

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday 14 September 2005

Session 2

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EDUCATION COMMITTEE

15th Meeting 2005, Session 2

CONVENER

*Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)

*Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP)

*Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)

*Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP)

*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con)

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP)

Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Christine Marr (Scottish Public Pensions Agency)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark Roberts

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Education Committee

Wednesday 14 September 2005

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:01*]

School Closure Policy

The Convener (Iain Smith): Good morning, colleagues. Now that it is 10 o'clock and we are quorate, I welcome the members who have made it on time to the 15th meeting in 2005 of the Education Committee. We have received no apologies.

The first item on the agenda is consideration of a letter from the Minister for Education and Young People, updating the committee on the current position on school closures. Do members have any comments?

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): This outstanding issue has been raised in various petitions on school closures that the committee has received. Although the revised guidance that was produced was welcomed at the time, some of us are still concerned that it contains no presumption against closure.

The minister's response is interesting in a number of respects. The overall message appears to be, "Steady as it goes," but he raises concerns about the kind of informal consultations that have been taking place. Moray Council clearly falls into that category. The minister also appears to recognise that certain matters need to be addressed; in fact, he says that the Executive might want to reconsider the issue of consultations.

However, I should point out that much of the additional guidance is predicated on the introduction of school estate management plans, the logical sequence for which is set out in paragraph 12. In dealing with concerns about school closures across Scotland, I have found that problems arise when the Executive's recommended process for managing the school estate is applied to potential closures in rural communities. Although some closures do not happen, many do; over the past year alone, 70 schools have been threatened with closure.

I welcome the Executive's investment in the school estate, but it is running up against this problem. As the minister says, statute is quite clear about the steps that should be followed in the formal consultation process. However, as we saw with the rolling programme of closures in the Borders and with situations elsewhere, problems

arise when paragraph 12 of the guidance which, as dictated by the Executive, deals with the school estate management plan, is interpreted locally. We must examine the matter further and urge the minister to address it. I know that people involved in the campaigns against closures have corresponded with the convener and that several petitions that have been presented to the Parliament have not yet reached the committee. That said, we have a duty and responsibility to try to resolve the problem.

One of the interesting points that the minister made was that we have to set out for parents the responsibilities of the council and the responsibilities of the Executive. Often a council blames the Executive, the Executive says that it is up to the council and parents and communities are stuck in the middle. Given our experience with previous petitions and as constituency MSPs visiting different parts of the country, we have a responsibility to cut through that. We should home in on the interpretation of the school estate management planning by different local authorities and examine good and bad practice.

Channelkirk Primary School is up for review this week. The minister said that one of the problems is falling school rolls but, ironically, the authority said that the rising school roll at Channelkirk is causing it difficulties. We have a duty to address the issue, because it is causing a great deal of unnecessary anxiety in communities. We should make it clear that a review of the whole of a council's estate makes sense from a managerial point of view, but, in practical terms, it means that schools face potential closures or reviews every two years. That axe being held over them permanently is what people find most distressing.

Those are the nuts that I take from this. The minister is moving in the right direction, but a bit slowly for my liking. I would rather see a commitment made to some revision. Perhaps we could construct a response from the committee to the minister. He says that he is in discussion with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. We can mention our concerns.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): This is an emotive and upsetting issue for many parents and young people. I am concerned that we should not offer false hope. I am conscious of the role of the committee and the Executive, which we have discussed before. As the minister said in his letter, the Executive is not there to overrule local decisions. It is wrong of us to even begin to hint to parents that we could do so or to think that we somehow know better than locally elected representatives, who I am sure put in a great deal of time and effort and do not take decisions lightly.

Given that responsibility for the budget, as well as for education, falls on us, we must have an eye

on the fact that school rolls are falling; we will expect some schools to close. We cannot expect councils to manage their budgets properly at the same time as keeping all schools open. We should be sensitive.

Our individual and collective concern is clear. I am slightly unsure about what Fiona Hyslop is asking us to do in her proposed letter to the minister. The minister says that he is considering what else he can do. He has addressed the fact that some consultations have not gone as well as he had hoped and that the process has increased, rather than assuaged, alarm. I am not entirely sure what we can add to that, given that we have not investigated the issue in huge detail, although we have had a reporter. Perhaps Fiona Hyslop could spell out what we would be saying in the letter to the minister.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): I welcome what the minister says in his letter. He says:

"I am considering what I can do further to address this and to ensure Councils improve in this very important area."

