such activity. The anecdotal evidence might suggest that people are wondering, "Would I record or report this or that?" but as far as schools are concerned, the pressure is going the other way.

The Convener: Kristina Woolnough mentioned young people who were—in her words—going to secondary school “illiterate”, so I want to bring in Clare Adamson to ask about early intervention.

Clare Adamson: Obviously there is a huge emphasis on early intervention. The act applies to disabled children under three in the local authority’s ken and children whom are in preschool education. How well has additional support for learning been integrated into early years education?

Kristina Woolnough: My experience is that it is patchy and that it depends on the area and the local authority; it is as patchy as the identification and supporting of children, in that we cannot guarantee it everywhere. It works really well in lots of places, but is not happening in other places. I have quite a lot of experience in the early years partner-provider sector. There are a lot of different organisations and establishments for local authorities to be in touch with. Again, it is about trying to achieve consistently good practice and meeting children’s needs. It is harder in the early years sector, because not all children attend an early years centre and there are, perhaps, chaotic families.

John Butcher: Once children are involved in the early years sector, support is good and it continues to improve. One of the big advantages of the early years sector is that early years establishments form very good relationships with parents. A multitude of resources are going into that early intervention and support, which will continue.

On the health side, a 30-month screening programme is being piloted before being rolled out, which will help to identify at 30 months kids who have potential additional support needs because they are not meeting their developmental milestones—for example, on socialisation. The issue is to exchange information on that with early years establishments and to pull in resources around that for family support. It is crucial that a child at that stage of development has good-quality parenting. If we can work with parents on good-quality parenting and how they understand and support their child’s learning and early development needs, it will have a long-term effect.

Early years is a good battleground, if you like, for our taking forward additional support needs for children. If we get it right early and get the formation of early language and numeracy at that stage, that is all of benefit for the future. A lot of local authorities are beginning to put resources into that and are working reasonably well with the NHS on the GIRFEC agenda.

Alan Jones: Being in educational psychology, I am involved a lot in early years in nursery and pre-

school education and in the transition into primary school. The ASL act has been incredibly supportive for the work that we are involved in. People are beginning to talk a bit more about wider aspects of additional support needs, such as social and emotional needs and parenting.

We are very involved in parenting programmes and in supporting parents. It is about empowering them through working with them so that they feel that they have more control and can support their children. We offer the kind of early years support and intervention that can make a difference so that things do not drift in the children’s lives, which is very important.

Linda Whitmore: I suspect that there may still be a job to do to raise awareness of the fact that the ASL act does not just apply from nursery school or primary 1 upward. Among parents and professionals in some areas there is a misunderstanding that the act applies only to school and is only about education. It will probably take time for awareness to be raised in that respect. To reiterate what has been said, it is obvious that the earlier support can be put in place for a child, and the earlier their needs can be identified and addressed, the better the long-term outcomes will be for that child and the less likely it will be that the family will reach a crisis point. It is therefore common sense to put in support as early as possible.

Clare Adamson: We have talked about looked-after children and children from families with chaotic lifestyles. Are such children engaging with pre-school education and the authorities?

John Butcher: I think that they are: that is where we are getting it right for children at the moment. As soon as we know about such children, they are engaged. We are up at 90 per cent plus for engagement with families on pre-school education. We work well with families through our early intervention strategy and we get resources in and around them to support them.

I think that we are beginning to get that early part right. It is linked to parenting programmes that are run primarily by early years staff who are doing parenting training, and by colleagues in education psychology services who are running training programmes on the positive parenting programme and other parenting initiatives. When we get people in through the door, that is good.

10:45

In early years provision, people are entitled to the equivalent of five half-day sessions per week, but for some young people that may not be enough. How we fund what would be enough for some families—how we support those chaotic families—is an issue. In Glasgow, for example,

there are more than 500 places for what we call vulnerable 2 children. Those are free early years places, for children under the age of three, for which there is no funding. That is how, in one local authority, the needs of vulnerable families are being supported by getting children and their parents in to early years establishments.

The Convener: Are there any contrary views, or does anyone want to make additional comments?

Kristina Woolnough: The early years are where to build the relationships that we have said do not always work so well through the other stages. How do we continue that practice and that engagement of professionals, parents, families and children into primary and secondary education? At secondary level, it falls off something of a cliff. The relationship-building work that is being done in the early intervention programmes is fantastic when it works well, which is a lot of the time, but how do we keep that going? That is the real challenge. The professionals are able to work together and the parents are mostly open to engagement when the children are smaller and probably harder work. How do we keep those early intervention practices going through all the other stages?

Alan Jones: The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 helps the early years agenda in that nurseries and child and family centres are where we begin to see children's developing needs. We and education partners are often able to liaise and to bring in the NHS and other services when something has been spotted. As we said earlier, we must recognise the importance of a school-focused approach for children and young people, including in the early years. Because they spend all that time in the centre getting to know the staff, relationships are built up and it is a brilliant and critical place to start to get that right.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I have some questions about variability in co-ordinated support plans, although we have already covered the issue to some extent.

