OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 6 March 2019

Session 5

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 6 March 2019

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE
8th Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
*Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)
*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Seamus Searson (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association)
Kayleigh Thorpe (Enable Scotland)
Nick Ward (National Autistic Society Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 6 March 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decisions on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning. I warmly welcome everyone to the eighth meeting in 2019 of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind those present to turn their mobile phones to silent so that they do not disrupt the meeting. Apologies have been received from my colleague Gordon MacDonald.

Under agenda item 1, the committee is invited to decide whether to take item 3 in private. Do members agree to take that in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: We also need to decide whether to consider in private at our next meeting our draft report on Scottish national standardised assessments and our approach to the subject choices inquiry. Are members content to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Additional Support Needs

10:00

The Convener: Under item 2, we continue our evidence taking on additional support needs, following on from our 2017 report on the subject. We will hear from witnesses from organisations and practitioner representatives who work directly with children and young people with additional support needs.

I welcome Kayleigh Thorpe, the head of campaigns, policy and activism at Enable Scotland; Nick Ward, the director of the National Autistic Society Scotland; and Seamus Searson, the general secretary of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association—I think that we will say "SSTA" for the duration of the meeting. If you would like to respond to a question, please indicate that to me or the clerks and we will try to ensure that you get an opportunity to do so.

I invite each member of the panel to provide a brief outline of their work and their organisation's experience in the area, including any work that has been done since the committee's report in 2017.

Kayleigh Thorpe (Enable Scotland): It is great to be here today. I have spoken to the committee about additional support needs previously, and I am delighted to be back.

Just over two years ago, in December 2016, Enable Scotland published "#IncludED in the Main?!", which recognised that Scottish education had come a long way in 16 years. In 2000, we took a progressive step towards enshrining article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The presumption to mainstream has resulted in the majority of young people being educated alongside their peers in a mainstream setting.

The #IncludED in the Main?! campaign set out to listen to that generation and to learn from its experiences to inform what the next steps on the journey to inclusion should be. We should be striving for inclusion beyond mainstreaming. Beyond the right to be present is the right to be included, and that is what I will speak to the committee about. I welcome the committee's on-going interest in the subject.

Nick Ward (National Autistic Society Scotland): I represent the National Autistic Society and our partners Scottish Autism and Children in Scotland. Since the publication of the committee's report, we have published our own report, which is entitled "Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved: A report on the experiences of autistic children missing school".

To give a bit of context to that, we wanted to get a deeper understanding of the experience of families with autistic children who were missing school. We surveyed 1,400 parents and carers of autistic children who had been out of school in the previous two years. What we discovered is what you would expect, which is that families with autistic children face incredible barriers to accessing the support and education that they are entitled to.

However, the report also included a number of key findings that shocked us. More than a third of families with autistic children said that their child had been unlawfully excluded. That means that the correct processes were not followed when their child was sent home. Often, the child was sent home against the parents' will and did not get the proper support with reintegrating into school. A quarter of those people said that that was happening more than once a week. They regularly got phone calls demanding that they turn up at the school and take their child home. A key fact was that 200 of those parents said that they had had to give up or seriously reduce their working hours to deal with the situation whereby their child's school could not cope with or support their child.

We have had significant engagement with the Scottish Government on our report, for which we are grateful, and I am happy to answer questions on the report and to say a bit about the experience of autistic children and their families in the school system.

Seamus Searson (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association): The Scottish Secondary Teachers Association represents just under 7,000 teachers in secondary schools. We produced a report back in 2017, which the committee has seen. If anything, the situation has got worse since then. The number of pupils who have been identified as having additional support needs has increased and the number of teachers and support staff has reduced.

Unfortunately, the consequence is that most children's needs are not being met. There is greater disruption in classes, which leads to other issues, and a greater burden on classroom teachers. As a teachers association, we are concerned about that.

As the committee probably appreciates, there is a major campaign on teachers' pay at the moment. Just behind the issue of pay is the issue of workload, which has escalated as a consequence of the situation. The level of ASN resources is inconsistent across schools. Equally, people seem to think that there is a lack of understanding of ASN. That is one of the things that I would like to get across today.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): In our discussion with the panel at last week's meeting, we spent some time on the decline in the use of co-ordinated support plans. That panel expressed concern about that decline because the CSP has a statutory basis and is the gateway to accessing the tribunal service. What are this panel's views on the low level of application of the CSP process?

Nick Ward: I have no data on that. However, at a meeting of the cross-party group on autism two weeks ago, the audience brought up the issue as something that people are really struggling with. The inconsistency across local authorities was mentioned.

Those in the room seemed to feel that there should be more and stronger guidance on the application of CSPs, so that people understand their right to ask for and have a CSP. That information is not always clear to families, who are often struggling with lots of things at once. The main thing that stood out was the lack of a consistent approach.

Kayleigh Thorpe: I agree with that and I echo some of the evidence that the committee heard last week. There is a decline in the use of CSPs—the committee has the data on that.

What we see with parents and families is what the committee heard about last week—they have to fight and struggle to get their child the support that they need. The CSP is seen as a mechanism for addressing that, so a lot of families would like to have one, but a lot of families do not know that CSPs exist. I agree that a lot of work could be done to raise awareness of the right to access a CSP and to increase understanding across the education system—among parents, families, teachers and local authorities.

We know that the child's plan is seen as another mechanism for planning, but it does not have the statutory enforcement that comes with a CSP or provide the gateway to a tribunal. More awareness and understanding of their rights is crucial for families and young people so that they can get support.

Iain Gray: Whose fault is the lack of understanding or awareness among families that they have a statutory right to a CSP? Nick Ward and Kayleigh Thorpe work for organisations that are advocates for those families. Why do families not know that they have those statutory rights? Is that your failure or the councils' failure?

Nick Ward: I hold my hand up—we have a responsibility as an organisation that advocates for people and maybe we need to think about how we can make the information clearer in our resources. However, ultimately, the responsibility for the failure has to rest with the Scottish Government. For people who are disabled and their families,

there are lots of examples of different bits of information that they struggle to get and put together. That happens not just in one area but across the board.

National Government and local authorities have a responsibility. I do not know whose fault it is, but we all have a bit of responsibility and we all need to step up and meet it.

Seamus Searson: To give a flavour of how much the situation has changed, the number of children with ASN has almost doubled since 2011 to nearly 200,000 youngsters, yet the number of CSPs has dropped by half. Those children have not disappeared. A major failing in the system is that we should not be expecting parents to know what their rights are; the system should deliver what is best for those youngsters in our schools.

The lack of knowledge and understanding is a failing of the system—of the Government, local authorities and schools. All teachers want to do their best for youngsters, but they do not have the tools to do so. We need to look at this in a slightly different way.

There is a group of parents who can access and understand their rights, but a vast number of parents cannot do so, which is a failing of the system. If we are serious about inclusion in schools and about doing our best for all our children, we need to change the whole approach, which is not easy.

Mr Gray asked what we need to do. The authorities need to focus on getting the system right to ensure that those children's needs are met because, at the moment, those children are being failed. That is the message that I get from our teachers in schools, who cannot cope. Mostly, that is because they do not understand the system. Every authority has a different system, a different interpretation and a different expectation of teachers. We need to undertake a major education process to get the system to do what we want it to do.