I will ask two questions. First, will the Executive consider updating existing guidance to local authorities on school closures in view of the widespread concern? Secondly, in view of the overwhelming cross-party support for a presumption against closure, does the minister feel able to revisit the matter, given that such a presumption exists in England?

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): The system in England is different from that in Scotland. It is debatable whether it would be appropriate merely to transpose the English system to Scotland.

I return to Ken Macintosh's point. The minister makes it clear in guidance that he has limited locus in the process of school closures. As Ken said, the committee also has no locus in school closures and it would be wrong to suggest to parents that we could somehow persuade local authorities to take a different view or that we could overrule local authorities. We must be careful not to put out the message that we have or the minister has particular powers. That must be clear.

Responsibility lies with local authorities. That said, I have often wondered about the Education (Publication and Consultation etc) (Scotland) Regulations 1981 (SI 1981/1558), which stipulate a minimum 28-day period of formal consultation. Concern has been expressed to us—it was in the e-mail that I think we all received this morning from the gentleman from the rural schools network—about the informal consultation periods that local authorities often introduce before the 28-day period. If the problem is lack of regulation of

how such consultation is conducted, is there merit in extending the period of formal consultation to ensure that the steps that should be taken are taken?

Fiona Hyslop: The committee has a locus because the revised guidance that was produced last September was a result of the committee's considering and calling for that guidance. To be fair, the guidance introduced the education case as a key point that must be considered. That is why our experience can be useful in informing the next steps, because the issue is evolving. To be fair, we acknowledge that the minister wants to respond.

We should focus on school estate management planning. Paragraph 12 on page 3 lists the steps in that process. Much of the informal consultation to which Elaine Murray referred and about which people are concerned takes place when those steps occur, but the guidance for them does not marry with the rest of the guidance about what is important to rural communities and educational value. There is a bricks-and-mortar schools agenda, a rural development agenda and educational development. When they come together, problems arise.

At the bottom of his letter, the minister says that he is taking

"steps now to bring the practices of all Councils up to the standards of the best, in relation to consultation and ... information".

It would be reasonable for us to request that he find out the best practice, rather than the worst practice, for implementing paragraph 12. If that means revised guidelines later, it would be useful for the committee to do that.

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): We do not question the fact that local authorities must make the decisions at the end of the day, so we cannot be accused of interfering in that way. However, the Scottish Executive and the minister have a role to play in setting down the guidance by which local authorities can proceed.

Fiona Hyslop talked about school estate management plans. Most confusion is probably felt locally about step 3, which is to consider options. In my experience of consultation exercises not just in the education service, but in health boards and so on, authorities appear too many times to present a preferred option that the public assume is a *fait accompli*. We need to explore that a little. In my opinion—for what it is worth—in that context the presumption against closure on educational grounds should be explored, as Lord James Douglas-Hamilton suggested. Fiona Hyslop is right to highlight the need to home in on the school estate management planning process.

The Convener: I thank members for their initial comments. I will make one or two comments and suggest a way forward. I acknowledge—several schools in my constituency are threatened with closure—that there are concerns about application of the guidance, rather than about the guidance itself, because the document is quite strong. How effectively the guidance will be implemented is perhaps the question that must be asked. In that respect, I suggest that we ask the minister to update us on his discussions with COSLA and on whether best-practice guidance is being considered in addition to the formal guidance to enable councils to have models of how they should consult.

10:15

Fiona Hyslop homed in on paragraph 12, but I want to home in on paragraph 27, which is on identifying and considering the relevant factors when a case is being made for closing a school. On Lord James Douglas-Hamilton's point about presumption in favour of closure, a case must be made to close a school—there is a *de facto* presumption against closure. The phraseology is meaningless and creates a false impression of security and there is no cross-party support in favour of using a meaningless term.

A case must be made, but part of the problem at the moment is that it is not clear what information should be provided in the consultation on the educational case, travel distances and times, future pupil and population projections, community planning and use and rural sustainability and development. What is the basis on which people should make claims? Guidance to local authorities on the information to make available in consultation is vital.

I agree that councils should be made aware that the 28-day period is a minimum period of consultation and not a target period. I would be reluctant to see that period being changed because there will be circumstances in which everybody agrees that a school should close: no pupils might go to it, for example, so why should the process be delayed? A period of 28 days is probably appropriate in those circumstances. A period in the region of the Parliament's standard consultation period is more appropriate when a major change is being made. Perhaps the way forward is to ask the minister in our mop-up session to update us on the discussions with COSLA and to put those points to him.

Fiona Hyslop: I take it that we will write to him about our areas of concern.

