

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday 5 October 2005

Session 2

£5.00

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EDUCATION COMMITTEE

17th 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:

Carol Ball (Unison)

Eileen Dinning (Unison)

Sandra Gray (Shetland Childcare Partnership and Shetland Islands Council)

Linda Kinney (Stirling Council)

Margaret Lauder (Argyll and Bute Council)

Carolyn Martin (City of Edinburgh Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark Roberts

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Education Committee

Wednesday 5 October 2005

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:31*]

Item in Private

The Convener (Iain Smith): Welcome to the Education Committee's 17th meeting in 2005. The main item of business is further evidence on our inquiry into early years education but, before that, we must decide whether to take item 3 in private. Item 3 is the consideration of an approach paper to the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill, which the Parliamentary Bureau remitted to us yesterday. We will discuss potential witnesses, which is better done in private so that we can have a frank discussion. Are members content to take item 3 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Early Years Inquiry

10:32

The Convener: We have two panels of witnesses who will give evidence as part of our early years inquiry. Later, we will have a panel of representatives from local authorities, but first we have witnesses from Unison, from which we have received written evidence. Before members ask their questions, I ask the witnesses to introduce themselves.

Carol Ball (Unison): I am a deputy service conditions officer with Unison.

Eileen Dinning (Unison): I am the Scottish equalities officer for Unison.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): I thank the witnesses for coming to present their evidence. The committee is conscious of the nursery nurses' dispute of some time ago and of the petition on the issue that Unison submitted. We are pleased to have the opportunity afforded by the inquiry to address the broader issues and some of the specifics, such as ensuring that we have a well-qualified, well-trained and well-rewarded workforce for early years education.

I have some general policy questions. Your submissions states:

"The existing Executive provision of part-time, free pre-school education for all 3 and 4 year olds is helpful, but inadequate."

You go on to explain what provision you would like, but your submission acknowledges that much of the legislation and support provision and many of the drivers for funding are Westminster responsibilities. How can the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government improve early years education and child care, or is it too difficult within the current constraints?

Carol Ball: I realise that the issue is for Westminster, but our view is that if the funding streams that we have at present—I will not rehearse them all, but I mean streams such as sure start funding—were put into a central fund, that would cut down bureaucracy, free up more money and allow more flexibility in provision.

There just happens to be a good model in Glasgow, where I work. There has been a fall in the birth rate and the number of children who attend school, so the council has taken the opportunity to close schools and merge them to create what it calls pre-12 campuses. The Keppoch campus in Possilpark has been in existence for a year and has brought together schools of mixed faiths. It is a statement about the way forward. The campus has a special educational needs unit and it has extended day

provision to out-of-school care. That means that a parent who has three children under 12 can drop their children off and they will be looked after, cared for and educated on one campus from 8 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock at night. Unison advocates such a good model that has well-qualified and trained staff and is delivered by the public sector.

Fiona Hyslop: That is a family-centred approach. One of the things we are looking at is whether the early education and care of three and four-year-olds should be delivered through wider family centres or whether it is more appropriate for that provision to be attached to primary or standalone nursery schools? Does Unison have a preference?

Carol Ball: Unison recognises that every community needs a model to suit it. The Glasgow model now has 29 learning communities, as they are known. The curriculum and early years provision are developed to suit the needs of a particular community. It is not the case that one model fits all, but the nursery nurses in that model are trained to deliver care and education to children from birth until the age of eight.

Fiona Hyslop: We are under Westminster constraints because a lot of the legislation that deals with funding streams, parental leave and child care come from there. However, we work with 32 different local authorities in Scotland. Obviously, we are touching on the politics of the nursery nurses dispute, but there is a question about whether we can have a truly national early years strategy if we have such disparate policy and delivery units in each separate local authority. Does there need to be more direction from the Executive to set out terms and conditions? Should there be teaching support in nurseries?

Carol Ball: Absolutely. There should be more direction from the Executive. Our job and the services that we deliver are governed by national care standards and by the curriculum that has just been extended to provide for children from 0 to 18. We have to deliver those policies. We have argued all along that although there might be different approaches to how and where those policies are delivered, the local authorities are well placed to develop them further.

Parents choose private or voluntary provision for their own reasons, but that happens because the public sector has not expanded as it should to make provision better available to parents. The work force is qualified, highly skilled and well placed to provide that care and education. There should be more direction from the Executive. The Glasgow model that I described could be repeated throughout Scotland.

Fiona Hyslop: Should there be qualified early years teachers alongside qualified nursery nurses

in each nursery class in Scotland as part of the nought-to-18 curriculum?

Carol Ball: The levels of qualification are being considered as part of the national review of the work force. Unison believes that the evolving work force should be degree led, but that is not to say that people should have a teaching degree. There should be appropriate qualifications. Unison has always taken that view.

I have been a nursery nurse for 24 years and I have worked alongside good teachers, but I have not seen a teacher carry out a task in a nursery that many of our members and I could not do. We must consider emerging roles and responsibilities for the future and having appropriate qualifications for each level of working. That does not necessarily mean using current relevant qualifications, including teaching ones.

Fiona Hyslop: A 10-year strategy has emerged in England and Wales. Some of us believe that Scotland was ahead of the game a few years ago, but that we are falling badly behind. The early years review was supposed to be published some time ago, but it has still not been published. Is that causing difficulty in developing early years education and child care? Does Scotland need to press the accelerator to catch up with and, indeed, surpass what is happening in England and Wales?

Carol Ball: Yes. However, I believe that rather than being behind, we are well placed to deliver: 81 per cent of nursery nurses in the public sector have a Scottish vocational qualification of level 3 or above. Because of expansion we have sometimes substituted quantity for quality, which is an issue that must be addressed. Some of the frustration of the members I represent stems from the fact that they are now well placed to move forward quickly; indeed, some have done so. In Glasgow, for example, there are 32 well-established centres with extended day provision. In addition, centres in West Dunbartonshire have adopted a holistic approach in which they have health and social services partners and deliver out-of-school care for older children who are in community nurseries. People should look at those examples as models for the future.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): How could the sure start scheme more effectively improve health, well being and educational attainment?

Carol Ball: The sure start scheme has been welcomed in under-three provision, which has been the least available. The scheme should continue, but it should be incorporated in a funding stream that encompasses all early years provision rather than provision for a particular group. We are reviewing a model that used the sure start funding to set up nought-to-three provision that operates

alongside nursery school provision. Under-three provision is available for an extended day—eight in the morning until six at night—52 weeks a year, but there are problems when a child becomes older than three and moves from that scheme to a nursery school that does not have extended-day provision.

Sure start funding gives the most vulnerable children a good start in life, with the added benefit that workers work with the families. Workers for every provision do that, but workers in the sure start scheme specifically do outreach work with families in their homes, which is a good model. The difficulty is the lack of funding for nursery education to continue extended-day provision. I would like all the funding to be streamlined into one funding stream.

Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP): Fiona Hyslop has explored most of the area in which I was interested. You mentioned the need for a set of qualifications and a professional structure to reflect nursery nurses' emerging roles and responsibilities, which have expanded more than anyone would have thought a few years ago. I wonder whether you could spend a minute or so giving us an insight into, for example, the role they play in parenting.

10:45

Carol Ball: I must be honest and say that when I first got my national nursery examination board qualifications and then went on to do the higher national certificate, the courses did not provide a great understanding of the possible difficulties of working alongside parents. It is to nursery nurses' credit that the issue has emerged and has been not only taken on board but embraced. That is due to the fact that, with their working class background, nursery nurses have been able to take a commonsense approach. For example, they know that many of these nursery provisions are based in housing schemes. As I was born in Govan and worked in Pollok, I am well placed to have an insight into certain difficulties.

A new HNC that is coming on stream will be made up of core elements and modules that can be chosen, including one that looks at the theory behind the practice of working with parents. For many years, nursery nurses in family centres have been running parents groups at which they show parents how to interact appropriately with their children; give them learning experiences; and explain to them the benefits of those experiences. When I worked in a day nursery in the Gorbals, which was one of the most deprived areas of Glasgow, I taught young single mothers the basic skills of cleaning and feeding their children. You would think that women would already have such an instinct, but some young women have not had

good role models. We need to provide such models to let them become even better parents than they already are.

Ms Byrne: How widely is that practised throughout the sector?

Carol Ball: It is more widely practised in the community nursery model than in the traditional nursery class model or some freestanding nursery schools. That said, all the models involve parents and utilise some of their skills. For example, Urdu-speaking mothers read stories to children in their mother tongue. However, as I said, teaching specific parenting skills to parents who are having difficulties is probably more prevalent in the community nursery model.

Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): Fiona Hyslop also touched on the area of staff qualifications that I was going to focus on. Given that Carol Ball serves on the national review of qualifications, it might be helpful if she gave us some feedback on the process.

Last week, Children in Scotland and the Scottish Educational Research Association told us that we need a high proportion of degree qualifications among the early years workforce. Indeed, SERA said that the critical and reflective thinking that comes from a degree is crucial for effective early years practice. What is your impression of that comment? Is the current mix of the early years workforce in line with what SERA is looking for or do we need to upgrade qualifications generally? Can you give us some reflections on your work over the past year or so?

Carol Ball: I am happy to do that. At the moment, there is some very good practice and, as I have told the committee that is conducting the national review, I would not want good, strong practice to be belittled by people saying, "We're aspiring to something else and what's going on just now is not that good." I think the report will reflect the fact that we are at a good starting base.

From Unison's perspective, the frustration is about what will happen as an outcome of the report when it comes out for consultation and is taken on board, as our members do not have such a huge leap to make. Our membership includes everyone from basic grade nursery nurses right through to managers of centres who have built on their starting qualifications. I have taken on a further qualification and a great many of our members have gone on to take degrees and further qualifications, so people are well placed and may feel frustrated by the length of time it takes for the emerging qualifications to kick in.

I firmly believe that the existing staff are effective practitioners. I admit that, when I first started all those years ago, there was not the same amount of reflection, planning or emphasis on the formal

curriculum. I would argue that, in some cases, things have gone a bit too far. Last week I was dealing with members who feel that, given that children now have to achieve in 68 different areas, there should be room for us to reflect on what we actually want our children to be doing at such an early age.

Roles will emerge and we want the sector to be recognised for the professional sector that it is. It is vital that the work practitioners do is reflected in society and it is a shame that we have to submit petitions so that society will take us seriously. Just because it is education at the earliest stages does not mean it is an easy job that anyone can do.

I believe that the consultation will consider whether we need a mix including qualifications at degree level not only for managers but for lead practitioners, with practitioners having level 4 qualifications and support workers having level 3 qualifications. There has been quite a bit of debate about the level for support workers, but I have worked in an environment where every one of my colleagues has held a qualification at level 3 and I believe that that is the minimum qualification that we should be looking for.

Mr Ingram: One of the problems, as we have seen for the past wee while, is the low status of people who work in the early years sector. That has to change, does not it, particularly if we are to move down the line that you want us to move down, towards universal day care provision for kids? Is there a problem at the moment with capacity to do that? Do you think that, to attract people into the workforce, there will have to be a step change in people's perception of the status of the workforce and their pay and conditions? Is that a prerequisite for further expansion of the sector?

Carol Ball: I believe so. Unfortunately, we had to go into a dispute situation. Nobody wants to do that. It is an absolute failure and I make no excuses for saying that it was not a place we wanted to be. However, one of the main positives that have come out of that is that all our members are now earning more money as a result of the dispute, although we still maintain that they should all have national rates of pay.

The job is determined through national care standards and every establishment provides education and care. Joint inspections are conducted by the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education. If staff have to carry out roles to meet those standards, it naturally follows that they should get the same rates of pay. That is still my belief, although pay levels have certainly increased. That causes an issue for other sectors, although I am not here to represent those sectors.

We feel that if education and child care were delivered by the public sector, there would not be the tensions that currently exist. The private sector now has recruitment and retention issues because it cannot afford to pay even the lowest rates, never mind the highest. We must seriously consider the rates of pay in that sector. Unison maintains that we did not achieve all that we could have achieved and that the rates are not as high as we would like them to be.

The dispute highlighted to society that there are people called nursery nurses and the support that we got from parents showed the esteem in which they hold us. I would go so far as to say that, in the latter stages of the dispute, that support did not help to resolve the dispute as their support for us meant that they did not demand a service. They were so supportive of our action that they did not go to the councils to bang down their doors and say that they wanted a service; they stood beside us. Parents became much more aware of what we were paid. They had assumed that as we work in a school environment we were paid the same as schoolteachers. They did not realise that there was a difficulty. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the dispute, it has highlighted the service. We are pleased to take that a step forward.

Mr Ingram: If, as you suggest, we move down the road of expanding early years education and child care, that will have funding implications. How should such an expansion be funded?

Carol Ball: I believe that children are society's responsibility. Every individual in Scotland has a responsibility to its youngest people. We have to get the message across that all children must have equal access to these services, as the whole of society will benefit. The message has to be that society must pay. The funding could be raised through higher taxation and so on. There is still some way to go to convince people. It is the same with employers, as they do not appreciate the problem and do not have enough facilities for their workers. They fail to recognise that if their workers have good resources and good child care and education facilities, that helps with the retention of well-qualified staff.

I will give an example that relates to flexible working, which is certainly beneficial—we are not saying that measures such as parental leave and flexible working are not beneficial. I give the example of a worker who has two children—a six-year-old and a baby—and is returning to work. They asked their employer whether they could job share. The response was favourable, but they were told that they had to have a fixed working pattern: they would have to work three shifts and the first one would start at 8 o'clock in the morning. The individual concerned said, "I can't do that because of my child care and education

arrangements. I have got my younger child into a nursery but it does not open until 8 o'clock and my older child is in the breakfast club but it does not open until quarter past 8. I cannot present myself at work at 8 o'clock in the morning because my child care does not start then." So they asked, "Could I have a fixed pattern that starts at 9 o'clock?" The response was, "Sorry, we can't do that."