Iain Gray: Teachers are part of that system. Are they aware that such children have a statutory right to a CSP? Are teachers saying to their schools, "Why does this pupil in my class not have a CSP?"?

Seamus Searson: Teachers do not understand the system. I would go so far as to say that teachers can easily identify that a youngster has extra needs, but they are not experts who know how to meet those needs.

We have to change the environment. We often hear people say that more needs to be done in initial teacher education to make people aware of all the different things. However, it is impossible to deliver all of that in initial teacher education.

We need experts working in our schools who can identify youngsters and help teachers to deliver what they need to do. We have to accept that teachers are not experts in all these fields.

The Convener: In its submission, the SSTA says:

> "Child Plans were introduced around 2011 and these will eventually replace Individualised Education Programmes and Co-ordinated Support Plans."

That jumped out at me because the evidence that we heard from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland witness last week was that only the CSP has a statutory right associated with it. In practice, are your members finding that CSPs are being phased out?

Seamus Searson: In many cases, teachers do not understand that CSPs are there. They are often given different labels for internal processes. A wellbeing assessment plan, a co-ordinated service plan and a get-it-right-for-me plan are just some of the examples across authorities. Of course, when youngsters or teachers move authorities, the process is different.

The processes are all bureaucratic and I would argue that that is intended to reduce the number of plans. Teachers get frustrated—they say that a youngster has a support need but, by the time they have completed one set of forms, they find that there is another set of forms and then they have to do another update. The system is bogged down by bureaucracy, which is not in young people's interests.

Kayleigh Thorpe: We need a proactive system for families and young people, as Seamus Searson set out. The most common words that we hear from families are "lack of information", "battle", "stressful" and "alone", so we need a proactive system that tells families and young people about the support that is available to them.

10:15

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): A month ago, the Parliament debated mainstreaming. We agreed unanimously that in principle mainstreaming is a good thing, and I do not think that anybody wants to remove it. Nonetheless, the Parliament also agreed that there are concerns about the increasing number of young people who are not coping particularly well in mainstream education—Mr Searson spelled that out and teachers have reported that. Is the guidance that is given to local authorities adequate or does it need to be extended or reformed? The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has helpfully given a commitment that he will look at the guidance again. What are your views on that?

Kayleigh Thorpe: More guidance on the presumption to mainstream was the primary call from Enable Scotland's #IncludED in the Main?! campaign in 2016. We believed that schools and local authorities needed more guidance because the guidance was written in 2000, and we have come a long way since then. We now have getting it right for every child and there have been a huge number of other developments, including the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004.

We believe that the guidance needs to be reformed and that schools and local authorities need more guidance on going beyond the right to be present, which is what is delivered now, to the right to be included, and on what that looks and feels like. We have contributed our thoughts and views to a review of guidance, and we look forward to its publication.

Liz Smith: I will press you a little on that issue. There are three conditions that, if met, allow a child to go into a special school situation. Do those conditions need to be expanded or changed? Are you looking for something specific in better guidance?

Kayleigh Thorpe: I believe that the law would need to be changed to change the conditions. I do not think that we need to go beyond them; we need to encourage the thinking that goes into the application of the exceptions. The guidance seeks to address probing questions that need to be considered in applying each condition.

Liz Smith: So the issue is the interpretation of the conditions; you do not want the conditions to be changed.

Kayleigh Thorpe: Yes. It is about the interpretation and, beyond that, the implementation—what it looks and feels like when a child is in a mainstream setting. That is the biggest consideration.

Liz Smith: What feedback has Mr Searson had from teachers in his union about that issue?

Seamus Searson: We need more practical guidance, because the guidance is vague; it comes down to the local authority's interpretation. Because of cuts over the years, many local authorities no longer have the expertise. It is therefore often left on the doorstep of the school to interpret the guidance, but the expertise is not in schools, either.

Given the changes that have taken place in schools, with more of a drive towards qualifications, especially in the secondary sector, ASN is the poor relation in the school. I would go so far as to say that, in secondary schools, the teacher who is responsible for ASN in one authority might do a completely different job from the teacher who is responsible for it in another authority. In some authorities, the teacher might be responsible for pupil behaviour, guidance and pastoral care—they are all mixed up. In some authorities, guidance teachers do ASN work. There needs to be clarity about who the people are.

I return to inclusion. If such youngsters are going to come into school, they need to have all the necessary support to give them a chance, and that is what is lacking. If there is support, it tends to be only in some subjects—it does not go across the curriculum, so the youngsters are not getting access to the curriculum.

The guidance is important, but it needs to be real so that those who are dealing with it can understand it. It must not leave vagueness, because that is an excuse not to provide proper funding, and that is what is happening.

Nick Ward: I support what Seamus Searson said. We fully support the ideals of mainstreaming, but there are concerns about how it works in practice. If mainstreaming is funded well and if training is provided for all members of staff, it is brilliant. When it is not funded well and when people are not trained well, as Seamus Searson indicated, it becomes a bit dangerous for kids with additional support needs. Instead of getting fully rounded support to integrate as part of the school, they become something that is stuck on the side and given half-hearted support, with half-hearted specialisation.

We asked the Scottish Government how many additional support needs teachers there are in the Scottish system and whether the number is declining or increasing, and we got the stock answer that there are more teachers in education than ever before. Unfortunately, that did not get to the nub of our concern about the erosion of specialism in schools and the erosion of specialist knowledge.

As Seamus Searson suggested, to be an additional support needs teacher, a person does not need any qualifications other than being a teacher. There is no set mandatory training and no set development that has to be undertaken for the position. We have thousands of ASN teachers up and down the country who do an incredible job and who take it upon themselves to become specialists. Should it be up to them to figure that out or should we have a more robust system that equips our teachers with the skills and knowledge that they require to support children?

Seamus Searson: To follow on from Nick Ward's point, there is a lack of qualifications for teachers to be ASN teachers. We should look at examples from other countries, where ASN teachers are experienced teachers who have

trained to become such teachers. We do not tend to do that. It tends to be that whoever has a management opportunity manages the system, and they do most of it on their own. That is not how the system should be; it should be seen as a priority and something to aspire to.

As I said, in many schools, ASN is seen as the poor relation. We hear many stories of ASN teachers who are taken off their duties to cover classes, which is not what they are there for. That tells us how the school views ASN teachers—if there is a teacher shortage, the ASN teachers are dragged out and the poor children are left to do whatever they need to do on their own. Unfortunately, that is happening too often.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): On the subject of expertise, when a child with additional support needs comes to a school does the teacher get a clinical or a psychological assessment?

Seamus Searson: That happens rarely, and, if it does happen, it follows a long process to get to that point. The number of learning support or ASN teachers in primary schools has reduced considerably in the past year, and those who are centrally based have reduced as well.

In relation to expertise, schools can wait many months for an assessment, which is not fair because the schools and the teachers are trying to do their best in the period in between. An ideal system would be to identify the youngster at the earliest possible age, before they go to school, and to track them through the system. One of the difficulties with each local authority having its own approach is that there is no consistency. If the youngster moves across authorities, the process is not followed and a new one has to begin.

Rona Mackay: The authority surely has an assessment that it could pass on to the school. Does that not happen?

Seamus Searson: It does not always get to the right people.