The Convener: We will discuss the mop-up meeting when we discuss our future work programme. We can raise various issues with the

minister, including what we have just discussed. Are members content with that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

Teachers' Superannuation (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/393)

10:17

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is subordinate legislation. The documentation for the Teachers' Superannuation (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/393) is bulky, although I do not know whether the debate will be particularly long. The documentation is fairly lengthy, but the substantive document consolidates existing regulations. There are only a few relatively minor policy amendments.

I invite Christine Marr from the Scottish Public Pensions Agency to join us. She will answer members' questions for clarification of the regulations before we decide whether to accept them.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I have three brief questions. First, do the regulations allow for a winding-down period for teachers who wish to take early retirement?

Christine Marr (Scottish Public Pensions Agency): Yes. The provision is not new—it was introduced in 2002. There are various eligibility conditions; a teacher must be 56 and can wind down for four years prior to retirement. They must put in at least half the work of a full-time teacher, although they can work more and will receive a full year's service.

Lord Douglas-Hamilton: Is there an option for teachers to increase their pension contributions in order to buy earlier retirement?

Christine Marr: Teachers do not have an automatic right to early retirement before 60. The matter is at the discretion of their employer, but there is a provision whereby late entrants who do not have the maximum service can buy added years.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Finally, do the regulations allow for teachers who leave the teaching profession to transfer their pension rights to another scheme?

Christine Marr: Yes. Most schemes would ask them to do so within a year. If teachers go to new employment, they must usually make a decision within a year.

Fiona Hyslop: I have specific questions and a general question. I am pleased that the regulations introduce paternity and adoption leave provisions and provisions relating to enhanced maternity leave. An adoption bill is to be introduced: I take it that the regulations would be compatible with its provisions on adoption leave, for example.

Christine Marr: I imagine so, because it is Department of Trade and Industry legislation.

Fiona Hyslop: I understand that the regulations relate to a transfer of powers to Scottish ministers that was made some time ago. There is great controversy at the moment about teachers and other public servants having to work until the age of 65. Were a decision on that to be made at Westminster, what effect would that have on these regulations? Would they have to be amended to accommodate policy decisions that were made in Westminster?

Christine Marr: At the moment, the public services forum is debating what should be done about retirement at the age of 65, in respect of whether that should be just for new entrants or whether it should be introduced in 2018. The Westminster Government has control over policy; only the regulatory work is devolved.

The regulations have to be approved by the Treasury. Therefore, Scottish ministers could not do anything totally different. If Westminster decides that retirement age will be 65 from 2018, that is what will happen. We are party to the discussions that are being held at the moment.

Fiona Hyslop: That is my point. Will any changes be made in Westminster or are there technical bits of the regulations that we will have to change in Scotland?

Christine Marr: Yes.

Fiona Hyslop: If Westminster raised the retirement age to 65, would we have to be re-presented with the regulations?

Christine Marr: There would be an amendment to them.

Fiona Hyslop: What form of parliamentary procedure would that involve?

Christine Marr: It would be an amending Scottish statutory instrument and it would be subject to consultation with teachers and other interested parties.

Fiona Hyslop: It would come before the committee.

Christine Marr: Yes.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you for answering our questions this morning. You have been very helpful.

The Subordinate Legislation Committee has no comments on the regulations and no motions to annul them have been lodged. Therefore, I ask the committee to confirm that it has nothing to report on the regulations.

Members indicated agreement.

Pupil Motivation Inquiry

10.23

The Convener: We move on to item 3. Members have before them a draft report in the shortened format that we discussed at our last meeting. Members have also had a private paper, which was a more traditional type of report, to look at. Do members have any comments on the shortened report and are there any changes that they wish to make to it?

Fiona Hyslop: I appreciate that the style of the report is to help us to identify issues at later meetings. Perhaps the committee should be a bit more pointed and ask challenging questions about what it means. Since many of the issues are already being addressed, we can afford to be a bit more challenging. That might be for the stakeholder session that we are planning. However, we could sharpen up some of the key questions that we ask. We do not need to answer the questions, but we do need to pose them.

If I could say a word about the content—

The Convener: Can we discuss first whether we are happy with the format? If we are, we can go into the details of content.

Mr Macintosh: I agree with Fiona Hyslop; I like the format but I think it should be supported by questions. At the moment it is too bland and it needs something more stimulating to be added to it. I also think that we are missing the opportunity to make recommendations. I have been thinking about how we could marry the two, but I have not worked it out yet. We should list some of the conclusions and recommendations from the draft report. There were observations and comments on which the committee agreed; although they are not overwhelming and the world will not be shattered by our conclusions, they are still worth making.