The person in that example is a nursery nurse who provides such care for other parents. The nursery opens at 8 o'clock and she has to be there on a fixed pattern so she cannot have flexibility to meet her own child care requirements. She may have to resign her post in the near future if the problem is not solved. She is an example of a good, hard-working, well-qualified staff member who has been working for a long time and of the talent that will be lost if we do not try to resolve some of these issues.

11:00

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I presume that in pursuing affordable universal child care you are suggesting that there could be some parental contribution towards the cost. Do you want to expand a bit more on that?

Carol Ball: There are good examples in the Scandinavian countries—Norway, Sweden, and so on. They have in place very good, resourced public sector provision. Their grant aid is about 2.5 per cent, whereas ours is less than 0.5 per cent at the moment. My understanding is that parents there pay no more than 30 per cent of their earnings towards care. They contribute, but their contribution is far less than what our parents are asked to pay for their child care. We firmly believe that education should be free: that is a fundamental principle of Unison. We also believe that child care should be affordable and that parents should contribute based on what they can afford.

Dr Murray: Children in Scotland made a similar demand last week for care of children from the age of one. Is it your opinion that child care should be available from the age of one year old, or would you want it to be made available from a younger age?

Carol Ball: If they had a real choice, most parents would probably choose to remain at home for their child's first year, but they do not have that choice because of the level of maternity pay. We appreciate that maternity pay has increased, which is absolutely to be welcomed, but a low-paid worker who is getting only half her salary for so many weeks does not have a real choice, because she does not have the means to take that time off work.

I advocate that the first year of a child's life is best spent in the home environment if possible, but there is a difficulty in that the home environment is sometimes not the best place. Also, if social services are seeking to place children who would otherwise be taken into care, they make that approach to the public sector, where they can get that provision.

Dr Murray: That was my final concern. You mention that certain families need extra support which, at the moment, comes through various targeted programmes. Is there a danger that, in moving towards a universal model, some of that support might be lost to some of the most disadvantaged parents?

We saw examples in Whitburn a couple of weeks ago of small groups of parents working with support workers to overcome some of their difficulties. If all parents are in the same situation—those small groups were—it is easier for them not to feel that they have failed in some way. However, if provision were rolled out to everybody, might some of that support be less available to those who most need it?

Eileen Dinning: The point is that a universal approach to child care would take away the stigma that currently exists, especially for disadvantaged families. At the moment in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom, when children are of statutory school age, they go to their local primary and secondary schools. If, however, their parents want to send them to a private school, that is their choice. The problem is that from nought to five years there is simply no such option at the moment.

What we have put forward in evidence today is not just about targeting the type of education that we should be giving from birth to five years and it is not just about the standard of qualification. What we are talking about is our hope that Parliament will in the long term have the imagination to become involved in a national and integrated strategy that involves all children.

We are, however, acutely conscious that there is little that Parliament can do when it comes to reserved powers, but I cannot believe that Parliament lacks imagination on how we might encourage employers—especially in the business sector—to become involved.

I was at a conference recently at which the convener of the Parliament's Enterprise and Culture Committee talked about his belief in the importance for the future of the Scottish economy of getting right our approach to early years education. We are talking not just about models of wraparound care, but about how we can offer affordable high-quality education. The Education Committee needs to work with other committees to

develop an imaginative and exciting strategy that will, when it comes to fruition, impact on social justice and other areas with which Parliament deals.

Dr Murray: Are you arguing that there should not be targeted support for very vulnerable families who need it?

Carol Ball: I believe that there should be such support. What we propose would be all-encompassing; such specific support would not be lost. Services would work together to provide help and support. There would be more integrated working with health and social services to meet the needs of particular families and children. Such support could still be provided under the model that we propose.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I want to expand on the point about stigma. What services are stigmatised at the moment and what is the danger of services becoming stigmatised? Does that relate to the funding stream that is used or to the location of the services?

Carol Ball: There is not universal provision, so those who are in most need get placements.

Mr Macintosh: Are we talking about services for children from the age of nought to three or about family centres?

Carol Ball: We are talking about children from the age of nought to five.

Mr Macintosh: I am not aware that stigma is a huge issue, although it was raised on the committee's visit to Whitburn. Will you expand on the danger of services becoming stigmatised? What services are already stigmatised?

Carol Ball: We were not suggesting that there is a great deal of stigmatisation. In every area, free part-time education places are available for children between the ages of three and five, so criteria are not necessary to allocate those places. However, there are some criteria. If there is a shortage of places for children in the nought-to-three age group, criteria are used to allocate places. Category 1 children—those who are most at risk—get automatic placement. There are categories below that, but I will not go into all of them. If there is not free provision for all children, children in particular categories are prioritised according to need. We do not want that to be the case. If there were places for all children whose parents wanted one, that would break down barriers. We are not saying that many barriers exist, but when there is a lack of provision, the most vulnerable people have first choice.

Mr Macintosh: Is stigma currently a barrier to accessing services? Are people not accessing services because they are stigmatised?

Carol Ball: No. I would not say that people are not accessing certain services because they think that they are for children from deprived backgrounds, for example. I do not think that that exists to any great extent.

The Convener: There are no further questions, so I thank the panellists for giving evidence. In particular, I thank Unison, which brought the issue on to the agenda through its petition to the Parliament. Petition PE523 called for a national inquiry into early years education and child care. The Education Committee is obviously following up on that petition.

We will have a short suspension while we change witnesses.

11:09

Meeting suspended.

11:12

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome the members of our second panel, which is a representative sample of the different types of local authorities in Scotland, from the urban to the remote. I welcome the representatives of City of Edinburgh Council, Stirling Council, Argyll and Bute Council and Shetland Islands Council. Thank you for your written evidence, which has been useful. Please introduce yourselves.

Linda Kinney (Stirling Council): I am head of early childhood services with Stirling Council.

Sandra Gray (Shetland Child Care Partnership and Shetland Islands Council): I am the chair of the Shetland child care partnership and I am co-ordinator for the family centre.

Carolyn Martin (City of Edinburgh Council): I am early years and child care services manager from the City of Edinburgh Council.

Margaret Lauder (Argyll and Bute Council): I am from Argyll and Bute Council. I am principal early-years officer and I concentrate on pre-school education.