It is perhaps not always well understood that additional support for learning covers a wide range of different needs, from more able pupils to those with specific learning difficulties. The largest group is pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. The discrepancy in provision between local authority areas is reasonably understandable. For example, one would not be surprised to see that Glasgow City Council comes out top in the figures for support with English as a second language. An inconsistency that absolutely screams out, however, is that Aberdeenshire Council records 28 per cent of its pupils as having additional support needs whereas North Lanarkshire Council records only 6.7 per cent.

Kristina Woolnough commented on how we collect data and how the systems for that are functioning. There seems to be enough evidence of inconsistency that, surely to goodness, alarm bells should be ringing. On the basis that it is probably less likely that there is overdiagnosis, we can start at one end and work up from there to try to provide a degree of confidence about there being consistency. The situation is not going to be homogeneous, but such discrepancies are worthy of note and some action.

John Butcher: I totally agree. Some of the statistics in the report are worthy of note. You mentioned Aberdeenshire, which seems to be the hotbed of additional support needs in Scotland. I suspect that there is some double counting in the statistics. One issue is that children often have more than one additional support need. A kid with a physical disability will often have an associated learning difficulty. Perhaps those are being double counted in some of the statistics. Sometimes, we are comparing apples and pears.

It is not easy to capture the information. For example, some schools think that they are dealing effectively with young people with dyslexia within the school setting—I am sure that they are—and they do not necessarily record that work in the statistics. Perhaps the way forward is to provide clearer guidance on how the statistics are gathered, categorised and presented to the committee. However, ADES does not want a bureaucracy to be set up around the gathering of statistics, unless those statistics make a difference to the way forward.

Liam McArthur: I want to tie the issue to the first question that you were asked, which was about gauging success by the number of complaints. Is there a correlation between where complaints arise and the identified levels of assessed additional support needs, or is the situation too random for that?

John Butcher: It is random, because local authorities have different provision. In many local authorities, young people with complex needs are in with the general school population, whereas in other local authorities the situation is different. For example, Glasgow has a huge additional support needs special education system, with 32 specialist resources that kids go to. There are few complaints about that, because parents see it as the answer.

The situation is complex. Kids with additional support needs that arise from bereavement or social issues at home might be effectively dealt with by pastoral care teams in secondary schools. That will be recorded on the children's pastoral notes in the education recording systems, but it might not subsequently be reported through the statistics that we are talking about. One issue that

the committee has identified is the complexity of meeting children's needs and the variety of ways in which they are met in Scotland. There is no great answer to that.

You asked about complaints. A significant number of complaints are dealt with locally and effectively by staff in schools, mostly to the satisfaction of parents. As my colleague Kristina Woolnough said, some parents might not have the appropriate skills to take an issue further and might remain slightly dissatisfied. However, I think that children's needs are being met, although of course we could make the situation better. Ratcheting up issues into the complaints world is not the answer. Good local dispute resolution or mediation is a much better way of dealing with issues.

Liam McArthur: I agree. As I looked through the figures, I found that even the discrepancies between island groups—obviously, I am more familiar with their figures—are slightly counterintuitive and do not follow a per-head-of-population trend or anything that I am aware of that is happening in education or wider care services. Therefore, there is an issue to do with data collection or the way in which the statistics are captured.

John Butcher: I absolutely agree. Some of the figures just do not make sense. They tend to be a snapshot of when the figures were collected. For example, the statistics have a category for deafblind children. Glasgow has no children in that category in the statistics, yet I have a school for 56 kids that is for dual sensory impairment, or deafblind kids. That is not recorded in the figures because of when and how the information was recorded. There is no question but that issues arise about how we record the information.

Linda Whitmore: I agree with John Butcher that we need much clearer guidelines on data collection. It should not be left to local authorities to decide how to go about collecting data, which is basically what is happening. That is why we have such huge variability. We need clear guidelines, and how to collect the data needs to be clearly stated to every local authority so that we get a much more consistent picture. Unless we have robust statistical evidence on the numbers of disabled children and the categories that they come into, we will not have a baseline from which to work, and we will have only a fuzzy picture of the distribution of additional support needs across Scotland. It is not just about the data; how to collect it is an important piece of the picture. We need a clearer idea of the national need and how we can meet it.

Alan Jones: We have talked a lot about additional support needs and are very much locating them within children. However, when we

look at supporting change and what makes a difference, we should realise that supporting schools and staff to improve the quality of teaching and learning and to build better relationships with children and better learning relationships makes a significant difference. Arguably, the support needs include those things as well. It is about how children are managed and their relationship with the teaching staff. If we get those things right, that can be part of the solution.

I know that some schools work hard and that the quality of teaching and learning in them is amazing. Perhaps in some of them, fewer children will be on additional support plans, or the lowest form of planning. If they receive really good support because they have literacy difficulties, for example, they will be provided for in the school itself. The child's additional support needs are important, but we should also remember that supporting teachers and other staff who work with the children makes a big difference.

John Butcher: I absolutely agree with Alan Jones. However, he did not mention supporting parents' needs. A key aspect of supporting children is the impact that they have in their family circumstances, how that supports the child's education, and the family's aspirations or poverty of aspirations. We need to be much clearer in our work with our colleagues in social work and the voluntary sector—none of us has mentioned them yet—about how we work and engage with families and get their capacity built up to impact on the lives of their children. Those are key issues as we go forward and in respect of getting it right for every child.

