

# **EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

Wednesday 1 February 2006

Session 2

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## EDUCATION COMMITTEE

### 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2006, 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

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP)

Michael Matheson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

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

\*attended

#### THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Val Cox (Scottish Executive Education Department)

Ronnie Hill (Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care)

Don McGillivray (Scottish Executive Education Department)

Peter Peacock (Minister for Education and Young People)

Jacquie Roberts (Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care)

#### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

#### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark Roberts

#### ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

#### LOCATION

Committee Room 1



## Scottish Parliament

### Education Committee

*Wednesday 1 February 2006*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting in private at 10:36*]

10:49

*Meeting continued in public.*

### Items in Private

**The Convener (Iain Smith):** We move now to the public part of our meeting—although agenda item 2, ironically, is to consider whether to take items in private. It is recommended that the committee agree to take item 4, and all subsequent considerations of its report on the early years inquiry, in private. The reasons for the recommendation are, first and most important, that it will allow the committee's adviser, Kathy Sylva, to take part in all our discussions on the scope and drafting of the report, and secondly, it will allow committee members to discuss the scope, content and drafting of the report in a frank, open and constructive way, which sometimes does not happen when discussions are held in public. Do members agree with the recommendation?

**Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP):** I agree—not for the second reason but for the first. Parliamentary rules state that, if we want our adviser to take part, we have to hold the discussions in private.

**The Convener:** Are members content with the recommendation?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Early Years Inquiry

10:51

**The Convener:** Agenda item 3 is our final oral evidence session—for the present—on the early years inquiry. I said “for the present” because we do not know what will come up when we consider our report.

We have two panels. The first panel comprises two witnesses from the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care—commonly known as the care commission. I am pleased to welcome Jackie Roberts, who is the chief executive, and Ronnie Hill, who is the director. Good morning. I will allow you a few moments for opening remarks before I open up the meeting to questions.

**Jacqui Roberts (Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care):** Good morning. Ronnie Hill is the director of children's services regulation for the care commission. We have two other directors: the director of adult services regulation and the director of health care regulation.

I will make a brief opening remark about the importance of early years services. We know that the committee is examining the whole early years strategy for Scottish children. The care commission exists not only to provide assurance that services are designed to meet all the needs of children, but to provide a force for improvement in early years services. We consider not only the education of children but their care and health.

**Fiona Hyslop:** I am interested in your point about the care and the health of children. Our inquiry is examining the development of children. Do you have a locus in that, or will it develop with the joint inspections of children's services that are due to be introduced by 2008?

**Jacqui Roberts:** When I talk about “all the needs of children”, I include development in that. If one is caring for children, one definitely has a responsibility to promote their development as well as their health and well-being.

**Fiona Hyslop:** Many institutions have raised concerns about overinspection. Do you sympathise with those concerns? The institutions have to produce reams and reams of paperwork on different subjects. In the meantime, do we just have to live with the present complicated system? Will joint inspections resolve the problems, or will it just be business as usual?

**Jacqui Roberts:** I will hand over to Ronnie Hill, who will give details. Many of the anecdotes about bureaucracy are just that—anecdotes. We need to talk about assurances and about improvement in the quality of services. One person's bureaucracy is another person's protection. We could give you information on that from independent research.

**Ronnie Hill (Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care):** Ms Hyslop mentioned overarching children's inspections. The committee may already have heard evidence on how those inspections will be developed across Scotland, so I will not go into that in detail. However, I will say that the inspections will be at a particularly high level across local authority areas. They will consider the overall strategy and the management and provision of services, and will then consider how the services perform in meeting individual children's needs.

The care commission will provide vital evidence for those overarching inspections. We inspect individual services and we will provide the outcomes of those inspections to the overarching inspection team. Indeed, we will second officers to that team. The people who are being inspected will not be inspected twice; they will be inspected once and asked each question once. There will then be a transfer of information.

As far as the fit between the overarching children's inspection and inspections of individual children's services is concerned, we are working hard to minimise unnecessary bureaucracy by asking for information only once and through a system of transferring such information between the various agencies that are involved in the joint inspection programme. I hope that answers the appropriate part of the question.

I will give an example of the type of bureaucracy that some people might complain about but which we think is important. The evidence that we submitted says that we have had to take formal legal enforcement action for a small proportion of services. For example, we have during the past year placed an improvement notice on a nursery, which said that the nursery must maintain a register of all the children in the service. The nursery was not, in fact, doing that and it had no idea of who was present in the service. Members will imagine the kind of problems that could have arisen, if, for example, there had been a fire or a child had gone missing on an outing. Some aspects of bureaucracy are important.

**Fiona Hyslop:** One of the key issues that we are considering is the workforce. Obviously you have, from the inspections, a great overview of what is working well or less well. What would be your ideal workforce? What works best in Scotland as a skill mix for the workforce?

**Jacquie Roberts:** I will begin and then hand over to Ronnie Hill. We believe that the nursery workforce is improving; certainly, the percentage of qualified people is going up. I believe strongly that there could be a greater investment in the workforce's status. One of the most important areas of work is looking after other people's children during the day—sometimes for a long

time. We could promote more training and qualifications and have more involvement of independent providers with local authority providers. There could be much more stimulation of the workforce.

**Fiona Hyslop:** Do local authorities have different experiences of working with private providers? Can you give us examples of good practice?