Ms Byrne: I am interested in exploring funding and sustainability. A few weeks ago, some of us had an interesting visit to the Jeely Piece Club in Castlemilk, which offers an integrated service for children between the ages of nought and five, plus pre-school provision. It is a highly impressive facility that chases seven funding streams, some of which come from the local authority while others come from the voluntary sector. The Jeely Piece Club highlighted to us the difficulty of keeping provision going under such circumstances, and the efforts involved in constantly having to apply

for funding, which distracts from management and development of the set-up. How can we sort out funding and approach the situation in an integrated manner? Would it be possible not to cut out voluntary sector involvement completely or is that what is necessary? Those are difficult questions, but there is obviously a problem with sustaining services, as some of your submissions highlighted.

11:15

Linda Kinney: Our submission points out that, although the early years sector has quite a lot of funding, it is fragmented, separated and targeted at differing outcomes, which can cause difficulties in service delivery. The problem, which the Executive has recognised, is how to bring those streams together. Where authorities have pulled together different funding streams to deliver services, that has worked well. The system does not exclude voluntary or other partner services—we have existing models that demonstrate that that sector can continue to work in such a system.

Sandra Gray: Sustainability is a major issue for Shetland. We need to keep our voluntary sector on board. We have eight partner providers, from which we commission places. If we did not retain voluntary sector provision, we would be unable to achieve our target of providing a place for every three to five-year-old whose parents want them to have one.

Because we are a remote island authority and we have a transient population, one family moving into or out of an area can have a huge impact on provision in that area. For example, 18 months ago, we set up Shalder House on the island of Unst, which is our furthest-away island. That was a really exciting venture that involved the local community, RAF Saxa Vord and the Shetland child care partnership in the provision of part-time care for young children. However, 18 months down the road, RAF Saxa Vord is to close, which has huge implications for the economy of the island. Families will move away from the island, so the service may no longer be viable, although we are trying to do some out-of-the-box thinking about how we can retain it.

One of our partner providers is small and can accommodate only four children. The authority's policy is to pay for a minimum of eight fully loaded places, which means that the group benefits from funding for four additional places. However, that is still not sufficient to make it sustainable, with the result that it has to come to the partnership with a begging bowl for money to meet its shortfall, which is not appropriate.

Ms Byrne: How can those issues be resolved? I know that that is a big question. What means of funding would help your situation?

Sandra Gray: I do not have the answer, but I would like more streamlining of funding. If that happened nationally, it would cascade to local level.

Carolyn Martin: For the City of Edinburgh Council, the issues to do with sustainability are twofold. One relates to an issue that has been alluded to, which is bureaucratic overload and the degree of administration and paperwork that we land on voluntary committees which, at the end of the day, are often made up of parents who have limited time to deal with that work and who do not necessarily have the skill or ability to do so. We need to acknowledge that and find a way to tackle it.

The other issue is how we can sustain child-care services, particularly in areas of deprivation. If we are saying that child care needs to be affordable and accessible, we should acknowledge that in areas of deprivation we will never reach a position in which child care can be self-sustaining: it needs financial support. One of the interesting models that we could explore in relation to that is demonstrated by organisations such as the Places for People Group Ltd, which has a subsidiary body, Places for Children. Essentially, what that group does is to consider communities holistically. It works with a range of economic and commercial organisations and agencies, as well as voluntary and public sector bodies. It levers in a lot of money on that basis. The City of Edinburgh Council is considering working with an organisation such as the Places for People Group to try to lever in the funding that would be required to give on-going support to child care in social inclusion partnership areas in Edinburgh. We acknowledge that we will never be able to sustain child care in those areas, particularly because SIP-based funding is being reduced.

Ms Byrne: If I understand you correctly, the issue for you is that there is no certainty that the SIP funding and other funding streams that you tap into will remain. We have just listened to Unison talking about universal child care and local authority funding and so on. We are talking about taking away the stigma. Do you feel that access for everybody would be better? The preventive measures and the early intervention measures that we need to put in place for the most vulnerable children would still be accessible, but it would be a universal service.

Carolyn Martin: It has to be a universal service because stigma is a problem. That is particularly the case for services that are provided for nought to three-year-olds, which are not universal; they are targeted, and the net impact of that is the

possibility that children who very much need the service are not getting it because it is not universally available.

Margaret Lauder: The overall scenario in Argyll and Bute is very different. Our position on sustainability is very real, both for the local authority and for the private and voluntary sectors. Argyll and Bute began from a very low historical base of provision. Prior to the introduction of pre-school education, most of our provision was in the voluntary sector. Pre-school education is the first universal service that we have been able to offer throughout the council area, and we have done that in partnership with the commissioned providers.

We began with an almost 50:50 spread of commissioned and local authority providers. We are tending to move now towards more local authority provision. However, there are quite distinct differences, in that there is a prevalence of sessional pre-school education, rather than wraparound care. The commissioned sector is trying to incorporate pre-school education within wraparound care, but issues regarding top-up fees are now starting to emerge. Although we pay a fairly substantial rate—among the highest in Scotland—for a pre-school education place, that does not match the hourly rate that a number of private providers were already charging. The private providers know that they need to offer the service, but they see themselves as losing income.

What are we, as a council, doing to balance that out? We do not have the economies of scale of other councils. We have been considering many viability issues and new developments; for example, who is not receiving a service and who needs a service? The general response from the companies that we brought in has been that the numbers are so small that it is not viable for a private provider to go in.

We have had out-of-school care schemes. There is only one in Dunoon, which started off offering before-school care. Because of the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care's requirements, the scheme needs two members of staff from 8 o'clock till 9 o'clock. However, some people need to be away on the 7 o'clock ferry if they are working in Glasgow, so they need before-school care earlier than that. We ended up with two parents using the scheme, but it costs £20 or £30 for staff to run it. Will those two parents pay that every morning? As I say, we do not have the economies of scale. Therefore, although there is a fair amount of money in the sector, the historic position of Argyll and Bute means that there is not sufficient to develop the services that we require. We do not have sufficient funds to create family

centres. Most of the provision is wraparound; it is pre-school education as a universal.

As you will have seen from our submission, there is a wide variety of initiatives throughout the council area that meet the requirements of an individual community or family. If a family that has a child with specific needs chooses to come to live in the wonderful environment of Argyll and Bute, we have somehow to get specialist provision to that family for their child.

We have just built a new facility on Islay, and the planning requirements for it mean that we need heavy fire doors on the toilets. At the same time, the care commission tells us that three-year-olds must have independence—but the three-year-olds cannot open the new fire doors because they are too heavy. That is one of the many conflicts that we are constantly engaged in.

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): I wanted to follow up on the consequences of the variety of funding streams. Because of the different types of need that we are trying to meet, we must look forward to a variety of funding streams in the future.

One of the issues that emerged from our visits was that some of the most ambitious providers may find themselves the recipients of up to six or seven different sources of finance, five or six of which will probably come from the local authority. However, when one asks about the monitoring procedures, one finds that most of the funding is annual rather than triennial and that all six or seven sources have completely independent monitoring and evaluation processes. That is phenomenally onerous on those involved.