Liz Smith: I have a question about teachers who are well trained in this area. The committee has been made aware of three special schools, and there may be more, which are under capacity just now, so they have spaces for children who would perhaps be better looked after in a special school. Is the teaching profession making any comment about that? Is there a reluctance to suggest that those children might be better looked after in a specialist environment?

Seamus Searson: Teachers, and schools, are expected to keep youngsters in their schools, partly because of finances. Given the amount of money that it will cost for a youngster to go to specialist places, the council will do all that it can, because of financial restrictions, to prevent that from happening. That is a mistake, because it means that the youngster is frustrated and struggles in the school situation, the teachers cannot cope with them and, unfortunately, the school is prevented from excluding children from schools. Exclusion is not a punishment in that situation, because the youngster cannot cope in the school environment.

Schools have been told not to exclude youngsters and not to go beyond the pupil quota, therefore the needs of the individual are not being met. Some of our youngsters need to be somewhere else—not just in specialist schools, but in other units—in order to be able to cope. Unfortunately, as I said, the biggest thing that has come through from members in our pay dispute is what they have to cope with in schools and the lack of support—not just on the workload but on pupil behaviour. In the next months, those will be the major issues for teacher unions.

Nick Ward: We are a membership organisation and we have members across the country. We hear time and again that, sadly, for many families, the presumption of mainstreaming means in reality that they must fight tooth and nail to get the appropriate placement for their child. We have created a perverse system in which a child must fail in a mainstream school before they can get the specialist place that they require, because local authorities do not want to pay for such places, as Seamus Searson said.

The situation is abhorrent. It affects other children with additional support needs, but our members say that autistic children and their families are being set up for a series of traumatic experiences before the children can get to where they need to be. That is not fair on families and children and it is not fair on teachers. Teachers do not deserve to have such a situation happen to them; they deserve the training and skills to cope with the circumstances or they deserve the placing of children in the most appropriate setting instead of having them mess up in the classroom.

Kayleigh Thorpe: I caution against viewing bricks and mortar as the solution. We find that the solution comes from people; it involves taking the specialist knowledge and expertise and inserting that into the whole system, so that we take a whole-system approach. Any success stories that we have heard about have occurred when a person, rather than a setting, has made a difference.

Some children benefit from a specialist school placement—I am not here to say that we should never have special schools—but that is not the black-and-white solution when something is not going right in the main stream. The issue is how we inject the specialism, the knowledge and the

expertise into making a success of mainstream placements.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am interested in what Mr Searson said about multiple names for things. His submission referred to two names in particular—"co-ordinated support plan" and "child plan". Will any panel member talk about their understanding of the difference between those plans and tease out the difference?

Seamus Searson: We discussed the subject at our ASN committee meeting a couple of weeks ago. A number of teachers from different authorities attended; each called the documents something different, and what they meant differed. That is why I made the point that the systems are completely different, as are the interpretations. We need a common approach to the various things and one name for them, with the same guidelines on how to use them.

Dr Allan: Am I right in understanding that the terms are not two names for the same thing but that they represent two fundamentally different offerings to a child?

Seamus Searson: It depends on the authority that we are talking about—that is where the confusion arises. Each authority seems to think that, if it cuts back on CSPs, it can put in place something else that is much more manageable. The problem is that authorities are not using what they should be using; they realise that that has a financial implication, so they introduce something different.

As I said, it is often left to schools to determine how to make the most of the plans, which is a problem. The position could be more difficult under the headteachers charter, which will empower schools more and give them more control, as schools could start to use their own interpretations. Schools will have the same problem as local authorities have had—they will not be able to afford all the things that they require to meet youngsters' needs.

The approaches should all be the same, but they are not. Different people are involved. Some of the plans that you referred to have multi-agency involvement, but some do not. The people who are available vary in each authority.

Dr Allan: That is helpful. According to your submission, the number of individualised education programmes and co-ordinated support plans decreased from 2011 to 2016, while the number of child plans increased. I am interested to hear from the panel what the implications of that are for children and young people. What is your take on that?

10:30

Seamus Searson: My interpretation of that is that, if there are variations in application, the only people who will lose out are the youngsters themselves. They will not get a plan that covers all their needs.

The issue comes back to the training of the teachers involved in the process. If they do not have the background or the understanding, they will not know what is available. That is why training is critical.

Dr Allan: Would the other members of the panel like to comment?

Kayleigh Thorpe: I want to restate the distinction between a co-ordinated support plan and a child's plan. A co-ordinated support plan is an education plan, whereas a child's plan is more holistic—someone might have a co-ordinated support plan as part of their child's plan. It needs to be understood that a CSP is an education plan, and that there is a statutory element to it in terms of enforceability and accountability.

To follow up on Seamus Searson's point, we need guidance and training on that distinction, on how planning works in the round and on how plans talk to one another. A more consistent approach needs to be taken to other plans. There is a fairly set format for what CSPs should look like, but more guidance might need to be provided on the plans that sit alongside them and talk to them.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I would like to return to Seamus Searson's opening comments about the impact that the increase in the number of pupils who are identified as having additional support needs is having on teachers and support staff. Could you say more about the knock-on impact on staff, which the committee has heard a lot about, and the subsequent impact on all the young people for whom they are responsible?

Seamus Searson: Teachers are very committed to what they are doing. I mention again that pay is not the only issue for them. Many teachers will say that they are not in it for the money. As a union, we would argue that teachers need to be well paid, otherwise we would have vacant classrooms.

Teachers are working up to the maximum in their contract, which, because of the cutbacks over the past few years, is 22.5 hours of contact time, and they are expected to focus on all the other things that they do in their job. They get very frustrated if there are one or two youngsters whom they cannot make real contact with or understand. Sometimes, they do not understand why that is the case. They might seek support from others, but there is not a lot of support available. Some

people might say, “That youngster’s okay with me,” but we do not always know why. Teachers can get very stressed by that, because they tend to spend more time with that youngster to prevent them from getting frustrated, to the disadvantage of all the other youngsters in the class. That is why teachers are desperate for support. They want the expertise to be close at hand, inside the school. They do not want support from someone in the authority, whom they might see once a week or once every two weeks, if they have got time.

Teachers’ stress has gone up considerably, because they are having to deal with such situations regularly. Sometimes, disruption is caused by low-level disruptive behaviour. There could be other things going on as well, but teachers do not always know. It does not help that there is no opportunity to get trained in or even—in some cases—to have awareness of such issues so that they can deal with some of the problems that they face.

Nick Ward: It is a vicious cycle. I used to be a teacher, so I am very familiar with the experience of not having enough time, having too many kids, wanting to spend the time to understand a child but not having the specialist skills to know what I could do in the classroom to support them and becoming frustrated with that child, with the relationship breaking down and the whole situation becoming more challenging.

As Seamus Searson said, there is a resourcing issue as far as time is concerned, but training and skills are also an issue. Seamus said that everyone thinks that initial teacher education is the answer to everything—we do, too. The problem for someone who is training as a teacher in Scotland is that the quality of their training on additional support needs can vary considerably. They could go to an institution where, in their entire training, they get only half a day or a couple of hours on additional support needs, with a couple of pointers about where to look if they happen to have a kid who needs support in the class. Alternatively, they could go to an institution where they get really brilliant practical training on things that they can do in their classroom to stop there being sensory overload.