For example, it is worth while to comment that good leadership is essential; that the leadership programmes that are being developed are to be encouraged; that teacher motivation is a key factor and therefore that it is essential to continue to improve teacher morale and flexibility in the curriculum to free up time; and that pupil numbers are a key factor so we need to do more to reduce class sizes. There is a little bit of stating the obvious in that, and there are no huge surprises, but it would be worth our while to make those points.

We have seen the move from an emphasis on attainment to an emphasis on achievement. Some people regard that as a subtle policy shift and some people regard it as more fundamental, but it is important that we keep that moving along.

Although we might think that the teaching profession recognises the importance of motivation, there is no harm in the Education Committee saying, "We recognise what is happening here and we want to give it our support and push it along, too." It is worth saying that we would welcome an emphasis on motivation in the classroom. We have a target-driven agenda, but we can amend that by including something about motivation and teaching. That would help teachers.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I think that questions might be better than recommendations. Incidentally, the clerks are to be strongly congratulated on their ability to reduce what was lengthy and complex into a straightforward, accurate account. That is not an easy thing to do. The material is not sufficient to justify strong recommendations; we took great trouble over the inquiry, but because the Executive has taken a lot of action I think that the clerk's recommendation is correct and that one way forward is to add some perceptive questions.

Fiona Hyslop: Or challenges.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I have one or two suggestions to make when we come to the appropriate moment.

Mr Ingram: I want clarification on how we are going to take forward the draft report. I take it that it will be put to the stakeholders conference and that when we have feedback from them we will produce a final report. If we are to ask questions, we should do that in a draft report. We should then get some feedback and make our final conclusions and recommendations.

The Convener: There will certainly have to be some feedback or a report from the stakeholders event. We will have to judge at that time whether it will form part of the committee's report or whether it will just be a report on that event. We should not prejudge how we will respond to the stakeholder event.

Mr Ingram: We should do as I suggested. As it stands, the report is not adequate. We have to draw some firm conclusions and some recommendations based on those conclusions. We have done a great deal of work on the inquiry; we will not do it justice if we do not make some recommendations.

10:30

Dr Murray: I tend to agree. The report is a good summary of what people told us, but it does not really take the debate any further forward. We have to have some way of progressing the debate, otherwise the exercise will have been a bit pointless; we could have done it in one session. We need to beef up the report a bit.

I had the same impression as Adam Ingram, in that I thought that this was an interim report and that we would come back after the stakeholders conference and produce a final report. We certainly have to have the flexibility to adapt the report.

The Convener: I am not suggesting that we cannot do that. If the stakeholders event comes out with nothing of substance, there will be no point in our wasting our time producing a further report. However, if it comes up with some useful additional recommendations, we will want to respond. We should not commit ourselves at this stage, but wait and see what comes out of the conference.

Mr Macintosh: Using the views from the stakeholders event will be a good way of gingering up the report. The event will give us a range of views, some of which will be very thoughtful, because the people we are inviting along are thoughtful, committed people, but some might be quite radical. I hope that we will get a list of suggestions and policy directions, although we do not have to endorse them.

Each chapter or heading in this brief draft report could be accompanied by the recommendations that we already have, or by a variation on them. There is a series of recommendations in our earlier report that are picked out in bold, and they could be beefed up—or not; we would have to decide. We could put our initial draft recommendations and a question or two into the draft report. We could present that to the conference, discuss each of the topics and come out with a range of further suggestions that we could publish. We do not necessarily have to approve those suggestions; indeed we might find it difficult to decide how to approve them. We could then publish the committee's report with our initial findings and recommendations and the additional possibilities that come out of the conference. That approach would more fairly reflect what has gone on, and perhaps it would take things forward, because it would mean including a range of thoughtful contributions.

Fiona Hyslop: The document is useful in that it identifies the key stimulators for good pupil motivation, but we are unsure about the extent to which they are being used in Scotland, whether they are being used to the necessary degree and the policy changes, if any, that need to be encouraged. That is where the stakeholders meeting will come in. The stakeholders will be able to say that if the key stimulators work well, they will start to engage properly in pupil motivation and to change a difficult situation. If that is not happening quickly or widely enough, that would lead us to seek something firmer. We might be able to go to the stakeholders and say that we are

quite happy that things are moving in the right direction. Alternatively, things might be moving at different paces in different areas. That will be the test.