**Jacquie Roberts:** Yes. Ronnie can give you an example of good practice.

**Ronnie Hill:** Through the child care partnerships, a number of local authorities are engaging well with the independent sector—the private and the voluntary organisations. Some local authorities are opening up their in-service training for nursery staff to the staff and managers of independent services with which the local authorities commission places. That has got to be an example of good practice. We think that such practice should be rolled out across Scotland, wherever possible.

As members will know from our submission and from previous evidence, childminders provide a great amount of child care in Scotland. Many local authorities engage well with childminders and provide training for them, but others do not provide such opportunities. It is important to bear in mind the position of childminders, particularly because they provide such a large proportion of the places for nought-to-three children.

**Fiona Hyslop:** It would be helpful if you could provide written information about areas where you believe there is good practice.

**Jacquie Roberts:** Okay.

**Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab):** The evidence from the DTZ Piedad Consulting survey of parents suggests that there is a perception among parents that local authority provision is superior to that of other sectors. Do you have evidence of differences in quality between the voluntary, private and public sectors?

**Ronnie Hill:** Yes. The care commission, together with our colleagues from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, commissioned research that we are finalising and will publish soon. Members might find the research interesting; I will provide the committee with a copy of it. We commissioned an independent market research organisation to look at how HMIE and the care commission perform in joint inspections and how the care commission performs in its own inspections.

Allied to that, we have considered the information from the inspections, which we have collated. On care services, the inspections show that, in general, school classes and nursery

schools that are run by local authorities perform well in elements of the curriculum and against certain national care standards and quality indicators attached to the HMIE document "How good is our school?"

11:00

There are examples of good practice in the independent sector, too, but in general independent sector school classes and nursery schools perform less well than those that are run by local authorities. On the other hand, we have found that as far as the statutory requirements that are attached to the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 are concerned, fewer requirements are made of the independent sector, which means that it is meeting certain aspects of the law in ways that local authority services are not. We think that that is because this is the first time local authorities have been regulated in that way, while the independent services have had to comply with input standards and regulations for some time.

**Jacquie Roberts:** There are areas for improvement in local authority provision in relation to the total care package, but not in relation to education and delivery of the curriculum.

**Dr Murray:** That is interesting. Do you have a feel for why local authority-run classes and nursery schools perform better in terms of educational attainment? Have they had more input from people with teaching qualifications?

**Ronnie Hill:** We find that local authorities have an infrastructure that allows them to pay attention to in-service training and development planning. Schools and classes are well used to internal quality assurance mechanisms, which are combined with the presence of highly qualified staff. Local authority nursery schools and classes not only have qualified teachers; they have other staff who generally have child care qualifications. Practically all the local authority services are staffed by individuals who have had training and hold qualifications, such as in teaching. It is important to have staff with a range of qualifications.

**Jacquie Roberts:** The number of hours that each child spends in the two different types of service might be relevant. The services began by looking after children and were not necessarily concerned with education. Movement and development are required so that the education standards go up in the independent sector. Younger children are spending longer in some of the local authority services and their care and health needs have to be considered.

**Dr Murray:** On consistency of care, particularly for very young children, we have heard evidence that it is not particularly advantageous for a child

to be in many different settings. Are there models of the type of provision that you think is most successful, such as family centres where children receive input not only in education?

**Jacquie Roberts:** Heather Gunn came to give evidence, either last week or the week before—I used to be responsible for the family centres in Dundee. I think that integrating health care and education in a network of provision that includes outreach services is the best approach. If the child has to move from one form of care provision to another, there is a network of people who know about that child and his or her family, which means that communication is good. That is the ideal approach.

**Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston (Lab):** One of the themes that we are considering is the direction of travel that we want for early years provision. There has been significant progress in the past five to 10 years, but there is a lot more to do. The committee has received evidence and has, through research and visits, compared what is happening here with what is happening in other countries.

One theme that popped up a lot in our discussion with the private sector providers last night was the need for more training. The private sector providers said that training is a good thing for all staff in the sector, although they are worried about how to fund it. They are also worried about training staff to a certain level only to lose them to another provider in the sector. How do we grow the economy in the public, voluntary and private sectors of early years services? I am interested in your views on this issue, which is the most complex matter before us.

**Jacquie Roberts:** I return to what I said about status in my opening statement. Looking after children is probably one of the most important jobs that anyone can do. Perhaps we ought to examine the status of staff throughout the sector and our investment in them. Such a review should bring more money into the sector and make clear the value of providing good services. Parents and families also need to be involved so that they, too, understand the worth of such provision.

Much more investment needs to be made in training and in linking childminders to provision of early years services. Childminders tell us how little they are paid by parents who seem to regard childminding as a cheap form of child care. Quality services cannot be delivered on low levels of pay. We are travelling in the right direction, but we need investment in status, quality and resources. The independent sector is part of that.

**Ronnie Hill:** We need to tackle the problem of children passing through the hands of multiple carers in any one day. We need to focus closely

on co-ordination of services and on trying to ensure that they are flexible enough to meet the needs of children and families. If possible, all services should be delivered on one site and with as few adult carers involved as possible. Continuity in experience and relationships is important for children, particularly very young children. I am concerned about the number of adult carers a nought-to-three child has to have when their parents are at work.

**Jacquie Roberts:** Many different funding streams are involved; perhaps they could be better targeted. I include the independent providers in that. The tax and benefits system is also important.