We always say that if something can be made to work for the child with additional support needs, generally speaking it will work for everyone else, too, which is a powerful idea. However, in order to get to that point, there has to be investment in training and education at some point. The National Autistic Society, Children in Scotland and Scottish Autism would argue that that point should be during initial teacher education, where a firm foundation needs to be laid that allows teachers to develop further on in their career. In that way, you can stop the cycle at the beginning.

Ross Greer: I will move the discussion on a little, but feel free to come back on anything that has been missed.

I am interested in the points in the process at which the lack of adequate support and resource—whether the lack of any staff at all or the lack of staff with relevant training and expertise—is most acute. Is it at the stage of identifying additional support needs or making decisions on where a young person with particular needs should be? Are the shortages entirely within schools or are there particular shortages in local authorities? Where are the acute issues that come from a lack of staff, and a lack of staff with the relevant knowledge?

Seamus Searson: The lack of knowledge means that it can be a long way into the child’s career before these things are picked up. That is why we need a co-ordinated approach from the early years right through the system. The needs should not come as a surprise. Some schools are using pupil equity funding for what they call a transition teacher, who goes into the primary schools to identify the youngsters, gets to know them and gives that first signal to the school that there are some youngsters who will need additional support. The schools themselves have made a decision to use the money for that, but that should be a normal process.

It all takes too long. It is about youngsters’ ability to get the best out of their education. The longer that they are frustrated, the worse the problem becomes. As colleagues have said, the child might have to mess up before somebody starts to notice. We need to look at this in a grown-up and real way, ask what the issue is and deal with it properly.

Ross Greer: Nick Ward talked about the challenge of getting accurate information on teachers who are working with young people with additional needs. The staff census has undergone a number of changes, one of which is the merging of some categories of staff. The number of additional support needs assistants will no longer be counted and published separately; they have been merged into the pupil support assistant category, with the general classroom assistants. Do you have any concerns about the impact that that might have?

Kayleigh Thorpe: I understand the real interest in that data, because there is a feeling that classroom support assistants or pupil support assistants—various roles and guises exist in the system—play a huge role in supporting pupils who have additional support needs. They play a vital role and are seen as a crucial asset, so of course it is important to keep an awareness of and a visibility around how many of them there are. However, what is more important is the work that

they are being deployed to do and the quality of support and training provided to them. In some places we are misusing the various roles that exist.

On the merging of all that data, one of the conclusions in our report was the need for consistency in the offer, role type and training, and in the quality of what that key and vital resource was delivering. We need to keep on top of the number of those staff, which we do not want to decrease, but we also want to look at what they are doing.

There is plenty of research out there around the effective deployment of classroom support and where it works and does not work. That is about how it is deployed and utilised and whether people are skilled for that role.

Seamus Searson: The change is a backwards step, because ASN support is specialised work, and, when you start to blend other classroom assistants into that, you lose that expertise. Also, the assumption in schools is that one type of support is interchangeable with the other and it is not. The Government likes lots of figures. If we take the number of children with ASN, which we need to look at as a crude figure, that number is going up, so the number of people involved should also be going up; it should not be going down.

In the chart on ASN support that we supplied previously, which is on page 23 of the submissions pack, we listed the authorities ranked by the total number of secondary pupils in each authority. It is interesting that there is such a big discrepancy between what each authority does. The number of ASN staff is higher in Aberdeenshire than in Glasgow. Sadly, in the past week or so, we have heard that Aberdeenshire is talking about removing its ASN teachers and replacing them with ASN classroom assistants or classroom assistants. That does not help the situation.

It is important, if we are going to use the statistics, to do the census properly and to identify the different skills that people have. If anything, a training programme for ASN support is twice as important.

Nick Ward: Seamus Searson's final point is exactly what I was going to say. The problem is that for the vast majority, as Seamus Searson and Kayleigh Thorpe have said, there is a difference between a pupil support assistant and a classroom assistant.

There is a difference in the skills that that person needs to use, in the different things that they need to be able to do with people, and in their understanding and awareness of situations. The sad thing is that there is no required difference in training. A pupil support assistant might work with an autistic person or two autistic people all day, every day, but there is no requirement for them to have specialist training in autism. There is no requirement for them to have specialist knowledge and understanding, or to have demonstrated those skills.

As I said earlier, there are thousands of brilliant PSAs up and down the country who do incredible work, but that is not enough. It is not enough that those people are really kind and nice and that they support pupils, walk them to classes and give them comfort. We need them to be skilled and to have the knowledge to support pupils properly.

I had not heard about what is going to happen in Aberdeen, but I am hugely concerned that Aberdeen City Council is considering such a move.

Seamus Searson: Aberdeenshire Council.

Nick Ward: I am sorry—Aberdeenshire Council.

Ross Greer: This is the second time in this parliamentary session that the committee has looked at additional support needs. We are revisiting our previous work. In the intervening two years, has the direction of travel at local authority and school levels been towards better definition of those roles?

There can be a disconnect between the information that is collected in the national census and what is happening on the ground. Is the census accurately reflecting the fact that, on the ground, there is an increasingly grey area and the roles are increasingly overlapping because of a lack of definition and a lack of training, or is there a disconnect between the census and what is happening on the ground? Has there been progress towards more clearly defined roles?

Seamus Searson: The interpretation varies in schools, where people in different roles are expected to take on different tasks. The figures that we gave show that there were 1,215 secondary learning support and ASN teachers in 2016. It is about the same figure—or one more, I think—in the latest information.

However, the number of learning support and ASN teachers in primary schools has dropped by 10 per cent and the number of centrally based ASN teachers has dropped by 23 per cent in a year. That tells me not that things are improving, but that there has been more cutting of the vital support that is needed.

Nick Ward: Although it sounds as though things are not improving, the one thing that we have noticed is that the will is there. Teachers want to be able to support ASN kids; they want to be able to get more training; and they want to have the skills and knowledge to support the kids. It is about whether the system can figure out how to meet that demand.

The Convener: Mr Scott, you indicated that you want to come in. Is your question on this area?

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Yes. It is further to the points about training. The pupil census figures for 2017 show that, in primary schools, the average number of pupils identified with ASN is running at 23.5 per cent, which is one in five pupils. That means that, in an average Scottish primary school class of 30 children, at least six will have additional support needs. Do you contend that those six kids are not getting the support that they need because the training has not kept up with the growth in identified needs?

10:45

Nick Ward: Yes.

Tavish Scott: What is the answer to that?

Nick Ward: We argue that the answer is greater consistency in training at the initial teacher education stage. As Seamus Searson said, we cannot all have training, but we could have a level of consistency and agreement among universities about what the baseline looks like and then a system of professional development that teachers could access throughout their careers, which would actually mean something and build on the expertise. We also need to have headteachers who are willing to do that and to release people. Who would pay for it is a different question.

Tavish Scott: A related point is that, as we expand nursery care, nursery staff will see more pre-school children at a young age and so might identify their needs earlier, which would be a good thing. What is your sense of the training that is provided for nursery staff? Are young children with such needs identified, so that the statement that goes with them to primary school can then help their class teachers as they progress through the school years?

Nick Ward: You are 100 per cent right that the earlier there is a diagnosis or an understanding of a child's condition, the greater the difference that can make to the outcomes in the child's life. I am not aware of any system of training for nursery teachers.