The draft report recognises the agenda, and we have to test whether that agenda is shared by people throughout Scotland. If it is not, we have a problem. If it is, we can comment on the fact that there is progressive movement.

The Convener: I will try to marry together members' comments. The draft report refers to the issues paper, which contains the questions that draw on the recommendations in the earlier paper. We need to put those questions together to decide how we take forward the issues involved. We will discuss those issues during the stakeholders meeting.

Members' suggestions do not contradict one another, and the issues come together through the questions and the issues paper. We can draw up the questions and circulate them for comment, if members think that that is a sensible way forward.

As members seem happy with that approach, let us go through the draft report page by page. Members should feel free to shout out their comments as we go through the report. I see that Fiona Hyslop has highlighted some phrases on page 1.

Fiona Hyslop: Given that we are the Education Committee, we should not describe 56 per cent as a minority. However, that is perhaps just a detail.

The Convener: It is a fair point.

Fiona Hyslop: The first section of the report deals with the scale of the problem; the introductory paragraphs mention 27 per cent, 56 per cent and 31 per cent of pupils. Apart from the fact that, numerically, 56 per cent does not constitute a minority, the other percentages that are quoted all involve significant numbers.

Mr Macintosh: Sorry, I do not understand. Does the report say that 56 per cent is a minority?

Fiona Hyslop: Paragraph 1 refers to the scale of the problem as involving a minority—this is perhaps a pedantic point—but the introductory paragraphs above that already suggest that we could do better for the significant numbers of children in Scotland who feel bored and so on in school.

Dr Murray: We should not necessarily confuse pupils who feel bored with pupils who are not motivated. We might exaggerate the problem if we suggest that the 56 per cent of those who say that they sometimes feel bored are not motivated. I sometimes feel bored in Parliament, but that does not mean that I am not motivated. The fact that things could be made more interesting for an

individual pupil should not be confused as meaning that the pupil is not motivated.

Fiona Hyslop: An important point is that lack of motivation is not necessarily about a lack of discipline and that it can take a variety of forms, such as boredom and disengagement. A significant point that was made to us was that quiet children who do not engage can constitute just as much of a problem as disruptive children. The clerks have probably tried to reflect that by acknowledging the fact that lack of motivation can be exhibited in different forms.

Mr Macintosh: The point is that the 56 per cent figure does not refer to pupils who lack motivation.

Perhaps paragraph 1 should be worded differently. Although the beginning of the report should talk about the problem that faces us, no one's purposes are served by exaggerating the problem. We should say two things. First, for a small minority of pupils, lack of motivation is a serious problem because it affects their life chances. However, a large number of children—perhaps the majority—could be better motivated and more engaged. Those are the two different client groups. The first involves those who are disaffected—although that might be the word that we were told not to use.

Mr Ingram: The word was “disengaged”.

Mr Macintosh: Yes, we were told not to call children “disengaged”, because every child can be disengaged. However, we have a serious problem that affects a small number of pupils and we have a big issue that affects virtually every child; they could all could benefit from greater inspiration and motivation.

The Convener: Perhaps we can get round that issue by omitting “Although” from paragraph 1. The paragraph would then state: “This evidence suggests large numbers of children and young people are not motivated by their school experience, but HMIE have stated: ‘in many schools, behaviour, standards and motivation are very good’”. We could repeat both sides of the case without getting involved in whether the problem affects a minority or a majority. Are members happy with that suggestion?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: If members have no further comments on page 1, let us move on to page 2.

Fiona Hyslop: I do not necessarily want to get into a debate on this, but I point out that paragraph 3 currently states:

“Scottish pupils, teachers and schools are performing well by international standards.”

Given what today's report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development says

about maths and science, the extent to which Scotland is doing well, or less well, in different subjects is open to debate. I suggest that the paragraph should simply say “are performing well by international standards in some areas.”

In addition, we do not know whether Scottish teaching performs well by international standards because the Executive is not engaged in the OECD teaching comparison. Given the underlying issues, the opening statement in paragraph 3 seems rather bold and needs a caveat.

Mr Macintosh: I hesitate to agree. I was concerned that the report starts off on a rather doom-and-gloom note. I would rather that the report started off on a cheerier note by highlighting the fact that we have good schools with good pupils and good teachers but we also have a problem that needs to be addressed. However, I am willing to accept that we should start off with the problem and go on from there.