I would like to draw a parallel. If we are trying to get seamless provision from the ages of nought to 18, the contrast with the schools sector could not be starker. In that sector, HMIE is responsible for the evaluation of the performance of a school and it fulfils all monitoring and funding requirements. Ostensibly, the rhetoric when the care commission was established assumed that, in the context of pre-five provision, the commission would in large part fulfil that role through its monitoring and inspection regime. However, it seems that there is not a local authority in the country that is comfortable with the outcome of the commission's evaluations. Without exception, money is tied to completely different evaluation procedures. A recipient of funding from six or seven sources has six or seven forms of evaluation.

As we move to a more comprehensive system, we will continue to have four or five funding streams in place for at least the next five years, so is it realistic for a local authority to accept that the care commission is capable of providing the same evaluation of pre-five provision as it looks to HMIE

to provide in the education sector? We want to avoid a situation in which there is a different monitoring regime for every piece of money that goes to organisations, on top of the funding uncertainty. Is there any way to streamline the system as an interim step towards more integrated funding? How do we match that with more integrated evaluation? Can anybody say what progress they have made in using the care commission or say why the commission is not deemed adequate to meet those monitoring requirements?

11:30

Carolyn Martin: As we move towards integrated children's planning and we build a performance framework around that, we might well be in a much better position to do what you suggest. The problem is that we have several different sources of funding, as you said. The Executive provides several funding streams, which are all criteria based, and the criteria do not necessarily talk to or relate to one another.

I would like local authorities to get away from the current system of having several funding streams and of deciding whether something is a sure start project or another kind of project, whether it should be funded by the child care strategy or whatever or whether it should be funded from a combination of sources. I would like us to look at the pot and say, "These are our planning objectives. These are the priorities that we are trying to identify and go with for the City of Edinburgh or this neighbourhood in the city. Let's look at how we can fund them."

We are not in that position; we are in a different place. We have sure start funding, child care strategy funding and changing children's services funding. They are all different and different criteria are attached to them. We are accountable to the Executive for meeting those criteria. What do we do about that? Once we have an integrated plan and an integrated performance framework, we will be in a position to start to do something about the situation, but we ain't there yet.

Ms Alexander: So you feel that the funding criteria compel you to impose independent monitoring arrangements on every stream. When we talk to Executive officials, we could say that local authorities' perception is that they have no discretion to reduce monitoring requirements on providers, because of the criteria that the Executive sets. A little responsibility lies on all sides, but it is important for the committee to clarify how to cut through that and reach a situation that is more analogous to the one in primary and secondary education.

Carolyn Martin: I am not saying that care commission or HMIE reports on centres do not count for anything. Of course they count for a great deal. However, they do not provide information that might be needed to decide that a centre meets the criteria that are required for the use of funding from a particular source.

Linda Kinney: As would be expected, different practices are perhaps used in different places. In some places—and certainly in my area—we try not to pass on the monitoring arrangements in that manner. That means that we take the burden of the monitoring arrangements and do not place it on providers. Local authorities can make that decision.

We have had integrated children's services for about six or seven years. That has made a difference, because we have brought funding streams together. In Stirling, we do not talk about sure start or the changing children's services fund. We discuss the delivery of services. Local authorities can think more creatively and some are already doing so. My argument would be not that the work should be passed to providers but that the burden that we have to deal with should be slimmed down at our end.

Wendy Alexander asked about the care commission and HMIE inspections. That is a fundamental question. Part of the issue is that the value base for each inspection process is different. The value base for the care commission inspections is to do with meeting minimum standards but, for HMIE inspections, it is about continuous improvement. The way forward would be to have an integrated inspection process. There is no need for annual care commission inspections and three-yearly integrated inspections. At the moment, there is unnecessary regulation in early years education. We already have a process that brings those two elements together. We need to work towards a situation in which we have one integrated inspection process.

Local authorities took seriously their duties and responsibilities in relation to quality assurance. We are one of the few countries in Europe in which local authorities have the responsibility to assure the quality of the public and the private sector. We are in an interesting position in that regard. There had to be a cultural shift towards public responsibility for private providers. In the beginning, some local authorities were imposing additional burdens on providers in relation to their quality assurance duty. Now, people are more confident and are trying to integrate those monitoring processes.

Margaret Lauder: I agree that the care commission considers the quality of the service. The only response that we have had in relation to the overall funding was about business viability,

which is quite different from the target information that one is looking for from a sure start programme. We would want to know how many children in a centre were being funded through sure start for planning purposes and to enable us to work out how much funding we will need in the future. The care commission considers funding in relation to whether the overall service can continue to be viable rather than whether it is meeting the targets of the funding.

We have begun to move down the road of having a quality assurance unit that will try to bring in all the monitoring, so that only one body considers quality assurance. That work is at an early stage and we are giving out information in order to reduce the burden. We are aware that different people are looking for different pieces of information on funding.

Ms Alexander: I would like further evidence on the matter to be submitted. I take the point that the care commission is, essentially, about how many fire doors a provider has whereas HMIE is concerned more with the quality of provision. However, in the context of child protection, although the "It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright" report, which was published in 2002, suggested that we should have integrated inspection of children's services, that is not even being piloted until 2008. Therefore, there can be no expectation of a universal service in the context of child protection until 2010.

I believe that we need clarity about our ambitions for the monitoring and inspection regime for pre-five services across Scotland, but we have not seen any evidence relating to that so far. People are trying to sub-optimize by creating their own quality assurance units, but, if we want to establish national funding schemes, the corollary is that there has to be some sort of national approach to quality assurance. However, we have received no submissions that deal with the issue of how we can move towards that.

In the child protection area, it took us six years to begin a pilot. Therefore, the committee might want to reflect in its report at least a view of what might represent the optimal situation. The committee could invite the submission of further reflections and evidence. Clearly, if we go down only the HMIE route, that will raise issues about how to ensure that the full spectrum of provision is being assessed.

The Convener: I think that that was more of a statement than a question.

Ms Alexander: Send us some evidence. That would be super.

The Convener: If anyone wishes to submit further comments or evidence, please do so.

Fiona Hyslop: We heard interesting evidence at last week's meeting that seemed to imply that there is a lot of money in early years education. However, local councils tell us frequently that they must spend on children's services substantially more than the grant-aided expenditure figure, particularly for integrated services. Are the costs primarily for child protection aspects rather than for early years education? Is the challenge for early years education the funding streams rather than the overall amount of funding?

Linda Kinney: In simple terms, the answer is yes. Bringing together early years education and early years care means bringing together what were previously social services for the under-fives and education services for them. The consequence is that workers work with a bigger group of vulnerable children and families, who require a higher level of support. My authority spends above GAE on children's services, the bulk of which is for what were previously social work services for young, vulnerable children and their families.

There is a potential for economies of scale with integrated services when the pre-school entitlement grant, GAE for social work services and funding for children with disabilities are put together. As Margaret Lauder said, there are separate rural issues that require creative solutions, but our experience in Stirling is that additional funding arises from service integration.