**Mr McAveety:** I agree with most of what the panel said. We are talking about the people who will contribute to a shift in the dynamic through a combination of local and national state support and the contribution of individuals and families from income. Everyone needs to recognise the value of our investment in child care and the need to pay properly for it.

Another issue that popped up a lot when we visited community-based voluntary sector providers and providers in the charitable sector was the need to streamline the funding process because of the complexity of funding streams. They also said that their capacity to make good partnerships with their key player—their local authority—differs around the country. Perhaps the stories are anecdotal, but people tell them persistently: too many experienced folk across the sector have told them for us not to listen to them. Is there therefore room for a national strategy or guidelines that would tackle the big differences in the sort of partnership that local authorities make with voluntary and private sector providers?

**Jacquie Roberts:** Our observation is that things go extremely well when the partnership with the local authority is good and dynamic and there is a sharing of resources and training opportunities. We have to remember the differences in geography in Scotland, however. It is important that local authorities in the more rural areas have imaginative and innovative ways of developing child care partnerships.

I agree that it would be good for us to have a national drive for really good partnerships to be made between the local authorities and providers in the private, voluntary and charitable sectors.

**Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP):** My question is about vulnerable groups of under-threes and universal services versus targeted services. Stigma can sometimes attach to targeted services, or children can fall through the net because they do not live in the area that is being targeted. What are your views on that?

From your experience of inspections, what good practice exists to ensure that we do not miss out any children, that they do not fall through the safety net and that integrated work is done with them, their parents, health services, social services and so on?

**Jacquie Roberts:** I will hand over to Ronnie Hill in a minute. We believe strongly that there should be universal services, but we also believe that targeted intensive services should be provided for families and children who need them. When that happens, there is less stigmatisation, and it is more likely to happen when the services are integrated—in other words, if health care and education are provided all in one. That is something that everyone wants for their children. Not only families who are in difficult circumstances have problems looking after their children, as can be demonstrated effectively if one considers one's own efforts and those of one's family and friends to look after children. Services that devote time to adults and to how to look after children well, talk to them and play with them would be good for everyone.

**Ronnie Hill:** There are a number of examples of good practice. Some nursery services or nursery centres have good links with the local primary health care team and provide parents rooms. Provision is multifaceted—contact with the community and the use of wider community resources are encouraged and work is done unobtrusively to provide support to parents and families who need extra support. Such services operate largely on a catchment basis, whereby every parent in a particular area who chooses to place their child in the centre can do so.

**Ms Byrne:** Is such provision offered mainly by local authorities?

**Ronnie Hill:** It is not necessarily local authority provision; many voluntary sector service providers offer such services. One of the challenges for the private sector is to make the leap to engagement with other professionals. It should be helped to do that. Many private nurseries already do that—as well as bringing in speech therapists and child psychologists, they refer children to specialists and discuss with parents their children's particular needs. Some private nurseries help parents to negotiate their way to receiving appropriate specialist services for their children. We want to encourage more of that.

**Jacquie Roberts:** The availability of premises—especially school premises—remains a problem in certain parts of Scotland. The nought-to-three age group is important and the number of services that are available to it is growing. Learning and Teaching Scotland has undertaken an important initiative to provide guidance on how to work with nought-to-three children and their families. Over



the next inspection year, we will focus on examining to what extent the whole sector—which includes local authority and independent sector provision—knows about and is working with that guidance so that we can test whether it is providing quality.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con):** I have a brief question. How do you account for the fact that the number of registrations that have been cancelled is greater than the number of new registrations by the care commission? That suggests that there might have been a net loss of childminders and day care centres.

**Ronnie Hill:** The cancellations that are mentioned in our submission have been made voluntarily. In other words, the childminders concerned have told us that they want to stop childminding and to do something else. We are not talking about compulsory cancellations. There were a few compulsory cancellations, which are noted later in our submission.

In our initial submission, which we made in March last year, we identified a number of reasons for the churn—the turnaround—in childminders. Those include a childminder's own children growing up and moving on and the childminder's family situation changing. They include childminders in some areas being unable to receive children—their businesses have not operated well. They also include childminders finding that it is more profitable and suitable for them to work in other fields. Some childminders go on to take child care qualifications and to work in other parts of the child care market.

11:15

There are a number of reasons for cancellations. Those are borne out by the Scottish Childminding Association's inquiries into the churn. However, as well as there being a number of cancellations, there are a great number of new registrations every year. In the past two or three years, more than 1,000 childminders from a baseline of just fewer than 6,000 have stopped childminding and about 900 new childminders have registered for the first time.

**Jacquie Roberts:** The turnover in the population of childminders is very interesting. In the next couple of months, we will issue a national report on it. We will consider it in relation to the population of children and determine where there might be differences in provision. It is obvious that, in the main, people who work as childminders do so for a period before going on to other professional development, which is probably a good thing because they should be considered as part of the overall child care workforce. We look to

the committee to recommend that childminders be considered to be a part of broader provision so that they, too, receive training and qualifications and can drive up standards in child care and in provision of education and development opportunities for children.

Turnover is inevitable. Often, young women with young children act as childminders, and other opportunities arise for them when their own children go to school.

**Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab):** You have brought to our attention the number of complaints and enforcement issues. It struck me as being a large number, which is worrying, but it is difficult for me to put it in context, so perhaps it is a small number and is not cause for worry. Will you explain the trend in complaints over a number of years—is the trend up or down? Is it getting better or worse? Complaints reflect the extreme end of the quality range. Will you compare care in Scotland with that in other countries? In general, is the quality higher or lower?