Kristina Woolnough: I reiterate that, in a way, the issue is not the statistics themselves, and it is not always how they are gathered; rather, it is what they will be used for. It is how local authorities will use them, and what they might be asked to do to check that all schools are properly screening and supporting children. That is what really matters from our point of view. The exercise of collecting the statistics is useful in contributing towards that.

Liam McArthur: I want to follow up on co-ordinated support plans. Earlier, we heard about the impenetrability of the IEPs. The Scottish Government's annual report acknowledges that there is

"inconsistency and variability in ... the extent to which authorities and practitioners view CSPs as useful in planning and improving provision for learners."

That seems to be borne out in the figures. There was an expectation that there would be between 11,500 and 13,500 CSPs at any given time, but the figure is nearer 3,500. I notice that, from the top to the bottom, the figure for the local authority with the highest ASN with CSP percentage is

around 15 per cent, whereas one local authority has a figure of 0.5 per cent. Can you shed any light on whether CSPs are delivering any real value or whether they are seen as a barrier to learning? If that is the case, are there ways in which we can improve them so that they do what they were intended to do and provide support to the most needy?

John Butcher: The concept of CSPs is really interesting, because we are talking about the Government's policy—getting it right for every child—taking us forward and, potentially, a single child's plan. If we introduce new children's legislation in 2014, as is planned, we need to take some of the anomalies out of the ASL act and take the best out of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and get to a situation in which we have a single assessment and a single plan for a child.

11:00

A plan is a plan is a plan. It is arguable whether it is necessary to go down the prescriptive road of a CSP. It gives parents confidence that measures are in place and they have something that they can take to a tribunal if it does not work, but it is still a plan. It records how we will meet that child's needs, but it does not necessarily record the impact of that.

I would rather have a single plan for the child, because the interpretation of whether a CSP is needed is borne out by the figures that you quoted. For example, why do we need a CSP for a child who is in a school for kids with physical disabilities, such as Ashcraig school in Glasgow, where there are resident teams of physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists who work with the children? A CSP is about how we co-ordinate those services, but those services are already in the school. Why do we need a CSP to meet those children's needs when any plan in the school will show the same thing?

My point is about the interpretation of the purpose of a CSP. Is it just to ensure that people deliver services? There is evidence to show that, sometimes, CSPs do not even make that happen, which is why people end up at tribunals. I would rather have good-quality assessment and planning to meet children's needs. That is a good direction of travel in which GIRFEC will take us. I am convinced that, if we align GIRFEC and the new children's legislation, take the worst parts out of the ASL act and get good-quality assessment and planning for children, that will help to get the right things in place for children at the right time. Good-quality assessments are key to that.

My colleague Alan Jones mentioned that the Government has withdrawn funding for

postgraduate training courses for educational psychologists. We need to talk about the training of teachers and the role that psychologists play in that, but we cannot make any progress with the agenda unless we have the right people in place to do the right assessments, to get the right information about children and to ensure that their needs are met. That is teachers, psychologists, parents, social workers and health professionals. We need to think about how we will fund the system in future.

Kristina Woolnough: I have never heard parents say that they do not want CSPs any more. I would ask why there are so few in certain local authorities. Some local authorities were slow to get moving on them and did not like them because they involved a big workload. Why are CSPs not used in some places? What do local authorities—the ones that do not use them and the ones that use them a lot—think is wrong with them?

Parents want clarity. They want the provision set out and they want it to be legally enforceable, because that is the starting point for holding the providers to a common plan. CSPs are legal documents, which is their importance.

Liam McArthur: Is John Butcher's point not that, to be effective, any plan will require a level of co-ordination? The level of co-ordination will become more significant the more people are involved and the more complex the needs are.

Kristina Woolnough: The plan needs to be legally enforceable. A lot of work went into the additional support for learning act. The debate about what to do in a children's services bill is one to be had in the future. We are where we are. Why are CSPs used so prolifically or so well in some areas and not in others? That is the next step.

Alan Jones: I agree with that. I also agree with John Butcher. As an educational psychologist, I go into special schools. There is a lot of special school provision in Edinburgh. It is not quite as large as in Glasgow, but it is close. In those places, we have physiotherapists, speech and language therapists and all the other services.

When I go into those schools and we talk about education planning for children's needs, funnily enough, the one document that is really useful is the working document, which is an individual education plan. It is not legally enforceable, but it gets used and reviewed every few months and the targets get changed, with the proviso that they have been properly explained to parents and people who are involved.

The IEP is a working document. The support is already provided in the school. That is a reason why I have seen a lower level of co-ordinated support plans in many places where I work. In the

legislation, the provision was intended to co-ordinate the involvement of outside agencies.

Of course, this is also about inclusion. Support provided by individuals and services in a mainstream setting must be co-ordinated, but with the various pieces of legislation coming together and with GIRFEC's single-plan approach, the system will become much more understandable to parents and schools and we will be able to get rid of some of the anomalies that have been pointed out.

The Convener: Clare Adamson has a brief—and I emphasise the word “brief”—supplementary question.

Clare Adamson: I was going to open up the whole issue of the voluntary sector, but I think that it is too big for a brief question.

The Convener: I am not trying to inhibit your questioning, Clare. On you go.

Clare Adamson: During our looked-after children inquiry, we saw examples of voluntary sector work in Glasgow. In my own area, a charity is working with three high schools to put children through the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme and so on. However, is there a role in the process for an independent advocacy service for children in situations in which the parent or carer is not as able to be the young child's voice?