Tavish Scott: Thank you very much for that. I will ask Seamus Searson about the position of secondary teachers. The same pupil census said that 29.6 per cent of secondary pupils—the thick end of one third, which I find an astonishingly high level—have been identified as having additional support needs. What is your sense of the training that is provided for their teachers?

Seamus Searson: Training is a vital component, but all teachers work as part of a team. They are not isolated, even though they might be in a classroom on their own for most of the time. They need the support of other people, including experts, of whom there are a range that we can call on to support youngsters in schools.

Initial teacher education is a starting point, but it is just that. Often, the issue is covered there just to raise awareness of it. We should be talking about proper professional development throughout teachers' careers, right up till the very end, because things are changing. We run autism awareness courses for our members, who asked us whether we could do something about the situation, and they take the courses in their own time. Most of the people who attend them are very experienced teachers who have not previously had the opportunity to understand such issues.

The approach should be about building a team, but the training needs to be considered. For example, when a teacher comes out of university, they are like someone who has just learned to drive. They know how to do it and they will improve with experience, but, if someone were to ask them to repair the car, they would not be able to do that after only a one-hour session on a training day. They need to have both experience and proper training with detailed content. It cannot be said that, if they have spent an hour on a training day doing a superficial, tick-box exercise, they know what to do. That is not how it works.

Tavish Scott: Thank you. I want to clarify a point that you made earlier to Ross Greer. Your argument was that classroom assistants have not had any training whatsoever. Did you mean training on additional support needs?

Seamus Searson: I think that Nick Ward said that.

Nick Ward: That was me. Some will have opted to have training, which is brilliant. However, my point was that it is inconsistent.

Tavish Scott: Forgive me—you said "some". Do we know how many?

Nick Ward: No. There is no programme or system across local authorities for training people. Some authorities have their own systems but, again—

Tavish Scott: It is a patchwork.

Nick Ward: It is.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): I want to pick up on what Mr Searson said about there needing to be experts in our schools. We need to be careful about suggesting that there is not already expertise in our schools—particularly in our secondary schools. Last week, we heard from Professor Sheila Riddell about additional support needs departments, and most of our secondary schools will have support for learning departments, at least. Do you accept that

part of the challenge, rather than being to do with a reduction in the number of teachers, is the move to employing ASN teachers centrally instead of having them in support for learning departments, as a result of which knowledge is being lost at the school level?

Seamus Searson: If someone is centrally employed, they will not be in the school from day to day, so they will not always be available. When they come into the school, they will probably do so to provide advice and support, but they will not necessarily support youngsters in the classroom, which is what teachers want. We need people with expertise at the local authority level, but we need expertise in schools as well. Unfortunately, as we said, some teachers go into ASN because they are very committed but they are not necessarily trained to the right level. Schools need to understand that, if they want to encourage people to go into such areas, they need to invest in their training so that they will be more useful in the school environment.

Jenny Gilruth: I agree, but it is also the case that it is not necessary to have any qualifications to become a principal teacher—for example, I did not need any additional qualifications to become a PT in a secondary school. The issue is not just about ASN teachers; it seems that you are suggesting that we should be looking at qualifications in the round.

Seamus Searson: I would argue that teachers need to be trained before they become principal teachers.

Jenny Gilruth: There is no such requirement at present.

Seamus Searson: There is not, but I would argue that all members of staff who take up a management position or become a subject lead ought to be trained in those areas.

Jenny Gilruth: There is a baseline expectation that that training will happen, but there is no requirement. We need to be careful about looking narrowly at ASN provision and saying, "It doesn't happen here," because, at the moment, it does not happen across the piece.

Seamus Searson: The fact that it does not happen now does not mean that it is right that it does not happen. That is why I make the point that it is important that we plan and manage our staff and develop them to their full potential. Many people who are promoted into posts struggle for a long while because they have not been prepared for it, so we need to be careful. The fact that teachers hold such posts without training and development is not a reason for not asking, "What's a better way of doing it?"

Jenny Gilruth: On the subject of supporting staff, I was quite taken by Kayleigh Thorpe's point about the importance of people and the fact that the issue is about more than just bricks and mortar. The SSTA's submission says:

> "93% of pupils with Additional Support Needs are taught in mainstream classes all of the time."

It also hits on the critical and educationally controversial point about the potential for mainstreaming to cause disruption and have a negative impact on overall attainment as well as on teachers' stress and potential absenteeism. If it is a case of getting the right people to make the interventions, as Kayleigh Thorpe told us, do we need to consider how our local authorities look after staff wellbeing?

Seamus Searson: Most definitely. We need to address teacher health and wellbeing, which we pay lip service to at the moment. Local authorities try to do something about it, but we need to be realistic. If teachers are stressed in the classroom, it is the responsibility of all of us to address that stress. It would be a nice situation to be in if teachers felt comfortable. I will give you an example. Some of our inexperienced teachers are frightened to tell senior colleagues that they are struggling with some of the youngsters, because they feel that that is a failing on their part. We need to be grown up and say that everybody struggles with some of our youngsters. We need to provide support and to have what I would describe as a more collegiate way of working.

Nick Ward: I would like to go back to what Ms Gilruth said about ASN teachers being employed centrally and not locally. Seamus made a good point about what is effective development of a teacher. There is quite a lot of evidence that the most effective professional development that a teacher can undertake is classroom coaching, which involves someone sitting in their class, watching them teach and providing advice as they teach, as a result of which they change their behaviour. They will then practise what they have learned and do it again.

A lot of the research says that that is the most effective form of teacher development. Given what Seamus Searson has just said about how some teachers feel, such a teacher is unlikely to be happy for a person they see once in a blue moon to observe them in the classroom. That should be done by someone who is there every day, with whom they can work collegiately and build a relationship of trust. With centrally employed people coming in, that innate trust could be lost, which is a bit of a shame.

Jenny Gilruth: My final question is about the increase in the number of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, which is the

category of ASN that had the greatest increase between 2010 and 2017. Last week, I asked a question about that dramatic increase and whether there might be a link with political events. I appreciate that members of the panel might not feel able to comment. We had a change of Government at Westminster in 2010 and the beginning of austerity. Lots of changes were made to the benefits system, and we know that poverty impacts on a child's ability to reach their potential. Are you aware of any analysis of the effect of austerity on ASN in the classroom?

Nick Ward: Unfortunately, I do not have any statistics, but we are aware of members coming to us with what I suppose could be called increased existential stress. Families of autistic people often tell us about having to fight for their rights in education and other areas. With certain elements of universal credit that are coming in, there is also a feeling that they are having to fight for the rights of their children as they become adults. We have examples of families with children who are non-verbal, who have a very high level of needs and who require incredible specialist provision all the time being asked to turn up for personal independence payment assessments. When they say that they cannot do that, they are told, "Well, we can come to the hospital and do the assessment there." That is not appropriate—it is not right—and the stress that it causes really starts to affect people. We know that that is happening, but we cannot say whether it is down to a change of Government. All that we can say is that we have noticed it.

Seamus Searson: The obvious point is that austerity and poverty come into the schools, because schools reflect what is going on in society; indeed, the frustration that is felt by some youngsters comes in, too. What is also making things difficult is the expectation that teachers will try to do more and more.