**Ronnie Hill:** As far as comparisons with previous years are concerned, you must remember that the care commission has been in existence for only a few years. We have found that, year on year, more complaints have been made to us, but we think that that is partly because people now know where to come. They know about the national care standards and they consider us to be a credible organisation through which their concerns can be raised and sorted out.

I draw the committee's attention to the relatively high number of complaints that we uphold. I think that it is well over half for nurseries and just over half for childminders. That is significant, because we are talking about substantial complaints that parents make about the care of their children. They pay for care but do not get the care that they expect. If an independent regulatory and inspection body comes along, examines the care and agrees with the parents, something must be done to sort out the problem.

We have not made any national or international comparisons, but we might consider doing that in the future. However, not all countries organise themselves in the same way, so we might not be comparing apples with apples.

**Jacquie Roberts:** There is evidence in the report that Mr Hill has promised to give you that demonstrates that, in the past three years in our work with HMIE, after an inspection or a complaints investigation there have been improvements in the services.

**Mr Macintosh:** I can appreciate that the complaints mechanism is essentially there as an improvement mechanism, which focuses on the issues that parents want to improve, rather than

the ones that they complain about because those services are unusable and so on. That is encouraging. In some ways, the more complaints the better. However, it would be interesting to see a comparison. It is difficult for me to grasp whether we have got a good system at the moment, how that system is working and whether we can be assured that we have got the best-quality child care. On the same issue, one of the issues that keeps coming up is the idea of unannounced visits, which might be another tool for you to use. Clearly, you have to balance the usefulness of unannounced visits against consideration of whether they fit with the general idea of the partnership approach. What are your views about unannounced inspections?

**Jacquie Roberts:** In the big consultation that we held last year, the majority of people—care providers as well as service users—said that they would like a mixture of announced and unannounced visits. Given that we carry out only one inspection visit a year, particularly for childminders, that is quite difficult to manage. However, we will be working on that because we believe that unannounced visits to services as they are functioning provide some important information.

On an earlier point that you made, it is difficult for us off the top of our heads to give you information on how we rate in comparison to other countries, because we have a completely different set of standards. Scotland should be proud of its standards, because they are outcome standards and they tell parents exactly what they can expect. In a couple of years' time, we will be able to give you information about whether there has been improvement. What we can give you now is information about where we have found the services to be wanting. Not all complaints are minor. It is not a minor complaint that a childminder was not present and that the children were left unattended; or that there was no register in early years services; or that day after day a child has been given carbohydrate food, without any fruit and vegetables. It is important that parents know that there is an independent body for them to go to if they are not getting satisfaction from the service.

**Mr Macintosh:** Our research, which we discussed last week, emphasised that above all other considerations, the health, welfare, safety and protection of the children were paramount. None of those is a minor issue, but the question is whether it is set in an improving context or a disqualification context.

**Jacquie Roberts:** Absolutely.

**Mr Macintosh:** Finally, I should know this, but will you remind me whether you are able to make unannounced visits under the current legislation?

**Jacquie Roberts:** Absolutely—to any service at any time. We often do that if we have received a complaint, particularly an anonymous one.

**Ronnie Hill:** You may want further information on that. It was agreed by the care commission board and ministers, as far as HMIE was concerned, that all the inspections in the integrated inspection programme that has been running over the past three years would be conducted on an announced basis. Our board has agreed that the majority of those services that have had their integrated inspection—that is children's day care services—will be inspected on an unannounced basis in the next financial year. We have had a programme of unannounced inspections of those children's day care services that are not in partnership with the local authorities to provide education as well as care—there are just under 2,000 such services.

Where we have difficulties is with childminders, because childminders largely work on their own, at home or out of the home. If we deploy resources only on unannounced inspections, we could be going there when no one is in. It is not the same when it is a nursery—someone is likely to be there. In the next financial year, we will pay childminders short-notice visits, which will involve us calling them up at lunch time and saying that we will be there in half an hour. We want to do more unannounced inspections or short-notice visits.

**Jacquie Roberts:** The early signs from our first shared report with HMIE evaluating our shared inspection regime are that the services in general are quite good. We can be quite proud of the standard that is being reached, but we are looking for improvements.

**Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP):** Earlier, you talked about the better targeting of funding. During our inquiry, we have heard about the complexity of funding streams and so on. I assume that you are talking about targeting funding in order to provide support for the development of integrated services. For example, we are told that it is important to integrate health with the care side of things and with early years education. Could you develop your thoughts on the better targeting of funding?

**Jacquie Roberts:** I am not the right person to be doing that, to be honest. I think that that would be stepping outwith my remit. However, I can say that it would be good if the money could be targeted to develop more innovative and integrated services that could be focused on areas in which we know that there are greater needs.

**Ronnie Hill:** It would be helpful to service providers, particularly in the voluntary and the private sectors, if the funding streams were less

complex. It would be useful if they could be brought together. We know that the various funding streams are operated in various ways by various local authorities. It might be helpful to engage with the independent sector to consider how best those streams could be managed so that it looks as though they come from the same place. We know that it might not be possible to bring all the funding streams together into one stream, but it might be possible to bring them together in a virtual sense. That would be helpful to service providers. At the moment, people spend a lot of time working out how best to fund their service.

**Jacquie Roberts:** Local authorities can involve the private, voluntary and charitable sectors at a much earlier stage in the commissioning and designing of services. When that works, it works extremely well.