Carolyn Martin: What Linda Kinney has said is interesting. In Edinburgh, we spend above GAE levels on pre-school education. The additional cost comes from the cost to the local authority of providing pre-school education, which is considerably more than the grant that we provide to our partners. As with Argyll and Bute, our costs are among the highest in Scotland. I think that that is because we are still trying to deliver pre-school education through an old model. However, we are trying to move towards the kind of integrated service delivery that Linda Kinney talked about. One of several reasons for doing that is that we realise that there is the possibility of economies of scale from bringing together child and family support services and pre-school education services. We hope that an integrated service would mean not only that we were better able to meet the needs of children and families, but that we could mitigate the current costs of delivery.

Sandra Gray: The cost of delivering pre-school education is also high in Shetland. Much of that is because we feel that every child has a right to such education, so we often offer pre-school education to only one child on an island. It might be asked why we do not use registered childminders in such cases. However, as well as having difficulty with education staffing, we have

difficulty in encouraging people to become registered childminders. We look forward to having an integrated service, which we hope will mean that we can streamline funding and reduce costs.

Margaret Lauder: In Argyll and Bute, nearly everything costs more than the GAE funding—for example, transport and individual units in which there is only one child. The care commission has requested that we increase staffing in some pre-five units so that the ratio is 1:8 rather than 1:10, because it feels that the school toilets are not in an appropriate place for the units, even though that is the only space that we have. Costs go up constantly. We do our best to give offers in kind to commissioned providers on top of the price per place. For example, they have access to our in-service training calendar and we use a lot of workforce development funding to get the staff qualified. In the early days of pre-school education, we had a commissioned childminder, but she withdrew and nobody else has since come forward. The committee has already heard evidence about qualifications; another big issue is the qualifications that we should expect of childminders.

11:45

Fiona Hyslop: Obviously, provision varies within local authorities and between them, but do you have any firm view from a pedagogy perspective as to the role of nursery teachers in pre-school provision? Is it more appropriate and desirable to have family centres, nursery schools that are associated with a primary school or nursery classes within primary schools? The City of Edinburgh Council is embarking on a rationalisation of primary schools—otherwise known as closures—but to what extent are the opportunities that arise for the early years agenda being grasped? Are the school estate changes an opportunity for Edinburgh to implement its ideas on the provision that has the most educational benefit for pre-fives?

Carolyn Martin: Edinburgh is firmly of the view that the way forward for early years services is the development of an integrated approach. That means the local authority working in partnership with important bodies such as health agencies to develop an integrated service. Our vision is the development of integrated centres, some of which will be associated with primary schools, although some may well be stand-alone centres.

Fiona Hyslop: What is the educational rationale for that?

Carolyn Martin: I was at a conference recently at which I heard a presentation by Leon Feinstein on work that he had done on the 1970 cohort. He discovered that, even at the age of 22 months,

there is what he described as an attainment gap. I am not sure how we define that at such an age, but there is certainly a gap in children's learning and development that is associated with the socioeconomic status of their family. The gap, which gets wider as children get older, is associated with the child's background—their family, community and circumstances. For example, relevant factors are whether a child lives in a single-parent family, whether the parents work, the level of finance that comes into the household and whether the mother has mental illness problems. All those distal factors around the family are relevant.

We must recognise that the early years—by which I mean those before 22 months and even before birth—are absolutely crucial. We also need to recognise that educators, health people, social workers and child and family support workers cannot sort out those issues on their own. The totality of the child's experience impacts on that child's attainment. That says to me clearly that we must bring those services together to create integrated service delivery. Whether that happens in a physical or a virtual centre is debatable, but it is important that people should work together in an effective and co-ordinated way in a community. If one can create a centre, that is great, but it probably would not make sense in a rural area, for example. That kind of thinking and work is behind Edinburgh's decision to go down that route.

Fiona Hyslop: That is helpful, but I am also interested in hearing another perspective.

Linda Kinney: You asked about pedagogy and the roles and responsibilities of different members of staff. As we bring services together and have a new understanding about how young children learn, the impact of poverty, closing the opportunity gap and so on, we have come to recognise the effectiveness of having multidisciplinary staff teams working together in integrated centres.

The roles of teachers and nursery nurses are changing significantly. In Stirling, we are moving towards creating a new professionalism for early years providers and we now call our nursery nurses early childhood educators. No longer is it thought that a trained teacher is any better than someone who has been trained either as a nursery nurse or in the new model of early childhood educator. We need to think about a combination of training.

We have much more of a career structure now. Some early childhood educators are engaged in BA modules, but the nature of the training is less important than the value of continuing professional development and working towards specific qualifications in early childhood. There is difficulty, confusion and tension about what those roles and

responsibilities are, but what is most important is the quality and ability of people who work with children.

Sandra Gray: I strongly reiterate what Linda Kinney said, but I feel that there is still some way to go to raise the profile of child care workers across all sectors. We struggle to get people to become registered childminders, because that role is not valued.

Margaret Lauder: Cost was the basis of the model that we used originally in Argyll and Bute; we did not have a base to build on, so any model that we developed had to be dictated by the available funding. Since then, we have seen big changes. In the model that we are now using, what we call early education and child care workers deliver pre-school education. There is an allocation of time for teacher input, which the head teacher manages in the most appropriate way for each unit.

Teachers now more fully recognise the skills of what were formerly called nursery nurses; they realise that they themselves perhaps did not have all the skills that were demonstrated by other members of staff. Like Linda Kinney, I believe that that recognition now exists and that there is a lot of support for mixed qualifications and skills in the units. Indeed, a number of our head teachers now argue that the staff are not paid well enough for the jobs that they do.

We have concentrated on raising qualification levels. Like Stirling Council, Argyll and Bute Council has a number of people who are moving on to degree qualifications in their settings. Some of those people will move on to take up a teacher training place to qualify and move out of our sector—indeed, some people have already done so.

We face particular difficulties in Argyll and Bute. If pre-school education is the only service that can be sustained in an island community with five children, for example, 0.5 of a place in a term-time post of 39 weeks will not provide someone with a sufficient salary. Families cannot be sustained on such salaries and people will not be attracted to come to take those posts. Unless we have flexibility to enable us to grow people into posts, the service will not continue. That is a big dilemma for us, especially when people move on or think that they can be better recompensed in another post. We are always considering ways of providing the service, because it is valued, but we have difficulties in some areas.

Dr Murray: You have covered many issues that I wanted to ask about and your answers have covered skills and qualifications well.

A number of organisations that have given evidence have expressed a desire for universal

full-time provision for all children over the age of one. What demands from parents are placed on you in that respect? Would it be possible for you to give costings for such provision? I do not expect you to give costings at the moment, but there would be no point in the committee making a recommendation that has financial implications without its being able to say what the financial implications are. Could you give the committee such information? How easy would it be to do so?