If we talk down our schools and do not tell the teachers and pupils in our schools that they are doing a great job, we may contribute to the lack of motivation that we are talking about. We have been told about the power of positive praise, and I think that it is important that we set an example by saying in this document that we recognise that our schools are great. There are people throughout the world who would kill to get into a Scottish school, because they are so good. We should not pretend that we are only okay at maths and so-so at English. We have got great schools and we should say so.

Fiona Hyslop: There is a way of saying that we think that there is something positive about the pupils, the teachers and the education experience in Scotland, but we have to be careful about what we say about international standards. We cannot say things that are factually incorrect.

The Convener: Instead of saying “At a macroscale”, could we not just start out by saying, “Generally, Scottish pupils are performing well”? Generally, they perform well, but that form of words suggests that there are areas in which they might not.

Fiona Hyslop: Yes, I think that that is fair.

I cannot remember exactly when, but I know that, during one of our sessions, concerns were raised about the sentence that mentions media and popular culture role models. We have to be careful in this area. Scotland has always had a strong tradition of recognising the success of people who are not necessarily successful in educational terms—some business leaders spring to mind in that regard. At the session that I am talking about, concerns were expressed about people such as Posh and Becks. However, that phenomenon is not new; in the 1930s, footballers

and film stars were the heroes and heroines of young people. I think that we should be a bit cautious about that sentence.

Dr Murray: I think that it is important to have as role models people who have turned their lives around and improved their life chances through education. There has to be a counterbalance to Posh and Becks.

I was at the session that Fiona Hyslop is talking about and I understand the point that she is making. However, I think that there is a difference. The problem these days is not so much film stars and so on but all the dunderheads that you get on reality programmes who just go on television for their five minutes of fame. Kids sit and watch them and say, "Why do I need to do anything when someone with synthetic breasts is getting an awful lot of attention?"

Fiona Hyslop: I think that you have just gingered up the report.

The Convener: I just hope that she is not referring to "Holyrood Live".

Mr Macintosh: I agree with the points that have been made. We are saying that the committee and the country should value education for its own sake. The countries that do that have succeeded. Lots of countries value education for its own sake, such as France—

Fiona Hyslop: Finland.

Mr Macintosh: I am glad that you mentioned Finland; I was going to mention it if you had not.

People in those countries think that education helps them not only to get on in life but to improve as a person. They value education because it enriches people and helps them to lead a more fulfilling life. That is an important message to send and I think that we should mention it in our report. That message alone is motivational.

Dr Murray: There is a tradition in Britain of valuing education for its own sake. The early demands of the trade unions for a shorter working day for adults were made so that people could engage in education. The idea is not alien to Scottish culture in any way; perhaps it simply needs to be rediscovered.

Mr Macintosh: Yes—we are not a nation of book burners at all.

Fiona Hyslop: If I may make a suggestion, perhaps the problem is that the sentence that we are discussing is written in a negative way when what is important are the positive aspects.

The Convener: We will consider redrafting the sentence to put a more positive spin on it. Members have made valid points.

Are there any points on page 3?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: My points might be more suited to being dealt with in the issues paper, but I can raise them in the context of pupil-centred learning and vocational options, which are dealt with in paragraphs 8 and 9. I preface my words with an acknowledgement that what I am about to say might not be appropriate for incorporation into this brief report.

On the issue of additional support needs, there might need to be a greater emphasis on the fact that there is a shortage in mainstream schools of professional support for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, which could lead to their becoming demotivated. Some children have been placed in mainstream schools when, arguably, such provision is not the most appropriate for them. That could make it increasingly challenging for teachers in mainstream schools to develop a range of learning resources that are tailored to the needs of individual pupils. I merely flag up the issue at this stage. It may not be appropriate to include it in the report, but it may be one of the challenging questions that will be associated with it.

10:45

Fiona Hyslop: The issue that Lord James Douglas-Hamilton raises deserves a separate section in the report. We received a great deal of evidence on identifying problems in the early years. Another issue is the transition from primary education to secondary education, but much of the evidence that we received was on the early identification of problems and the provision of continuing support. When we visited Perth Grammar School, concern was expressed about teenage boys with behavioural difficulties, many of which stemmed from their being clumsy because they did not receive support in relation to cognitive learning and physical development when they were very young. We also visited nurture groups for children at early primary level in Cumbernauld. Much of that work is about identifying the connection between special needs and behavioural issues later on and providing support. It would be useful for us to include a short paragraph, similar to those that appear in the other sections of the report, about early identification of needs and the provision of subsequent support. That would provide Lord James with a basis for further exploration of the issues in the issues paper.