**Mr Ingram:** You also mentioned how important the tax and benefits system is. At our meeting with the independent providers last night, we got a few complaints about how the tax credit system is operating in relation to the fact that they were not being paid. There was a general desire to move toward a system of direct provider subsidies, as that would give them security of funding. Have you any views on how well the tax and benefits system is supporting services?

**Jacquie Roberts:** We hear the same comments from the independent providers that you heard last night. Childminders, in particular, can face problems.

**Mr Ingram:** It strikes me that if we want to unify the system, end fragmentation and bring people together so that we can get consistent and high levels of training and qualifications across the board, it would be sensible to consider new funding arrangements that would help that happen. The evidence that we are getting from the independent providers is that the current system is not helping that to happen.

11:30

**Jacquie Roberts:** That issue is outwith the care regulator's remit. However, it is important to say that a clear policy decision has been made to subsidise the cost of regulation in the early years sector. That is important, because it means that childminders do not have to pay the full cost of registration with the care commission, which shows full policy support for the development of the sector and an awareness of the cost pressures.

**Ronnie Hill:** Private nurseries do not have to pay the full cost of registration either.

**The Convener:** Yesterday evening, we had an interesting round-table discussion with private

sector providers, who raised a couple of issues to do with regulation. They were not particularly concerned about the regime, but they raised a concern about the consistency of inspections. Some providers have been inspected one year and told X, but then told Y at the next year's inspection. How can the care commission improve the consistency of its inspections?

A related point was about the national forum that was set up to discuss issues with the private sector. As it has not met for some time, the providers are concerned that it has fallen into abeyance. Will you comment on that, too?

**Jacquie Roberts:** We have a strong commitment to consistency. As members know, we inherited staff from more than 44 different employers just over three years ago. We know that consistency is important and we are putting in place measures on that. However, it is important to keep repeating the phrase "beware of anecdote". Ronnie Hill can give a list of initiatives that we are taking to ensure that we are as consistent as we should be, while taking into account that each service and area is different. Some recommendations and decisions from the care commission may, wholly appropriately, not be consistent with what was said to another service 5 miles down the road.

**The Convener:** The point was about establishments receiving slightly different advice or recommendations from year to year, because the inspectors are different. It was about the same service getting inconsistent reports.

**Ronnie Hill:** I am sure that there can be good reasons for that, too, because the situation may have changed. We would need to consider in context the specific detail of what was said to make any firm comment on that. We are not complacent about how we operate and we want to continue to improve our service, although we start from a fairly strong base. Along with our partners in HMIE, we have commissioned an independent survey, the returns from which show that more than 90 per cent of providers think that our inspections are well run, well managed and helpful. That applies whether or not the inspections have been conducted jointly with HMIE.

Having said that, I must point out that we seek continually to make improvements through a range of staff development initiatives. The committee may be interested to know that every care commission officer must register with the Scottish Social Services Council. To do that, they must have a specific post-qualifying award for good regulation. One of the emphases in that award is on how to operate consistently as a regulator or inspector. We also use the national care standards as a benchmark, although they are, of course,

outcome standards and the way in which an outcome is delivered may differ from one service to another.

In the coming year, our inspections will be based on several key themes, which have been chosen because of what we have found out about services through previous inspections, although they also link with Scottish Executive and other initiatives. To support that work, we are developing tools to help inspectors to inspect consistently and equitably throughout Scotland, while bearing in mind that all services are different. Those themes include child protection, healthy eating, oral hygiene and nought-to-three initiatives. A range of inspection tools will support that work. There will be specific training for all the officers on how to inspect on those themes using the standards and on how they should be reported on.

The national forum has not met in the recent past, but it will be reconvened. We have had to look closely at how that should be done. In the past, it brought together community care providers, early education providers and child care providers, but it did not work particularly well. We have therefore taken soundings from a range of organisations about how things could be done better. I think that child care providers, community care providers and others will be involved, but we will deal with that matter in the next financial year.

**The Convener:** Is there a case for reviewing the frequency with which a service is inspected on the basis of how well it fared in a previous inspection, so that very good services are inspected less frequently than those about which you have serious concerns?

**Jacquie Roberts:** Yes. We think that there is a case for seriously considering the frequency with which services are inspected, particularly day care provision, and we will do that with HMIE. We will also have a national consistent risk assessment tool in the next inspection year, which all the services, including independent providers, will know about.

**The Convener:** My final question again arose last night. When does a childminding service become a nursery? The point was made that some childminders may deal with up to 12 children but will not be subject to the same level of regulation to which a nursery that deals with 12 children is subject.

**Ronnie Hill:** What is meant by “child minding” and “day care of children”—that covers nurseries—is set out in section 2 of the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001. A childminder operates in domestic premises, for example. Whether the service operates in domestic premises is one of the criteria that would be considered; other criteria relate to the length of the

service and how often it operates. However, those are matters of fact and law. If a service user is concerned that a service is not properly registered under the law, we would need to consider that service.

**The Convener:** Private nurseries are probably particularly concerned because they think that people may be taking advantage of a loophole in the legislation by setting up large childminding operations in domestic premises that have been bought for that specific purpose rather than setting up as nurseries and then being subject to more stringent regulation. I wondered whether you consider such matters when you carry out inspections to find out whether an operation is legitimate.

**Jacquie Roberts:** Yes. We consider the number of children, the number of adults and the space that is available, and we can put conditions on the registration to limit the number of children who are cared for. If a private provider is concerned about something that we do not know about, we ought to hear about it.