Linda Kinney: I would be absolutely delighted to give the committee information about that. Demand for provision for under-threes is certainly increasing year on year. In my area, the issue is integrated education and child care provision. From what I understand locally, I think there would be a great demand for services for children from the age of one and I would be pleased to give the committee the costings from a Stirling perspective.

The Convener: It would be helpful if any of the other authorities could provide such information in writing, although I realise that that is a big ask.

Margaret Lauder: That would be a big issue for Argyll and Bute Council because much of our provision is within school settings and we do not meet the requirements for younger children in care situations. A big capital investment would be required for changes to buildings to meet those requirements. I will give an easy example. An out-of-school care facility wished to develop, using school premises. We were happy to support it, but there was a care commission requirement for a new fire door in the space that was identified, which would have cost us £6,000. The education service did not require to do that work—the door was needed only by the care service. As the current refurbishment of the village hall will take into account all the necessary fire precaution measures, the group has decided to establish itself there. That is a recurring theme for us when it comes to old buildings.

12:00

Mr Macintosh: I hesitate to speak on behalf of the whole committee, but members' comments indicate that we have been impressed by much of the provision that is directed not just at individual children but at the whole family and which provides support to parents. I realise that that coverage is not universal, but I am not sure that I have a grasp of how the patchwork of provision has developed and is funded.

Pre-school provision is a universal service, but I get confused about funding for support for parents. Most of the money appears to come from family support funds—from social work funds—but it might be supplemented by some families who are

paying for child care. I am slightly unclear about how the services are integrated.

Perhaps we should start with Linda Kinney from Stirling Council, because I liked its submission. You are clearly proud of your integrated model. Will you explain how that model, particularly its non-pre-school element, is funded?

Linda Kinney: There are two important aspects to that question, the first of which is a cultural issue about supporting families. I will deal with the early years element in a moment.

I should point out that one movement in the education and care aspects of the holistic way in which we work with children has been paralleled by educational developments such as new community schools. The emphasis in Stirling's integrated service on caring for and educating children and families means that, even in our traditional nursery class provision, staff who work with early years children and their families understand that they need to engage with families in a way that they would never have done before. They are also aware of the services that we need to target at children and families with specific needs.

With the funding for new community schools and the changing children's services fund, services in certain localities have been working together much more effectively. For example, the changing children's services fund has allowed clusters of schools in our area to employ family support workers to help families who have children both in pre-school provision and at school.

One point is that people's general view of their roles and responsibilities has changed. However, on your question about targeted services, integrated early years services can use sure start funding to employ family support workers who might offer additional support to families. We work with a number of local authority-funded voluntary groups, one of which, for example, targets children and mothers in families in which drug abuse occurs. Although we have used specific targeted funding where need is greatest or where there is very specialist need, we are aiming for a sea change in culture with regard to how we engage with families. If everyone takes responsibility for caring for families and targeting specialist services at them, we will be able to take a holistic approach.

Does that make sense or answer your question?

Mr Macintosh: Yes, but I suppose that the committee is concerned most with how we remove barriers to make that happen. Some barriers might have arisen as a result of attitudes or occupations. For example, the workforce in a traditional nursery school might not be able or willing to provide the extended care that parents need or desire.

It may be that the funding is available only to the most vulnerable or to the families with the most need, which may stigmatise the service. A couple of comments have hinted at that. You have developed a number of integrated services, but you have gone only so far. What is preventing you going all the way? Why are all services not integrated?

Linda Kinney: If I understand what you are saying, it is about stigmatisation, about which there were issues in the past. Bringing services together in one setting, such as a campus approach, may prevent that. The simple answer to your question about what stops us bringing all the services together is funding. We need capital funding and to bring a range of people together. As was mentioned earlier, people are funded from different funding streams, so we are trying to be creative and to put all those funding streams together. Because we have made the decision that education is a public responsibility and that child care is a private responsibility, the lines get blurred. Although we are saying that child care is a private responsibility, we are funding some kinds of child care.

Part of the difficulty, which we talked about earlier, is bringing it all together. Where we can create centres, and where we can work with public-private partnership models to create schools that are integrated in a campus model, that is what we are doing. As funding becomes available we will continue to develop that model. In the meantime, if we cannot do it physically we are trying to establish a cultural change in how people work. The simple answer is that not all services are integrated because we do not at this stage have all the funding available to make it happen overnight. It is a process.

Mr Macintosh: How extensive are the integrated centres? Are we talking about 10 per cent of the provision or 15 per cent?

Linda Kinney: For early years services, half of our local authority centres are now integrated centres. We started off about nine years ago with one and we now have 12. That is quite a substantial improvement. Where we have had the opportunity to integrate nursery class provision, that is what we have done. However, at the same time, we have seen our partners as having the potential for that too and we have been clear about not getting into competition. We have been clear about having a partnership model in which, if a good quality partner provider is offering the potential for an integrated model, we will work with them on that basis. We are commissioning not only pre-school places but, in some of our partner centres that are at a particular level of quality assurance, we have started commissioning places for vulnerable children under three, for example.

Those partner centres have bought into being part of a Stirling-wide early childhood service rather than just a Stirling Council children's service.

Mr Macintosh: I have another question for Stirling—I am not picking on you. Do parents and families use those centres? Are they entirely paid for by public funds, or are some of those parents opting in and using them because they provide a service that suits their needs and allows them to work and to care for their families?

Linda Kinney: Absolutely. All that is happening, and it is the ultimate aim. Most of our integrated services accommodate children who are vulnerable—who need additional provision for themselves and their families—but parents can buy child care in those settings. The major demand is for under-three provision, where the number of places is much smaller. The danger can be that those places are filled by vulnerable families, but because they are in a setting that offers universal education for three to five-year-olds, where there is a social mix, it does not have the same stigma as it may have had in the past. There is a much better mix in rural areas, where as well as vulnerable children and families there are local children and families. We have a mix in all our centres.

Mr Macintosh: Carolyn Martin said that the advantage of the centres is that they can lever in funds from elsewhere. I was not sure where they can lever funds in from.

Carolyn Martin: It is about perceptions of child care and pre-school education. There is a whole interesting debate to be had on that alone. What do we mean by pre-school education? How does it differ from child care? If we think about the child care element as most people would understand it, a lot of it is driven by an economic agenda. In certain parts of the City of Edinburgh, there is a strong emphasis on regeneration, and a major effort is going into it. That is particularly the case in social inclusion areas such as Craigmillar and north Edinburgh. A lot of people are doing a lot of work and are putting in a lot of resource in such areas.

On the outskirts of that debate and that effort, we are fighting to emphasise the fact that early years services and child care services are crucial to what we are trying to achieve in attempting to regenerate communities. There are organisations that will come in and help the range of organisations that are doing the actual work to recognise that regenerating communities requires a holistic view. Early years forms a vital part of that. Much success has been achieved in leveraging in funding to support the development of early years and child care services.