Linda Whitmore: As a representative of a voluntary sector organisation, I will respond first. We already have the Government-funded take note advocacy service, which is for children whose cases can be referred to the Additional Support Needs Tribunal for Scotland, but it is quite limited in the number of advocates that it has and its remit.

I believe that there is much wider role for advocacy. We have mentioned complaints a few times this morning, and I think that parents would feel more confident in speaking up for themselves if they knew that they were supported by an advocate. Moreover, given that, as we have pointed out, young people do not always feel involved in their plans and given that their views might not be listened to in the process as carefully as they should be, Enable Scotland would be very much in favour of advocacy not only for parents but for children and young people. It can smooth the process and give parents confidence that they are not on their own and that they have someone to back them up. Advocates do not have to speak for them; all they have to do is sit beside them, work things through with them and give them the confidence to take things forward if they need to.

Indeed, if parents have an advocate, they can get problems resolved at an earlier stage instead of having to take the matter as far as a tribunal. It

is just a matter of having someone else to talk things through with and give the support that is needed. I do not know whether Kristina Woolnough agrees from a parent's perspective.

Kristina Woolnough: To help professionals, we wrote a document for the enquire advice service's annual conference called “A Plea from Parents”, which, among other things, asked that parents be able to bring someone to meetings. That is a pretty basic thing. These meetings are like a doctor's appointment: you might have a conversation, but do not hear anything that is said. No matter how experienced or articulate they might be—and in line with the saying that people learn only if they are emotionally engaged—if a person is upset or concerned, they will find it quite hard to manage such situations and hear and understand what is being said. In that respect, it would be helpful to have someone else present.

Moreover, in such meetings, people are usually faced with a wall of professionals. I do not know whether they are all necessarily compromised by resources but they certainly operate within a context and it is quite difficult for parents to understand who they all are, what they do and where they come from. It is all about developing trust, and anything that helps in that respect would help everyone to make progress.

Alan Jones: I totally agree with those points. I have been at a lot of meetings at which someone has been present to advocate on behalf of a parent.

I mentioned empowerment and the importance of listening to the views of the child and the parent. An important role that the professional services, educational psychology included, play is that we work hard to ensure that children and parents feel as comfortable as possible about going to such meetings. We often work with them before meetings to help them to prepare, because we realise that when they go into the room and face a wall of people—it is a bit like coming here today—their emotions might come to the surface. They might feel a bit blank and might not say what they wanted to say.

That goes back to the point that I made about beliefs, attitudes and mindsets. A lot of this is about working with people and understanding—as we in educational psychology do—that such situations are emotional and difficult, and that they need to be prepared for. It is not the case that, simply by organising the meeting and getting everyone together in a room, things will all work out fine and we will get a wonderful plan. We work with the children beforehand to gather their views, which might involve pictures being drawn, and to listen to them in preparation for the meeting. I think that it is brilliant when young people are

involved in such meetings and can speak about the issues and feel supported in doing so.

The voluntary sector has a big role to play when it comes to advocacy, but education professionals have a role to play, too. That will involve a bit of a change of mindset. We need to ensure that the tone is right and that we deal with the emotional nature of the occasion. How we approach people and build relationships in meetings is as important as the meetings themselves and what might be seen as the concrete strategies.

Kristina Woolnough: I would not like to get too hung up on meetings, because what counts is delivery in the classroom. There is probably sometimes a supporting or observing role for voluntary organisations to play in the classroom, as well.

John Butcher: We are probably all unanimous in thinking that it would not be a bad thing if more support were provided for young people but, as Kristina Woolnough says, the issue is that we do not sell good-quality teachers and support assistants short. They work with children and young people on a day-to-day basis, and they often advocate strongly on their behalf. It is not necessary to put other layers on top of that, although it might be necessary to provide better training for teachers and support staff, whom we have not really talked about.

There are two other issues that ought to be borne in mind. Children have children's rights services—most local authorities provide such a service to advocate on children's behalf; in general, the service is based around social work services. In addition, there is the corporate parenting role that local authorities play in relation to looked-after children, which could be developed further from the point of view of the responsibilities of elected members as corporate parents for children who are looked after across the system.

The Convener: Thank you. You mentioned staff training, which I know that Neil Bibby wants to ask about.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I will begin with a question for Linda Whitmore from Enable. You are in favour of mandatory training for school staff who deal with children and young people who have additional support needs. What training would you like them to get? We have heard that it would be impossible for everyone to be trained in every disability.

Linda Whitmore: We are realistic about it. We are not asking that every teacher and every support for learning assistant should know about every learning disability and every condition on the autistic spectrum. That would not be realistic, and it is not what we are asking for.

We are asking for a basic level of training to be provided, which should consist of three elements. First, it should provide an awareness of learning disability and autism, and what that means for the child. Secondly, it should cover strategies for communicating with and managing the behaviour of those children. Thirdly, all that should be underpinned by an understanding of the ASL act and inclusion and equalities agendas.

We would like such training to be a mandatory element of initial teacher education. I understand that the initial teacher education degrees are to be restructured in the coming years. We would like the new degrees to include a mandatory element that covers the aspects that I have mentioned.