Your meeting with private providers reinforces the importance of our having regular meetings with our stakeholders and of our having divided our direction of regulation into three main services. We did not have such a division in the organisation's first two or three years.

**The Convener:** That concludes our questions. I thank both witnesses for coming to the meeting and for their helpful evidence.

We will take a short break while the minister and his team come into the room. I know that he is lurking out there.

11:39

*Meeting suspended.*

11:43

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** It is almost like it is Friday, it is 5 to 5 and it is “Crackerjack”. It is Wednesday, it is a quarter to 12 and it is the Minister for Education and Young People.

**The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock):** You display your age with that comment, convener.

**The Convener:** I welcome the minister and his team back to the committee. This morning, the minister is joined by Val Cox, who is the head of the early education and child care division, and by Don McGillivray and Penny Curtis, who are also from the early education and child care division. Thank you for coming along to give evidence in

our early years inquiry. As usual, you have a few moments in which to make some opening remarks before I open the floor to members for questions.

**Peter Peacock:** I want to make some opening remarks, but not too extensively. I emphasise the enormous growth that has taken place in early years services since 1999, of which you are aware and about which you have discovered more through your inquiry. There is now a free part-time and pre-school place for every three and four-year-old. There are high-quality targeted services for our youngest children, through sure start Scotland. There is improved support for parenting in a variety of ways, to help with the challenges that people face in bringing up children and working in their family. As you heard a few moments ago, we now have robust quality assurance systems in place for pre-school children and child care services.

In the evidence that you have taken, a number of people have mentioned the quality of the existing services and the distance that we have travelled in the past few years in making improvements. In that context, the committee's inquiry is timely, because we now need to consider how we move forward from where we are, learn the lessons of what we have done in the past few years and build on the strong foundations that have been established. The objective that we have in mind is to ensure that we give our children the best possible start in life and to help to balance work and family life for families in Scotland today.

11:45

You will be aware from your inquiry so far of the major role that the sector plays in helping to increase parents' participation in the employment market in Scotland.

I will highlight a couple of issues that are key to delivering the early years services that we want in the future. First, we must address the perceived low status of the child care sector. As I mentioned, early years services play an important role in today's society. It is important that that role is carried out by a well-qualified, well-motivated and well-respected workforce across the sector. The workforce review that I commissioned has considered how to improve leadership, modernise qualifications and improve career pathways to deliver better services in the future. The aim is to create a much more vibrant and professional sector, which will have higher status in our society, will be an attractive career option and will provide assurance to parents that we have high-quality services. I plan to have the review published soon, along with an initial response from me about the things that we want to do as a consequence of it.

The second issue is flexibility and the integration of services. Existing pre-school education

provision suits many families, particularly when a parent works part time, but it does not suit everyone. All-day care has developed rapidly in some parts of Scotland, but it is patchy or limited in other parts. Tax credits help thousands of families with the cost of care, but there are still people who are deterred from accessing employment or education because of a lack of flexible, affordable child care services that meet their needs. Better integration of services, with affordable wraparound care, is a matter to which we want to give further attention and which will be developed further in the future.

In moving forward the agenda, I see a continuing role for the public sector but also a role for the private sector and the voluntary sector. Increasingly, the sectors will work more closely together in partnership to deliver the flexible services that we want. We must be aware that the further development of services that we might all want to see needs to be affordable in the context of lower projected growth in overall spending. That will mean very important choices being made between whatever growth in universal provision might be affordable and more intensive interventions for vulnerable young people and families.

There has been growth and the sector now has a strong foundation on which further progress can be built, but more must be done. My focus will be on enhancing the quality of children's experience, improving flexibility, closing the opportunity gap whenever we can and delivering services that meet the demands that today's families face.

That is all I will say by way of introduction. I am happy to engage in discussion and to answer questions.

**The Convener:** Thank you.

The early years workforce review is a matter of significance for the committee's inquiry. Can you give us an update on that?

**Peter Peacock:** I received the report at the back end of last year, after the review group had been working for quite some time. As I said, I plan to publish the report in the not-too-distant future. I am in the process of considering exactly how I can pick up and move forward elements of the recommendations that have been made to me in the report. As I indicated, I am clear that we want to move the whole sector forward.

As the committee is aware, the group has worked on defining the roles of people in the sector; it has examined the roles that they perform and the roles that they should perform. The group has also considered how qualification structures can be improved to give reassurance that the quality of the staff who work in the sector is as high as it needs to be. It has investigated how the

structures can be improved in a way that is flexible and meets the needs of the sector.

The group has examined big issues relating to workforce planning, which has pretty much been absent from the sector in the past—as members know, the sector has grown like Topsy. We must get more coherence into workforce planning in the future. The group has also considered ways of improving the career pathways between different parts of the sector.

Although the review group was not asked to address the matter, all of that has implications for pay and conditions, on which the local authorities, principally, are in the lead.

I cannot go into too much detail about the report and can talk only about the broad landscape, but the important point is that the report is about the long-term development of the sector; members will see that when the report is published. I am sure that we can do some things quickly to make improvements and to make progress but, in the near future, we will commit to the long haul of developing the sector over several years and of ensuring that it has the respect that results from having a better-qualified workforce. Quite a lot will come out of the report in the not-too-distant future.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** What level of skills is required to deliver the three-to-five curriculum? Should every pre-school establishment be staffed by qualified nursery teachers, or is that matter being left to the review?