The Convener: I will ask the clerks to draft an appropriate paragraph.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: My other point relates to vocational options. Vocational courses should be properly accredited, and those who choose to take advantage of a broader curriculum should be able to access either skills for work or

Scottish vocational qualifications, incorporated into the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. I do not know whether the point is appropriate for the report or for the issues paper that will accompany it, but I flag it up as I believe it to be a legitimate point of relevance to many who will opt for further education.

Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): I agree that the point is relevant. It should be made in the report.

The Convener: We could expand paragraph 11 of the report, which refers to

“parity of esteem with more traditional, academic subjects”

to make the point that the qualifications that should be available through that route must be properly recognised.

Dr Murray: On pupil-centred learning, the report refers to the need

“to find ways of maximising opportunities for teachers to develop learning resources”.

It sounds to me as if all the emphasis is being placed on teachers’ ability to respond to multiple learning styles, but in fact this is an issue for initial teacher education and continuous professional development. Too much emphasis has been placed on individual teachers.

The Convener: I will ask the clerks to draft paragraph 8 slightly differently to take Elaine Murray’s point into account.

Fiona Hyslop: We have not yet addressed the issue of pupils’ role in pupil-centred learning and its connection with lifelong learning. Surely motivation is not just about people’s school days, but about their being able to understand different learning styles and to take ownership of those for the world of life or learning. We may need only to refer to that issue, but it is one that would be worth exploring with the stakeholders.

Ms Byrne: I am happy with the contents of paragraph 9, but perhaps we could add a reference to the minister’s point that reduced bureaucracy would free up teachers’ time—time that could be spent with individual pupils. The issue was raised in the document that we considered last week.

The Convener: It is hinted at in the reference to “the impact of data-collection activities”.

Ms Byrne: The report mentions “de-cluttering of the curriculum”, but cutting down on bureaucracy is also important.

Mr Ingram: We should mention careers guidance and the like. I do not think that there is anything in the draft report about that area. We found that pupils who have a well-defined idea of what they want to do after school do better in

school. In a couple of sessions, we discussed the need to work with children to determine what they are going to do and what the relevance is of their experiences as pupils to the rest of their lives. Can we include something in the report about that?

The Convener: Do members agree that we should add something on that?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Okay. We will find the appropriate evidence and add something on that as well.

Mr Macintosh: I would quite like to add to the report all the recommendations in the private paper. Each point would be improved if it was accompanied by a recommendation.

The Convener: As I suggested earlier, the issues paper that accompanies the report will present the recommendations as questions about the way forward.

Mr Macintosh: I understand. I am being obtuse.

The Convener: The recommendations will be presented as challenges to the stakeholders, for the stakeholders event.

Do members have any comments on page 4?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: On the fifth line from the bottom of page 4, the words “any degree of” slightly weaken the argument. I wonder whether those words could be dropped.

The Convener: I agree with that. The report should read: “The Committee asks the Executive to consider whether priority should be given to this stage”.

Are there any other comments?

Members indicated disagreement.

The Convener: With those suggested amendments, are members content to approve the draft report?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The clerks will re-draft the report and will circulate it for comments. We will draw up the issues paper, which will set out the recommendations from the previous report. At our next meeting, we will discuss the documents and how we will handle the stakeholders event.

Work Programme

10:53

The Convener: The final item on today's agenda is the committee's work programme. The clerk's paper was drawn up following the discussions that we had at our away day on proposals for the committee's work programme for the foreseeable future. A substantial amount of legislation is likely to come the way of the committee over the coming months. We expect a Scottish schools parental involvement bill to come fairly soon, followed by an adoption bill and a children's hearings bill. Following the First Minister's statement, we now expect the health promotion, nutrition and schools bill to come our way. We should also bear in mind the fact that a member's bill on school meals may come to us at some point, subject to the consultation on that proposal.

The fact that a substantial amount of legislation is coming our way limits our time to do other things. We agreed at our away day that we would concentrate on the issue of looked-after children and some relatively minor issues, which appear on the clerk's paper under "Other work". Do members have any comments, or are we content to approve the paper?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The paper is excellent. However, I would like to flag up the possibility of our holding—perhaps in over a year's time—a quick one-day inquiry into whether the provision of access to FE for schoolchildren is meeting all the aspirations of Scotland's young people. I mention that as no more than a possibility at this stage.

The Convener: We might want to take that up with the minister at some point, once the process has had a chance to bed in. Things are still in the early stages at the moment, so such an inquiry would be a bit premature just now, but the issue is certainly one that the committee would want to keep an eye on.