In addition, we would like there to be a programme of continuing professional development for teachers and support assistants, which those elements would be built into. We would like that to be a requirement—not an option, as it is at the moment, and not an elective evening session to which people do not have to go if they do not want to—so that people have the basic understanding.

11:15

A lot of good practice is already out there. We are not asking for the wheel to be reinvented. We say that we should build on what exists. We have a good foundation and a lot of local authorities are doing the training well. We should make training mandatory and build on what is there, so that all existing teachers and newly qualified teachers feel more confident and better equipped to meet the needs of all the learners in their classroom.

The chances are very high that, at some stage in their career, a teacher will have in their classroom a child with a learning disability or autism. When combined, children with learning disabilities and those with autism form the largest category of children who have additional support needs. It is important that those learners' needs are met. If we can meet that group's needs, we can meet the needs of all children in the classroom.

We should build on the existing foundation. It is not for us to prescribe exactly how training would be delivered, but perhaps half a day's training or a day's training per year and an annual refresher could be provided. We are not asking for huge amounts of resources to be thrown at that, because we know that huge amounts of resources are not available. We are saying that some areas have provided such training, so why not restructure the training so that all local authorities deliver it on a mandatory basis?

Neil Bibby: Is there a particular problem in education? Your report focuses on education staff,

as opposed to health or social work staff. Are other staff adequately trained, whereas there is a problem in education that needs to be addressed?

Linda Whitmore: We focused on education because the campaign came from parents. We have a young families support committee, which raises its concerns with us. The parents on that committee said clearly that they felt that one barrier to their children achieving their full potential was that they were not being adequately supported in the classroom. I have no doubt that, if we did a similar exercise in relation to the health service, many parents would feel similarly about their experiences of the health system.

We cannot focus on everything. We focused on the education campaign because parents spoke clearly to us about their experience and said that, if their children were supported in the classroom by teachers who felt confident and equipped to meet their children's needs, that would make a massive difference to them and their families. That does not mean that many parents have not had a different and positive experience of the school system, but it is clear that the additional support for learning system is failing many children.

As has been said today, there is nothing wrong with the legislation and the policies. What is needed is in place and the 2004 act is excellent, but the system falls down in practice and in implementation. It is not working in some instances, for a raft of reasons, some of which we have discussed.

We must strengthen what is in place. The system will never be perfect, because we do not live in a perfect world and we are not perfect people, but we can make it better. Putting strong, robust and mandatory training in place would be a good building block in improving the excellent system that we have.

Alan Jones: Educational psychologists—certainly those with whom I work—spend a lot of time helping and supporting teaching staff in schools to manage things and do what is best for children with additional support needs. That is a big part of our job. Part of that links to the wider issue that inclusion in mainstream schools requires resources, training and support.

A key aspect is reflective practice support for learning assistants and teachers. New issues and new ways of operating constantly arise, and people must deal with things flexibly to support individuals.

We talk a lot about labels for children such as autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, but every child is an individual. Professional and flexible support is key for teaching staff so that they can use their skills to manage the additional support need. The policy and legislation in

Scotland are driving a brilliant education system for the 21st century. We have got right the curriculum for excellence's focus on the process of learning and the quality of relationships. For example, there is increased awareness of the importance of talk for learning. The dialogue between teacher and pupil is a big part of what makes for success in the classroom.

The Donaldson review of teaching in the 21st century was important. The key bit for me is how we build into initial teacher training more awareness of the breadth of additional support needs and how we approach them. The key aspects are communication, relationships, flexibility of response and an understanding that there is no toolbag that you can take out that has 10 things that you do to fix the child—that never happens.

Flexibility is linked to reflective practice. The issue is how we build that into initial teacher training and beyond—CPD was mentioned in that regard—and how we support teaching staff, learning assistants and management in mainstream schools to reflect on practice for the population of children that they have in order that children with additional support needs can be included as far as possible in those schools. Educational psychologists are involved in that job all the time, as are lots of other support services. We need to be clear that that is a key pillar in the process of implementing the curriculum for excellence, GIRFEC and the ASL act. It is not about just having a million more people on the classroom floor; it is about how we use and reflect on practice and how we get it right, with teachers and staff feeling very supported.

Teaching is a very stressful profession. We have all seen front-page news stories about teachers being stressed out, which is a difficult thing to manage. We need to appreciate that on-going support is needed in that regard.

Neil Bibby: There appear to be differences among local authorities on the necessity of training, the key staff to target and the time and capacity for training. What are the witnesses thoughts on that?

John Butcher: There are two aspects, the first of which is initial teacher training. I met with the universities yesterday to talk about initial teacher training. Parts of initial training—on raising awareness, particularly around additional support needs and the different aspects that teachers may come across in class—must be mandatory. Promoting positive behaviour should also be a key aspect of initial teacher training.

It is then up to local authorities to have appropriate continuing professional development in place for new teachers and the staff with whom

they work, wherever they work, and to target the right courses so that the teachers understand the needs of children and young people. Psychological services are key to supporting that training and development. Partners in social work and health are also key, for example for children who need to be fed, who have respiratory requirements or who need to be changed appropriately or hoisted. Key aspects of staff training must be delivered by NHS professionals. The GIRFEC agenda will help us to continue to develop that training agenda, but it must involve joint training.