Mr Macintosh: So it involves leveraging in other public funding?

Carolyn Martin: No, not necessarily public funding. Private funding has been secured.

Mr Macintosh: Private funding in terms of—

Carolyn Martin: Commercially based funding.

Mr Macintosh: Commercial regeneration?

Carolyn Martin: Yes.

Mr Macintosh: There has been an idea of child care and learning forming two separate streams. They are not in fact incompatible at all. Perhaps one reflects the needs of the parents more, whereas the other reflects the needs of the child. "Care" is perhaps based more on the needs of families to go out and work.

Carolyn Martin: Well—

Mr Macintosh: Perhaps that was not a helpful distinction.

Carolyn Martin: That is one perspective.

Mr Macintosh: There is more than one type of ethos. There are the private child care providers, some of which are nurseries, and there are the public sector providers. I think that the private ones tend to be more responsive to the demands placed on working parents, or perhaps more flexible in the hours they operate, although they might lose some of the educative ethos that exists in the public sector or voluntary sector providers. That is my perception as a lay person, as it were. Would you say that that is fair?

Carolyn Martin: No—I do not know whether that is fair or not. The City of Edinburgh Council has recently been considering care commission and HMIE inspection reports for all its providers, as well as for all its own provision. In Edinburgh, 40 per cent of provision comes through the private and voluntary sectors. No real difference has been distinguished between the quality of the council's partners' pre-school education provision and that of its own provision. That might not have proved to be the case if we had done a similar exercise a few years ago: there has been quite a dramatic improvement in the delivery of education services among our partner providers.

12:15

Your point about the partners being able to be more responsive to the needs of families—in particular, parents who go out to work—is probably valid. That goes back to the cultural issues that Linda Kinney mentioned and what people perceive themselves as being there to do. In the local authority, staff and the service itself perceive their role as being the provision of pre-school education and, in the case of targeted

services, child and family support services. Local authorities have not necessarily traditionally seen themselves as providers of child care. That is associated with people's perceptions of their roles and responsibilities and how those need to change.

The City of Edinburgh Council recently commissioned a piece of work from the University of Edinburgh that considers the competency base for the development of integrated early years and child care services. The work examines where the competency base sits currently and where it needs to be in respect of the development of an integrated service. It has been extremely interesting to look at the outcome of that piece of work. It highlights the need to examine core staff teams and to consider what constitutes a core staff team that needs to be in place to provide universal services. We must also consider how that relates to the additional services that need to come in to support children and families who have additional needs. Through that piece of work, we will be able to move to a position where we conceive roles and responsibilities differently from how we currently do in the local authority. That will inform fundamental shifts in the way we deliver the service. For example, we will have to recognise that we must move from the current system of term-time provision to providing a service 52 weeks of the year.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I will ask a general question that may be difficult to answer because there may be variations between different parts of Scotland. From your perspective, is pre-school provision by the private or independent sector shrinking?

Carolyn Martin: Absolutely not.

The Convener: Is that the general perception in all areas?

Linda Kinney: The quick answer to that question is no. I will add a comment that follows on from a question that Kenneth Macintosh asked. There are important issues about the private sector, because our experience is that where local authorities can provide flexible services, parents want more of it and prefer it.

In respect of quality in the private sector, the issue perhaps comes back to the point we made earlier: local authorities have had some responsibility and duty—particularly to partners that have been commissioning services—to try to assure quality. We have been working for a number of years to assure quality in partner centres. It is therefore perhaps not a surprise that external inspections show that the quality of private-sector provision is good, very good or equivalent to the standard of local authority

provision. That too contributes to the fact that the private sector is not diminishing.

Sandra Gray: I am afraid that I have to say that in Shetland we have only two private nurseries and that both struggle. That stems from the fact that we are moving towards staff having qualifications. As soon as they gain the appropriate qualification, they tend seek employment in the statutory sector rather than remain in the private sector.

Margaret Lauder: I have to say that there is no growth in the private sector in the Argyll and Bute Council area. There is an element of swings and roundabouts: one private nursery closed this year but another private nursery in a different area is trying to become the sole provider in that area. We are currently negotiating with that nursery. There is a decline in the voluntary sector.

When a crucial person or a crucial piece of work suddenly becomes an issue, it quite often happens that the group has gone before we have been able to be involved. I have had to call committees back and say, "Actually, you were commissioned to us. You shouldn't have gone and done that before you spoke to us. Can we help you through?"

The other issue that I would like to raise is the fact that we have a number of private providers who ran three-hour sessions prior to pre-school education being introduced. The parents in that community are quite used to that sort of arrangement and, therefore, have been quite willing to pay a fee for the extra half hour. That has kept those units afloat and their business is continuing. We are, however, starting to see a very small, but growing, number of parents question that: if they choose to access that provider, why should they have to take the three hours? We are starting to talk to those providers about that conflict. If an awful lot of parents say that they want to take up only two and a half hours, the sustainability of some of those private businesses will be in doubt.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I have one or two questions for Sandra Gray. Do you believe that the concept of Shetland Council's child care voucher scheme could be extended to cover, for example, childminders who look after their own children, as long as they also look after other people's children as well?

Sandra Gray: A requirement of the child care voucher scheme is that the vouchers are used with a registered child care provider. That does not exclude a registered childminder, so yes, there is potential there. The difficulty is in getting people to be registered childminders.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Might there be scope to extend training opportunities to

grandparents, to encourage more grandparents to become childminders?

Sandra Gray: We make our training available to as wide a target audience as we possibly can. If a grandparent was to say that they were interested in becoming a registered childminder, we would welcome them and encourage them to participate in the training.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I also have two questions for Linda Kinney. Are there significant differences between the hours of child care that are offered by local authorities and those that are offered by independent pre-school providers?

Linda Kinney: In the main, our extended day early years centres operate from 8.30 in the morning to 5.30 in the evening, whereas a private nursery would normally operate from 8.00 am until 6.00 pm.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Are there significant differences between the ways in which the three-to-five curriculum guidelines are delivered in local authority and independent pre-school centres?

Linda Kinney: The technical answer to that question is that there should not be any difference.

The Convener: That is very diplomatic.

Thank you very much. It has been very useful to hear about the different perspectives. We have gained some interesting insights into the specific problems that our rural and remote communities have in sustaining services. Perhaps we need to reconsider the gold plating that some of our regulatory bodies have in terms of demanding how services are provided, to ensure that there are no unnecessary barriers to the provision of services. Thank you all very much for an interesting and useful session.

That completes the public part of the meeting. Before we go into private session, I remind everyone that the next meeting of the committee will be on 26 October, by which time some of us will have had the advantage of visiting Sweden and Finland to find out about child care and early years provision in those countries. I also remind members that, in the evening of 26 October, there will be the seminar with the children's commissioner. I hope that that is already in members' diaries.

12:24

Meeting continued in private until 12:35.

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