I would like to say that the change of Government was the reason for that, but I am not able to. The practical effect of the cutbacks in this area over the years is that people have left and have never been replaced. We see that in every school. These are the things that go by the way. When a school loses an English teacher, it has to replace them, but, if it loses an ASN teacher or classroom assistant, it just muddles through. Unfortunately, that is what is happening. As I have said, that is a practical example that we see in every school.

The Convener: Before we move on, I have a question about statistics and the fact that some categories were dropped because there was no consistency of definition or reporting across local authorities. I am talking about the numbers of ASN pupils. We heard last week that the spectrum of ASN covers very different cases. For example, someone at school who has a temporary need—they might have, say, a broken arm—will be categorised and counted as one pupil with additional support needs, as will a pupil who does not have English as their first language. Given that there are plans of some kind in schools for a lot of young people who have been assessed as having needs, do you think that it would be preferable to count them in that way? Would it be possible to capture the young people's needs in order to help local authorities plan for what is needed in classrooms? After all, a child who was categorised as autistic could have very different support needs from another child who was categorised as having additional support needs.

Nick Ward: What you have described does, indeed, happen. If you look at the range of plans, you will see that they go into a lot of detail and talk about what the needs might look like or present as and where they come from. It would be really interesting—in fact, fascinating—to have some statistical analysis of that, but I have not seen any. You are right to say that the ASN category is being broadened. It is a bit like autism in that it is a spectrum, and the different needs in that spectrum might require quite different approaches.

Seamus Searson: On the point about the numbers going up, I would argue that the numbers have always been there; it is just that teachers are now more able to identify youngsters with needs. The numbers could have increased slightly for other reasons, but the fact is that there have always been youngsters with needs in schools; we have just not always been able to identify them.

We need to address the situation, and I think that we need the kind of in-depth analysis of ASN that has just been suggested. We should be measuring what we think is important, not what somebody else thinks is important. If we understand all the different categories and elements of ASN properly, we will be able to determine the statistics that we want. It is not helpful to have crude statistics by counting classroom assistants as one and blending them all together; we need proper detailed research into the complexities of ASN. In fact, it might better to identify the funding that might be needed for each of the categories. I imagine that, in most cases, we are just guessing at the moment.

The Convener: Dr Allan has a supplementary question.

11:00

Dr Allan: I would like you to say a bit more about languages, which is an issue I have an interest in. I have no doubt that there are children

and young people who require additional interventions because English is not their first language, but what are your feelings about the fact that, for lots of children, having two languages is a good thing intellectually that we should celebrate? When the large group of children who do not have English as their first language are put into the ASN category, how is a distinction drawn between those who require help and those who may be entirely fluent and whose bilingualism should be celebrated?

Seamus Searson: It is a different area. I used to teach in the east end of London, and we had a big influx of Bangladeshi children. There was an assumption that they would all have the same needs, but they did not. Some of the youngsters had higher levels of language ability than most of those I had been teaching in the area, whereas others had not even set foot in a school before.

It is a real benefit to a school if it can harness that expertise and that tremendous ability. I am particularly passionate about this. For all youngsters throughout their school careers, we should build on the languages that pupils bring into school, which should be seen as a benefit. We should not say that we are going to focus just on particular languages because they are all that we can offer. Addressing that situation is another challenge for schools.

Dr Allan: Is it helpful that all the children that you have just described are counted in the statistics on additional support needs?

Seamus Searson: They should be counted, but not in a single block. We need to consider the whole range of their abilities, including in their own languages.

Kayleigh Thorpe: My understanding is that having English as a second language might not give rise to an additional support need, so we might not categorise all those children as having an additional support need. If they are fluent in English, they probably do not have an additional support need. I cannot say whether that is how the system works in practice, but that is my understanding of how it should be applied.

Nick Ward: I, too, used to teach in a school in east London that had lots of Bangladeshi pupils—Seamus Searson and I will need to compare notes later. We often found that children who had English as an additional language needed intense support when they came in but that they progressed through that stage and reached a point at which they did not need that support any more. Also, as Seamus Searson said, the additional language acted as a wonderful cushion and support for them to explore English more, to explore literature and to bring in different cultures.

For such pupils, there is a more obvious journey from being unable to speak English to being able to speak it, or needing less support, whereas for pupils with an additional support need, the journey is not linear—in fact, there may not be a destination at the end.

Dr Allan: Okay. Thank you.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I was struck by what was said about PEF money being used to employ a transition teacher. I have been out of teaching for 20 years, but when I was teaching it was routine for the learning support teacher to go to all the feeder primaries, get information on all the young people and identify the ones we would really need to look after when they came into secondary school. I am astonished that we are not doing that now, and it tells me something about what is happening in our schools if that is regarded as unusual.

I am interested in looking at the point where the policy is no longer a policy. Can you give us some examples with regard to flexible timetables? From submissions from Enable Scotland and the National Autistic Society Scotland, it seems that some young people who have such timetables are exactly what has been said—present but not included. Do you have examples that show the variation in that respect and what flexible timetables can mean for individual families?

Kayleigh Thorpe: Yes. I think that some of that comes through in "#IncludED in the Main?!". We heard stories about young people attending school for one hour a week, and there might be value in doing a deep dive into the data on home education in order to understand why some young people are moving to that. My suspicion—and some of the anecdotal evidence that we have received supports this—is that it is because they are not being supported and cannot be supported in their school.

There are pretty stark stories out there about part-time timetables or what I would describe more as informal exclusion, with parents routinely asked to take their child home without it being recorded. As a result, those young people's experiences are missing from the data. What will their lives look like once they reach the age of 18 if they have received no or very little schooling?

There is some data on part-time timetables, but there are gaps in the data on home education. The question is, have people elected to home educate or have they got to the point at which there is no other option?

Nick Ward: We would call them not informal but unlawful exclusions. People who have an entitlement to education are being asked to stay at home. Although it is against the law, it happens all

the time, and it is a scandal, to be completely honest.

As for part-time timetables, some nuance is required, because they can be hugely supportive for children with additional support needs. For example, it can be meaningful to say, "You know, Seb really struggles on Wednesday afternoons, so would it be possible for him not to do things or to have a bit more space and time then?" That can make a big difference to children who need support to adapt or who sometimes feel overwhelmed and need time out.

However, there is a tipping point at which a part-time timetable becomes an unlawful exclusion—for example, when someone is asked to pick up their child every single day without notice because the school is not able to cope with them. Another example is when someone is told that their child will start off with a part-time timetable under which they will come in for just one or two days a week and then build up to being fully back at school, but that shift never happens.

If, as I think we will all agree, the child is still entitled to an education but the school says that that education cannot happen there, the question is, what makes the school think that the child will get a better quality of education at home? Who makes the decision that that is the best place for them to be? Also, what will that home education look like?

We have been talking about the lack of standardisation across the board, but there is also a lack of standardisation around home education. For a start, there are no minimum hours. Some councils used to provide a minimum of five or 10 hours a week of education materials for children to access and go through, but, I am sad to say, that system does not exist anymore. There is also an issue with the quality of home education. It could involve a teacher doing absolutely amazing and brilliant work, hosting seminars for kids and having online schools, or it could involve a child being told, "Here's a worksheet—fill it in." I am not being overdramatic; that is literally what children can be getting now, and there has to be greater consistency.