Dr Murray: I am also on the Finance Committee and I am sure that members will be aware from the press this morning that there will be a fairly fundamental budget review. That was discussed in the Finance Committee yesterday, and the suggestion was made that the subject committees should have a role to play in investigating where resources could be moved between priorities and projects. Although the clerk's paper suggests that this year might be slightly less complex, that might not actually be the case, as there might be some more difficult discussions to have.

The Convener: This will be a relatively light year for the budget process, but as we move

towards the next spending review period, the committee may have further work to do on next year's budget. We are not talking about the budget process being light right through to 2007, although the current budget year, which is a continuation of the existing spending review period, will not be too demanding.

Mr Ingram: I think that we agreed to keep a watching brief on the implementation of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) Scotland Act 2004, and we should perhaps include that in the paper.

The Convener: That is correct. We agreed to do that. We shall add that to the list of other work and the things that we shall continue to look at.

Fiona Hyslop: It will be a challenging year, particularly given the amount of legislation that is ahead of us, but I am quite keen for our work programme to identify some key issues, including on-going policy issues, that affect Scotland. Do you have any further information as to whether we will be the lead committee on the health promotion, nutrition and schools bill? If we are not, we may want to express the opinion that we think that that bill should come to us, if not as lead committee then certainly as one of the secondary committees.

The Convener: I would be surprised if a bill that includes the word "schools" did not come to the committee.

Fiona Hyslop: I am just unclear as to which minister will be responsible for the bill.

The Convener: That is not clear to me, either, but at this stage I assume that the bill will come to the committee. If we hear otherwise, we shall obviously let members know, but we do not anticipate its introduction until about this time next year at the earliest, so I do not think that we need to panic about it yet.

Fiona Hyslop: The way in which paragraph 20, which is on Dungavel—an issue that I have raised previously—is set out makes sense. We should ask the minister to find out from the Westminster Government its response to the views and opinions expressed during the Parliament's debate on the education and support of young people. Obviously, many of us were distressed to hear the news about the removal of young asylum-seeking children last night. We should reflect on the provisions of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and who has responsibility under Scottish legislation for all aspects of children's welfare. Members will also wish to note the comments made by Kathleen Marshall, Scotland's commissioner for children and young people. This is a key issue for her, and there may be others. Do we plan to have a session with her as part of the on-going relationship between the committee and the

commissioner? We identified the need to have sessions with organisations such as Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education and the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care—we have been having such sessions as we go along—but I am not aware that we have timetabled a meeting with the commissioner for children and young people. I suspect that the response from the minister on the plight of children at Dungavel is something that we could usefully discuss with her, if we have an opportunity to invite her to the committee. If we have not identified such a meeting in the timetable, I think that we should.

The Convener: A seminar with the children's commissioner will be held in the Parliament on 26 October at 6 o'clock. That will be our initial opportunity to meet her; obviously, the committee can invite her back if members feel that a session would be useful.

Fiona Hyslop: I think that a committee session would be useful.

The Convener: We shall keep that under review. If we feel that it is necessary and if we have time in the timetable, we shall try to fit it in.

If there are no further comments on the work programme, do members approve it? Do members also agree to hold an inquiry into looked-after children?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: The clerks will draft a paper on the handling of that inquiry in the near future.

Fiona Hyslop: I know that Elaine Murray and Lord James Douglas-Hamilton attended a session with young people from West Lothian who were looked-after children. They came to a meeting in the Parliament and gave a very good presentation on what it is like to live as a looked-after child, particularly with regard to concerns about education. If it is at all possible, I think that we should ask those young people to come and give evidence to us. It would be appropriate to start an inquiry into looked-after children by listening to the children themselves to hear their views and concerns.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Bristow Muldoon, who helped to organise that meeting, told me that he was interested in making representations to the Education Committee. If the clerk were willing to contact Bristow Muldoon and tell him about our proposed plans, he would find that helpful.

The Convener: A paper by the clerks will be written in due course and I am sure that that point will be included.

Dr Murray: As Fiona Hyslop said, I also attended that meeting. I understand from Mary Mulligan, who is also one of the constituency MSPs for the area, that the children had already made the presentation to the council. Therefore, the presentation that they made to us was their second, so they are getting quite experienced in giving presentations to people. After the meeting, I took the liberty of forwarding their publication to the clerk, just to provide some background on what they were saying.

The Convener: There is no meeting next week, as the committee is going on two visits in connection with our early years inquiry. The following week, we shall start taking oral evidence for that inquiry. I thank you all for your attendance today.

Meeting closed at 11:01.

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