**Peter Peacock:** I have several thoughts in outline and in specifics on the point about teachers. The short answer is that we are not thinking of having a teacher in every setting. I will put that in the wider context. The review will examine the qualifications framework for the whole sector—that will include not just early years education, but child care. That point is important. We are anxious to have the right qualifications framework for the future. Teachers can bring to a pre-school setting additional benefits to those from the other qualifications that people have. Our guidance to local authorities and others refers to the extra dimension that a teacher can supply, but that goes beyond an acceptable threshold that others can achieve in the sector. As members know, we have nursery nurses, nursery assistants and centre managers in the sector. Over time, we must ensure that they all have the appropriate qualifications, which many of them have.

As members are aware, we repealed a bit of the Schools (Scotland) Code 1956 to give local authorities the flexibility to think about whether they required to employ a teacher in every nursery school and to deploy teachers as they saw fit. The purpose of that was to give councils choices about their priorities for employing teachers. That

change was in no way intended to be a signal that authorities should stop employing teachers. We recognise that teachers can bring an extra dimension from their background. In the vast majority of local authority nursery settings—if not in all of them—a qualified teacher is available in the establishment, if not in the nursery, to help to manage the establishment and to bring the skills that teachers have. We want that flexibility in the sector.

My officials will keep me right, but I think that I am correct in saying that 60 per cent of centres have a teacher but that only 17 to 19 per cent of staff in the sector are teachers—they represent a small proportion of the total staff. To change that situation to guarantee a teacher in every centre would create enormous logistical and practical problems, apart from anything else, given the scale of the sector. We recognise that many qualifications can be appropriate for working in the sector but that teachers can bring an extra dimension.

The guarantee of standards comes not just from the qualifications that we have and which we will improve on, but from the inspection system. Centres are inspected regularly on their educational component and by the care commission on a range of matters that it considers. As in the schools sector, when an inspection report shows up inadequacies, people must act on them. That is the ultimate quality guarantee of the standards that are being achieved. Inspectors have variously commented on establishments as being “good” or “less good”, regardless of whether a teacher has been there over the years. That process will continue.

**Lord James Douglas-Hamilton:** How does the minister account for the findings of the Peter Tymms survey, which suggested that pre-school education does not affect a child’s ability once he or she has started school?

**Peter Peacock:** I will ask my officials to keep you right about the technical details of that finding. However, the evidence that we have received from a range of different sources—including from one of the committee’s advisers, if I remember correctly—shows that there are clear benefits for young people who have had pre-school experiences. However, given the time that young people spend in pre-school education, there is a limit to how far those benefits will extend. There may be little difference in the benefits that come from having had a full-time rather than a part-time experience. However, a part-time experience helps in a variety of respects. I visit schools frequently, and I interact with teachers in nursery schools and other settings. The teachers tell me that young people with pre-school education who come into their charge in primary 1 have better

socialisation skills and are more mature in a variety of ways. Often, they have interacted well with other young people before they arrive in primary school. Therefore they are better able to cope with the school experience and their resilience at that level is stronger, providing them with a better learning platform. There are many positive benefits, which we know about.

Compared with the situation in the past, few young people now have not had pre-school experience. Teachers say that relative to those children who have had that experience, those who have not are often not as mature, well socialised or well prepared for learning. There are many benefits to pre-school education.

I invite Val Cox to comment on the detail of your question.

**Val Cox (Scottish Executive Education Department):** There is no short answer to Lord James's question. The findings of Peter Tymms's report obviously concerned us as officials and gave us pause for thought. We are looking to see whether we can get underneath those findings.

I will add a couple of things to the minister's comments. We tend to find increased resilience and preparedness to learn in children who have gone through a positive pre-school experience. The Peter Tymms sample, which comprised a relatively small number of children, used a specific set of tests that is not widely used across the country. Those tests tend to focus on fairly formalised aspects of children's knowledge and learning, such as skills in pre-learning and recognition of letters of the alphabet. Those things are not a primary focus of the three-to-five curriculum in Scotland and that may be a factor behind the findings.

As I said, however, we do not actually know what is behind the findings. As the minister said, very young children who are associated with high-quality pre-school education experience positive outcomes. The finding in question may be a result of the different approach that is taken in Scotland—our three-to-five curriculum has an informal and broad-brush nature—in comparison with, for example, the approach that is taken south of the border, which is slightly more structured.

12:00

**Ms Byrne:** In its evidence, the Educational Institute of Scotland was very much in favour of pre-school teachers; in fact, it wants their provision to be legislated for. The effective provision of pre-school education project concluded that children did better in teacher-led settings. The knowledge of the three-to-five curriculum that a teacher has and can move forward with is an extremely important element; the EPPE findings back that up.

At all levels of education, transition stages are regarded as crucial for children, particularly those at vulnerable ages. The involvement of a teacher is key, because they have knowledge of the curriculum and can smooth the transition.

Witnesses have told us that the local authority sector is doing better than the private and voluntary sectors. We do not have research evidence, but I suspect that much of that stems from the fact that the local authority sector has traditionally used teachers in nursery settings.

I do not think that the issue of teacher provision can be easily dismissed. I appreciate the difficulties that would be involved in making such provision across the board, but I believe that we should phase in good practice rather than phase it out because providing it seems like an impossible task. Even if across-the-board provision took a number of years to phase in, it would be the right thing to do, along with the provision of decent professional qualifications and proper structures for nursery teachers and nursery nurses. It all fits together. I am interested in the minister's views.