Part-time timetables can be useful, but they are tools that can be abused and which can quickly become a means to unlawfully exclude a child.

Johann Lamont: When I did this job in the 1980s, it was all about supporting young people to integrate and being flexible. My sense is that, sometimes, parents agree with the situation simply because they want their child to be safe. That is a difficulty.

Going back to our earlier conversation about specialist education versus mainstreaming, is there a danger that, simply because the reality on the ground is that relevant and meaningful support for a young person is not available at school, there will be a drive towards people saying, "I do not want my child to have to fail before they go into specialist education"? It could be a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the policy is proved to be wrong simply because of the reality that people experience. Have we got as far as that yet, do you think? In their pay dispute, teachers have raised issues about workload and stress and about the lack of support for young people with additional support needs. Is there a danger that we might get to a place where the policy is not being lived and that there will then be a move towards saying, "Oh well, we need to change the policy"?

Kayleigh Thorpe: That is absolutely a danger, if we do not get it right. We have taken progressive steps that are recognised internationally, and we have a responsibility to get it right, but we do not want young people to have to suffer and struggle just to prove a point and to prove the policy. The policy is the right move and we can get it right, but we need to take a whole-system approach and continue the investment in specialism. That does not mean special places; it is specialism. In other words, it is about experts, knowledge and understanding. It means whole-career training, but it also means experts with specialist knowledge who can come in and provide additional support. We have a responsibility to get it right and to do that soon if we are going to fix the issues that we have been hearing about over the past 16 years with regard to the previous generation. We need to continue to improve.

Johann Lamont: Unison Scotland, which represents classroom assistants, has argued in its submission that, in a system of finite resource, additional support can have wider implications. It says that, if a parent manages to be successful in getting resource for their child, all it means is that resource gets shifted from somebody else. Is that a problem? To me, there is a sort of self-censorship with CSPs and other plans, with people thinking, "I'm not going to put this in the plan, because I know I can't access it." Is the issue that Unison raises another challenge in schools? If a parent fights, they get the extra resource, but that resource is then lost from somewhere else in the system. Such an approach does not guarantee increased support in schools.

Seamus Searson: We need to make the policy work and make it real, but at the moment we are not doing that. The situation that you have described in which money is taken from one place and goes to another, perhaps because one parent is more vocal than anybody else, is fundamentally wrong, as it means that somebody else loses out. As we discussed earlier, there could be five or six youngsters in a class, but if one parent pushes, one youngster might get the support and the four

or five who need it as much will not get it at all. We need to find the resource; if we are committed to making the policy work, it needs to be real for people. We need expertise and people coming in but, unfortunately, we also need resource as well as the preparedness to accept that second best is not good enough.

Nick Ward: Sadly, Unison has presented a deficit model, and the current funding means that we work on a deficit model, as Seamus Searson has said. If we go back to first principles, as I have mentioned, having a presumption of mainstreaming is the right way forward, but if we neither fund it properly nor build a system to deliver it properly, we start to create a system that in some ways is worse than the older system and which has perverse incentives.

As Ms Lamont has said, the current system favours middle-class parents who argue and fight for their children. If it was my child, I would be fighting and arguing and going mad as well, but they should not have to do that. We should have a proactive system in which people can say, "This is what we think," and which offers support, because then that will happen not just for middle-class parents but for working-class parents. It is a social justice issue that we perhaps do not talk about enough but which should be addressed.

Johann Lamont: Just to be controversial, I want to ask about the issue that has been highlighted of the broad categorisation of additional support needs. If somebody suffers bereavement, that is, of course, an episode in their lives when they will need support, and the same applies if there is a crisis in the family and there might be a reaction at school. I do not think that young people should be set against each other but, if the categories catch everything, there is a danger that that will affect young people who are most vulnerable and who have not just social and emotional but other needs that, if left unmet, mean that they simply cannot come to school. Such people might need somebody with expertise to feed them, keep them safe and so on. Is there a perverse incentive and a danger that we meet the needs of those who are less needy at the expense of those who probably fought hardest to get into mainstream education in the first place?

11:15

Kayleigh Thorpe: We have not taken a position on changing the definition of additional support needs or anything along those lines. Do some pupils with learning disabilities get lost in the data? Yes, they do, without a doubt. Does that mean that they are not getting the support or that we are not planning for the support that they need? Yes. Perhaps the issue is about having more clarity on and visibility of the data.

That said, the issue is not just the data, but what we do with it and the effect of that on how we plan the resources and support that need to be in place. There needs to be more visibility of young people who require more support or, from our perspective, of young people who have a learning disability.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I was going to ask about categorisation, but that response answers my question.

I am interested in diagnosis and assessments. Are assessments being used enough and are they available to classroom teachers and schools? My experience locally is that people are waiting years for an assessment or are being asked to rely solely on assessments that have been made by the classroom teacher. When it comes to autism or other specialist learning difficulties, classroom teachers do not necessarily have the expertise to do that and they cannot give a diagnosis that is respected by other professionals, or their diagnosis is dismissed by the local authority.

Nick Ward: Oliver Mundell is right that diagnosis is an issue that needs to be discussed and addressed. Inconsistency is almost the theme of the session. Again, there is massive variation and inconsistency among local authorities and health boards when it comes to the diagnosis pathway, how long that pathway takes and what can happen.

As Tavish Scott said, getting an early diagnosis can be incredibly powerful and life changing for a young person and their family in enabling them to access support. At the moment, from what we hear, it is possible to get a diagnosis relatively quickly in some schools, but there are also some places—such as Oliver Mundell's constituency potentially—where going through a diagnosis is a ridiculous process, and it is the first fight that a parent has to undertake. As we have said, parents should not be having any fights, so that is not fair.

Kayleigh Thorpe: In relation to the earlier point about early years, we would hope that a diagnosis of learning disability would happen before a young person reaches school, but for many parents it does not. We published research in 2014 on early years and the journey to a diagnosis of a learning disability; we found that getting a diagnosis is a struggle that can take years. In the meantime, people are not getting access to the support and services that they need. Ideally, if diagnosis was made before a young person started school, the support that they need in the school environment would be planned for.

Seamus Searson: It would be lovely for teachers to arrive at school and be told all the background information on a youngster, all the plans that are in place and all the support that the

teachers will get. They should get that information not just on that day but in the months beforehand, so that they are enabled to address pupils' needs. We are far from that stage. Teachers often have to go back and ask, "Who is this youngster? What support should they have?" It is at that point that you find out that it is in a process somewhere, if the process has even started. It would be nice to get to a situation whereby teachers are able to deal with a youngster on day 1, with all the preparation done and all the background information available.

Oliver Mundell: Is it appropriate or fair to place on classroom teachers the burden of giving parents an informal diagnosis of autism or other learning difficulties?

Seamus Searson: If a secondary school teacher felt that something was needed, they would need to go through internal structures. The appropriate person to contact the parents would be the person who has oversight of the situation. Identifying a need is not necessarily the same as diagnosing what the need is. There can be a major difference between those two things. It is appropriate to have a dialogue with the parents, because it would be very wrong for a teacher to say that a parent's youngster had this or that, when that was not the case.