How we support children's learning is another key education and training agenda. We rely on support staff and we must ensure that continuing professional development for them is not ignored, because they are key in supporting children's learning. We can often also learn from parents because they know their children well and know what their additional support needs are. They can help staff to understand how to work best with their children.

Kristina Woolnough: To me, the problem is in the classroom in secondary schools. Many parents still come across additional support for learning deniers and, worst of all, children experience them. We need broad awareness training on responsibilities—not just in relation to the act or the range of difficulties, but in relation to the fact that everybody is responsible for supporting children properly. Teachers sometimes do not realise the enormous leaps that children can make if they are supported properly. That takes me back to the point that training is all very well, but the issue is what happens in the classroom. Is training implemented? Are teachers helping children to learn effectively? Monitoring and evaluation are needed. It is all very well to have additional support for learning teachers who receive training and then cascade it, but the issue is how we hold classroom teachers to account.

Teacher training will not necessarily help with transition, by which I mean transition from one year group to another, not just from the early years to primary or from primary to secondary. Many parents ask why, given that schools know that their children are in the system, they do not plan ahead. At the post-16 stage and at every other point, each year, each teacher seems to have to learn all over again about the children. Whether it is subject teachers in secondary or primary school teachers, why does the learning curve have to start all over again every year? Can training address that, or do we need training that involves observation and support? As Alan Jones said, we need a culture among professionals of openness to seeking specialist advice when they need it. We need to ensure that people have sufficient time and opportunity to find that expert advice.

Teachers cannot know everything, but they need to know their responsibilities.

The Convener: I am aware of the time, so I want to move on, unless Alan Jones has a very critical point.

Alan Jones: I just wanted to say that the point that Kristina Woolnough makes is the key—we cannot expect people just to know how to do things, because that is context dependent. The support changes every year and children change all the time—we all change all the time. That is why I talked about space for reflection. Learning assistants, for example, work wall to wall, but they need an opportunity to reflect on their practice. They need to be supported even more regularly than I think Kristina Woolnough suggested. One key issue is about a mindset change in relation to how we support teaching and learning support staff to do what we are asking, which is to be flexible and skilled. We need to support them.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): We do not have a breakdown of the cost of providing additional support for learning. Would it be useful if we had such a breakdown?

Kristina Woolnough: Part of the reason for collecting information on support needs was to find out who spends what on supporting children and young people and whether there are any gaps. I am particularly interested in invisible support costs. As has been said, many establishments support children without a direct funding allocation—the costs are absorbed into the running costs of the establishments. It would be helpful to get information on those costs. If we were confident that the audit was comprehensive and picked up every additional support need, no matter how it was met, we would have a full picture and we could see how the work was being funded—or not funded. At least we would then know what we needed to consider. We do not yet have such a picture.

Those substantial hidden costs are a burden on the investment that schools make across the board. Hours are not allocated or funded by the local authority. Learning assistants are directed to provide support, but hours are not allocated for that. There is a lot of invisible cost to individual professionals who carry burdens that are simply unrecognised. It would be helpful for everybody to know how much schools invest in support for learning.

John Butcher: Because of the complexity of additional support needs, it is difficult to cost provision without a clear framework for how to do that. Kristina Woolnough talked about invisible costs. How do we cost the support that is provided by a pastoral care teacher to one family compared with the support for another family? How do we

cost the staff investment in one resource compared with another? How do we compare apples with pears, or what one local authority does with what another does? What would we use such figures for? Would we say that one local authority spends a certain amount on additional support needs and another does not?

It would be really difficult to strip out the huge amounts that are going in. Certain key aspects could be stripped out: we could say, "This is what we spend in this area, and this is what we spend in that area", as we spend so many millions on psychological services and so many millions on physical disabilities, but that would be hard to do.

11:30

Joan McAlpine: You mentioned that in Glasgow there is not so much emphasis on mainstreaming and there are specialist centres.

John Butcher: That is a slight misinterpretation. We have an historical sector of special schools and additional support needs schools, and a lot of specialist resources. However, that does not mean that we do not engage with parents on whether their children or young people want to go into a mainstream school—we offer that type of support. We just happen to have historical resources which, to be honest, suit a lot of parents.

Joan McAlpine: That is fine. I just thought that it would be helpful to find out whether the cost of delivering the service in that way is different from the cost of delivering it through mainstream provision.

John Butcher: There is certainly an issue with economies of scale and there is potentially an issue with grouping together specialist teachers and support staff, and with the ability to bring groups of young people and groups of specialist NHS staff or social work staff into one area. That would result in economies of scale, but as soon as services are dispersed, they can become more expensive. Some people might say that they would become less expensive; it depends on how we count. Statistics are statistics.

The other issue with cost is how we count the voluntary sector contribution. All local authorities are hugely involved in investing in voluntary sector providers. We have the Place2Be and schools counselling services delivering in Glasgow, but every local authority is different. Getting a real picture of what is spent on additional support needs will be very difficult, because it is hard to compare one local authority with another.

Alan Jones: Much of our education policy clearly states the presumption of mainstreaming; the inclusion agenda is very strong, and rightly so. From my practical experience as an educational

psychologist, I know that there is a need for more support and resources to give people—families and parents, and schools and their staff—confidence in inclusion and in the mainstream option. I am not laying that at anyone's door, but there are cities and places in Scotland that have a great number of specialist school resources. One down side to that is that there may be a dependency on believing that the special school is always the best option.

There are cases in which the special school is the best option, but in some cases—I have come across a number—there is confidence in the mainstream system. The support that the staff in schools receive must be up to the right level to enable them to fulfil our policy agenda and the drive to ensure that the majority of children and young people can be included, engaged and involved in their local mainstream school.

Joan McAlpine: Is cost a factor? If a child has very complex needs and requires a lot of support in a mainstream school, that will be more expensive than the delivery and economies of scale that John Butcher spoke about.

John Butcher: Cost should never be a factor. It is about meeting children's needs, and about whether a child can benefit from mainstream school. Even in Glasgow, where we have that special sector, we want children to go to mainstream schools when that is possible. That would be a choice for the parents and the child, and we would support the child in that.

Mainstream schools offer children opportunities that special schools do not, and vice versa. We support the presumption of mainstreaming in the 2004 act, and we want that to happen. Cost should not be a factor. I agree with Alan Jones that it is sometimes about parental confidence in the system.

Joan McAlpine: Does cost become a factor in balancing the needs of one child against education as a whole?

Kristina Woolnough: Realistically, that must be a factor, whether people say it is or not. When it comes down to the final issue of resources, professionals will often say, "Actually, we can't afford that" and I think that parents understand that.

At a recent consultation event for the Doran review, we collected evidence from a raft of parents—more than 20, I think—of children with complex needs from different authorities, and we had a really amazing discussion in which they shared their views on many different issues. The key issue that they raised was that although they want mainstreaming—and most are getting it—provision and funding are patchy. It is not always about money, but in areas where provision is poor

money is often used as the excuse. I do not know that having a broad picture of costs would help with that; instead, we need to get things sorted on the ground and remove barriers to professionals providing the right service for children.

Alan Jones: That is the key point that we have all returned to again and again. This is about nothing other than need—the need of the child and the family—and in that respect the experience of mainstreaming, which is all about having peer relations, the normalisation of life and getting used to the world as it is, is invaluable. We hear your question, but the important thing that we are all saying loud and clear is that when the need drives and the child wants to have the experience that is provided by inclusion and mainstreaming—or, indeed, the family wants the child to have it—we should be getting that right and making resources available. We certainly need more resources for training and support—certainly for the middle-level services, support and training in reflective practice and so on that we provide to teachers and learning assistants. Those things make a difference. Of course, we must also ensure that physical resources are available to children with profound disabilities.

Kristina Woolnough: The parents at the consultation event were very specific; indeed, they compared provision in their various schools and local authority areas and found that, even within a single local authority area, there are different allocations of physiotherapy, speech therapy and so on. No one could understand why provision is so disparate; parents do not get X number of hours of this or that therapy because of the child's need. It all seems to be about affordability and allocations.

The same happens in early years provision. In Edinburgh, for example, parents are allocated only 10 hours of learning support for a nursery place; they never get, say, 12 and a half hours.

The Convener: John Butcher wants to come in, but I ask him to make his point very brief.

John Butcher: Although I accept Kristina Woolnough's comments, I point out that, with regard to parents saying that their child gets only so many hours of speech therapy compared with another, these are professional decisions that are made by speech and language therapists, not educationists, and are based on their assessment of that child's need. Parents are great and should be advocates for their children, but sometimes education does not control the resources that are given to children to meet medicalised needs.

The Convener: I am very aware of the time, but I will let in Neil Findlay.

Neil Findlay: I will just summarise a few of the points that have been made. It is naive in the

extreme to suggest that cost is not a factor. It is and we know it is. It is a factor—not the only factor, but a factor, nonetheless—for some authorities that are moving out of special school provision into mainstream provision.

Alan Jones has already summed up very well the complex role that ASL teachers, assistants and the rest of that community play. Depending on the issues that pupils have, a teacher might need to take a firm disciplinarian approach with one pupil and a gentle nurturing approach with the one next to them, with the approach to everyone else being in between those. I have to say that, when I was doing my postgraduate training, I never touched on either this area or related issues such as how to deal with parents. We were just supposed to learn such things as we went along.

The fact is that many people tend to fall into this line of work. Many start out as subject specialists or primary teachers but for one reason or another—perhaps, if we are being honest, because they cannot get a job in another area—they go into additional support for learning. If, like me, you get a vastly experienced member of staff to feed off and learn from, you are very fortunate.

As you all know, there are hundreds of long-established learning support teachers in schools and, if they all fell under a bus tomorrow, the system would grind to an immediate halt. That is the danger that we are in, because the system does not teach us how to be in this line of work—it is something that people just pick up and learn as they go.

At the nub of the issue there are various pressures, such as the cuts to the educational psychology budgets—the local authority in my area has got rid of two educational psychologists, which means that it takes people a long time to get appointments. In a time of budget difficulties, support staff are an easy target, so a swathe of support staff have been lost. Many of the CPD courses that relate to ASL are intense courses such as reading recovery, which go on for weeks and require the teacher to be absent from the classroom. At a time when there is a crisis in supply teaching, the ability of people to access that CPD is going to be restricted as well. All those pressures fill me with foreboding. Would anyone like to comment on those issues?