Oliver Mundell: So if teachers are being asked to do that, that is wrong.

Seamus Searson: Yes—that is wrong.

Oliver Mundell: It would be wrong for local authorities to ask teachers to do that.

Seamus Searson: Yes. They would not be able to.

Nick Ward: A diagnosis of autism is a specialist clinical activity that, we would say, must be undertaken by doctors. It is completely inappropriate for teachers to diagnose autism. They cannot do it and the idea is ridiculous.

It is not inappropriate for a teacher to say to a parent, "I've noticed some traits. Do you have a diagnosis? Maybe you should talk to your GP." That is good teaching that shows an awareness of the child and shows that the teacher has a good relationship with the family. However, as Seamus Searson said, it is not okay for a teacher to say to a parent that their kid is autistic.

Oliver Mundell: It is obviously more challenging for teachers when there are young people in schools who have been waiting three years to see a communication disorders assessment team. I absolutely take the point that it is wrong that people need to wait at all.

Are local authorities encouraging parents to take their children out of school? I have come across cases in which local authorities have allowed stand-offs with families to go on for so long and have made the process so difficult and frustrating that they have almost encouraged parents into thinking that taking their child out of school would be the best option.

Kayleigh Thorpe: I am not in a position to say that local authorities are taking that approach. However, from anecdotal evidence from parents, I know that they are left feeling as though taking their child out of school is the only option for them. You can infer from that that something is going wrong in the system and in the dialogue. Parents are not making a proactive choice; they feel as though taking their child out of school is the only available route for them.

Nick Ward: This is a weird way to think about a child, but it is a bit like having a ticking clock. A child has access to only so many years of formal education. If a parent is in a dispute with the local authority and thinks that they are stuck in limbo, with the clock ticking and nothing appearing to be happening, there is an incentive for them to perhaps make the wrong call and home school the child or find somewhere else for them. I do not want to say that local authorities are doing this deliberately, because I have no evidence of that, but there is an issue with the speed with which conflicts are resolved. A lot of disputes have gone on for a long time, so parents have needed to make difficult calls.

Oliver Mundell: Are we doing enough to involve parents whose children are in a mainstream setting? During a focus group that the committee held, a lot of parents said that they find the system difficult and that things have to go wrong before they are invited into the school to help. The parents felt that they are the experts on their children and on managing their children's behaviour so that they can be part of the classroom setting. Do schools do enough to involve parents at the earliest stage?

Nick Ward: Some do, some do not—that is the truth.

Ultimately, this is not simply an issue for additional support needs pupils. Partnership with parents is vital at all steps. The school having a good relationship with the parents of any child who is making their way through school is key; it is just that it is especially important for a child with additional support needs. There are some schools where those relationships are well constructed and people have a lot of faith and trust in one another, but there are some where people are treated not as partners but as a nuisance or a pain—"They're on the phone again." To be honest, they should be on the phone because, as we have discussed, that appears to be the only way to get things done. However, that is not right.

Kayleigh Thorpe: The issue is also to do with how schools can support parents with the child's learning at home. There is plenty of research around how we can support continuous learning and learning in the home environment, through homework and so on. Some schools have found good ways of working with a young person and have learning strategies that work, and an issue is how we support the parents of that young person to reinforce those good strategies at home. It is a crucial relationship and it works well in some places, although, as Nick Ward said, it does not work in others. For a lot of families, there is a relationship breakdown and they are fighting a battle.

Oliver Mundell: Mr Ward, I understand that your organisation and others that were involved in the production of the "Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved" report have been in continued dialogue with the Government. Can you give us an update on that discussion? What key asks of the report have the Scottish Government and the cabinet secretary committed to?

Nick Ward: There were nine asks in our report. We had a meeting with the cabinet secretary, who was warm and nice, and he took the issue seriously. He agreed to commission a round-table discussion on the issue of initial teacher education, which took place last week. All the key players were invited, such as the General Teaching Council for Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland, the Scottish Council of Deans of Education and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Together, we explored whether we can do more initial teacher education in autism. It was an interesting discussion. It started off with people saying, "Well, if we are going to have training in autism, what about all the other issues that people might need to be trained in? How will we fit everything in?" However, we got to a place where there was an acceptance that, because of a number of different issues—the prevalence of autism, the seriousness of incidents and the fact that autism is different from other additional support needs, in that it is part of someone's identity and is a holistic condition about who someone is and how the brain functions—there was some work to do.

The cabinet secretary has agreed to form a working group with us and the Scottish Council of Deans of Education to explore the issue. That is very positive. The representative from the Scottish Council of Deans of Education accepted a couple of things that we have talked about today. For example, he accepted that there could be greater standardisation of what initial teacher education in autism looks like and that we could perhaps work on figuring out what that baseline could be. That is important, because Education Scotland was saying that part of the problem that it has is that it deals with teachers who have all got vastly different experiences, and it is not clear what level of experience each one has. We are grateful for what the cabinet secretary has done in that regard.

The downside is that our other main asks have not been answered. We sent a letter about that and we did not get what I consider to be an adequate response. I have to say that the response to our calls seemed a bit copy-and-pasted, which was disappointing, given that the letter was signed by 3,000 of our supporters.

We are happy that the issue of teacher training in autism is being addressed. However, the issue of stopping the unlawful exclusions has not been addressed. There has not been progress on that or any acceptance that the ability to do that rests with Government. We have asked for those exclusions to be formally recorded, so that we at least have an idea of the data and an understanding of the extent to which that is happening. That has not been agreed to yet, which is a shame, but we will continue to engage with the Government on the issue.

11:30

The other issue that has not been engaged with is the need to improve the numbers and availability of specialist teachers in the education system. The answer that we got was that the overall number of teachers has increased. That is great—we love it—but we would like more information about specialist teachers and would like to work constructively with the Government on what it means to be a specialist teacher and how we can ensure that we have a gold-standard quality of specialist teacher, so that, no matter what school your child goes to, you know that the additional support needs teacher has a certain level of expertise and will be able to support your child well.

We are pleased with the progress that has been made and we thank the Government for that, but there is still a lot to do.

Rona Mackay: Would the policy work better if there were more of a standardised framework across local authority areas in relation to data, the definition of ASN, the use of CSPs and everything else that we have been talking about? Is it too piecemeal at the moment?

Seamus Searson: What you are suggesting is exactly what we need—it is what teachers need. We would support that.

Nick Ward: Many of the issues that have been raised today involve the issue of inconsistency across boundaries. Those boundaries are artificial lines drawn in the sand, but they mean that

someone can have a totally different experience from someone who is living one street down from them. Sadly, there is a classroom lottery for autistic kids and their families. We would definitely support greater standardisation. As Dr Allan was saying, even the phraseology is problematic. We want to offer guidance, but how can we do that when it is called five different things, and means five different things, in different places? It is tough. Standardisation would make a big difference.

Kayleigh Thorpe: We agree. There are pockets of great practice and the question is how we make that universal. We are talking about resources, and the fact that each area has to reinvent the wheel and create its own version of things has resource implications. If we can provide something that has a baseline element of standardisation, that will free up resources for other things.

The Convener: That concludes our questions. I thank all members of the panel for their time this morning. It has been an interesting and helpful exchange.

We will now move into private session.

11:32

Meeting continued in private until 12:01.

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