Alan Jones: As you said before, in order to realise the aims of the ASL act, staff must be trained and supported. If there were an amendment or an addition to the act to ensure that teacher training needs include elements around ASL, that would be good. As you say, it is not only the initial training but the on-going training that is important. One of my interests is how we can continue to support people in a career that takes twists and turns and involves different pupils and

different situations all the time. How are we guiding and supporting teaching staff, learning assistants and other staff who work with difficult cases? Social workers have supervision for when they deal with difficult cases and difficult meetings, but there is nothing like that in education, other than the supervision that goes on during probation.

Education is about involvement with children and families and involves a lot of difficult emotional matters. How are we supporting professionals to do their job in that context, aside from the initial training? What is there that supports teachers and learning assistants to feel less stressed and to look after their own health and wellbeing, so that they are able to do their best with the children? That needs to be considered.

Linda Whitmore: Supporting the needs of learners with additional support needs should not be something that teachers just fall into in the way that Neil Findlay just described. At the moment, some make a reasoned choice to do an elective ASL module when they are taking their degree, but some student teachers never make that choice and can go through their whole teaching career without being required to undertake training on meeting the needs of children with additional support needs. That should not be allowed to happen. It should be a fundamental part of initial teacher training and CPD for teachers and support staff. The curriculum for excellence and the GIRFEC agenda are designed to meet the needs of every child in the classroom, and a significant proportion of learners in every classroom have additional support needs. We should not push them to the side and forget about them because it is too costly to train people to address their needs.

As I stated previously, the foundations are already there. We have the necessary legislation, the code of practice, the guidelines and a lot of good training programmes. However, we should make that training mandatory. That will give teachers a starting point to build on, and when they encounter pupils with a particular need, they can have focused training to enable them to support the needs of that child. They should all have a good general grounding in what additional support for learning is all about.

As a colleague of mine likes to say, we should not let the perfect get in the way of the good. We will never get the system perfect, but if we ensure that the correct training is in place, we can certainly make it better.

11:45

Kristina Woolnough: Additional support for learning is not an add-on—it is integral to being a good teacher. I have never understood why taking

an holistic interest in the child and the child's development is not integral to the training and recruitment of teachers. Curriculum for excellence reflects the fact that additional support for learning is not an add-on or a thing that people choose to do: it is good practice.

The vast majority of children will have an additional support for learning need at some point. Being an adult who is open to helping, to looking at what can be done and to working with others on that is pretty fundamental for people who want to work with children.

John Butcher: The key is good-quality training of staff. As Neil Findlay said, that takes time and money. Backfilling posts when people are out doing training has a cost. Supply teachers have a cost. Most local authorities do not have supply support assistants, and training support assistants is complex. That involves challenges.

We are not naive enough to say that the issue is not about money at some points. We in local authorities have a responsibility to get best value, but the aim should be to meet children's needs. I always take the principled first position that the question is how we meet children's needs, after which we think about the money. It is not just about the money.

We have some mandatory training in all local authorities that works well—the mandatory training for teachers and support staff on child protection and the care and welfare of children. All staff in local authorities get child care and protection training. Perhaps we should make other bits mandatory, such as awareness raising. That is a challenge for us. We would welcome and are up for that challenge as we move forward with new legislation on the GIRFEC agenda.

The Convener: I have a final quick question, to which I ask for quick responses. I will start with John Butcher, because he finished on a point about improvement. If you could do one thing to improve the legislation, what would it be?

John Butcher: Legislation needs to come together. If we are serious about getting it right for every child, any new children's legislation that is introduced must bring together the ASL legislation, the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. We must have one set of legislation and make the legislation simpler and less bureaucratic.

Kristina Woolnough: Many of us spent many years contributing to the additional support for learning act, so I would not like its values and principles to be lost under what John Butcher suggests.

John Butcher: No.

Kristina Woolnough: I would not like those elements to be incorporated, absorbed and lost. The key at this point is implementation rather than legislation, as we have just revisited the ASL act.

Alan Jones: I pretty much agree with John Butcher. The curriculum for excellence, getting it right for every child and additional support for learning all cross over and do wonderful things. We do not want to lose any of that. The key is how we move forward. Perhaps we should legislate on how we support teaching staff in general to support the child's holistic needs, which we have just spoken about. That is a big relational job on which support is needed. We must ensure that such resources are in place.

Linda Whitmore: I will not come down in favour of one piece of legislation over another. Whatever we have in place, we must always remember that it is about the child or young person and their life. That means life beyond school and not just what happens in school. What happens in school and in the early years can have a massive impact on the rest of a person's life and on the wider family. Whatever legislation we have, we should make it work in practice. We must ensure that the professionals who are tasked with putting the legislation into practice understand what it means for the child and their family and are trained to meet every learner's needs.

The Convener: I thank you all for your contributions. I am sure that the evidence has been fascinating for the whole committee.

I said before the meeting started that we might write to the Government immediately after the meeting or after the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has given evidence. I do not know whether members' views on that are clearer now. My view is that clear issues in the evidence that we heard include the need for clearer guidelines, which came up strongly, as well as training and variation across the country. That may cover most of the issues, unless members have other points on which they want us to write to the Government. We can ask the cabinet secretary about those matters when he appears before us.

Meeting closed at 11:50.

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