**Peter Peacock:** Rosemary Byrne made a comment about there being a desire to phase out nursery teachers. I make it clear that we have no desire to do that. As we are doing on a range of issues, we have given flexibility to local authorities to allow them to deploy their staff in the way that they believe will have the best professional impact on the system. Such decisions are for local authorities and it is not our policy intention to phase out nursery teachers, if that is what Rosemary Byrne thought.

On the point about the EIS, I would be astonished if the EIS did not argue for more teachers. It is the leading trade union for teachers in Scotland and I would expect it to take that position.

On the point about the EPPE study, the committee's adviser will know far better than I do what the position is and if I get it wrong, I am sure that she will correct me in advice to the committee later. I will paraphrase the key finding, as I understand it, and my officials will correct me if I have got it completely wrong. The key finding was about qualifications and qualified people making an impact. The fact of the matter is that in the largest part of the study in which that relationship was found, the people were teachers; ergo, there is a relationship in the study, as I understand it, between teachers and qualifications. However, the underlying finding is about the importance of qualifications in leading the centres. My officials will qualify that, if I have got the position hopelessly wrong, but I do not think that I have.

On Rosemary Byrne's other point about teachers' knowledge of the curriculum, I have

acknowledged that teachers can bring an extra dimension. I do not diminish that in any way, but it is not the only dimension that can be brought to the management, quality and development of pre-school services. Rosemary Byrne made the point about transition management and teachers' understanding of the P1 curriculum helping with the transition and I acknowledge that that is part of the dynamic of what a teacher can bring. In the curriculum review, we are considering making a potentially significant change to the earliest years of primary school to make them more like the pre-school experience so that part of the transition is eased by other means.

I do not know to what extent the committee has picked up this point in evidence, but while teachers can bring an extra dimension in the way that I have described, that is not universally the case. Many teachers have not necessarily had a high level of pre-school experience in their initial teacher education. Indeed, the way in which teachers are inducted into the profession through the probationary scheme means that they would tend to be placed in primary classes rather than in nursery classes. In the teaching profession as a whole, there is not necessarily the specialisation in nursery and pre-school education that one might at first imagine.

Rosemary Byrne also made a point about the local authority sector doing better. As she said, she was not quoting research evidence in that regard. There is no doubt that parents are looking for quality. They often associate quality with schools because they know what they are and they have an air of quality. Parents would tend to associate nursery provision with that. Equally however, on the evidence that we have from inspections, many centres that do not have teachers and which are not part of schools offer high-quality provision. We must be alert to and aware of that as well.

I ask Val Cox to qualify whatever I said about the EPPE study.

**Val Cox:** What was said indeed reflects our understanding of the EPPE study. As we understand it, the critical finding was about the association between quality outcomes for children and a higher level of qualification on the part of the leaders or managers of centres. Essentially, the level of qualification that related to quality was degree-level qualification. In England, it so happens that most centre managers who are qualified at degree level are teachers. There is clearly a correlation there. Our understanding is that it is the level of qualification, rather than the nature of the qualification, that makes a difference. As the minister said, different professional groupings bring particular skills to the work of an early years centre, and we need a range of

different professions to bring their expertise and their different skills.

To add to what the minister said in response to your point about quality apparently being better in the local authority sector, the latest aggregate report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education showed that, to generalise—which is always a dangerous thing—the local authorities seemed to rate rather more highly on a number of dimensions of quality. There were some suggestions as to why that might be, and the presence of a teacher may or may not be one factor. Other factors that have been suggested include the fact that the local authority has been in the business for an awful lot longer. As we know, local authorities are better resourced, by and large, in terms of the levels of funding that are available through the so-called advisory floor, which I am sure you might wish to ask about. There may well be some truth in what you say. It is quite difficult for us to establish a clear causal relationship with a single factor, however.

**Ms Byrne:** I did not say that I thought you would recommend phasing out teachers. You spoke about logistical difficulties, which I said could be addressed within a planned timescale. I do not think that there should be great difficulty in the longer term with ensuring that teachers find themselves in pre-school settings, and there are strong educational grounds for retaining teachers in those settings. I would be concerned if the pre-school experience came without the teacher in the early stages.

We need to consider the different learning styles; we have discussed that matter a number of times in our inquiry. Some of the learning styles that we have seen in the pre-school setting could be transferred, but that must be teacher led. The specialisation of having nursery experience is perhaps not as good as it used to be among teachers; that is probably a given. There was a time when teachers specialised in that area. Some of those teachers will still be around, and some of them will undoubtedly have a wealth of experience that they can still give. I am interested in the teacher training aspect; along with the degree qualification, that is a key factor. I do not think that other degree qualifications without the teacher qualification could have the same status in that context. I disagree with the minister on that.

The EPPE study was teacher led and its authors meant what they said, so I stick to my point of view on that. The subject is huge and it could be examined in more depth. I would like a bit more research to be done to give us some answers before we end up losing teachers from our nurseries. That is on the cards in some local authority areas, which is a sad state of affairs.



**The Convener:** That was more of a comment than a question, but the minister may respond if he so wishes.

**Peter Peacock:** That is exactly the point that I was going to make.

**Mr Macintosh:** The focus of pre-school, three-to-five or nursery education is clearly educative. I seek clarity about the support that we provide for families and for children aged from nought to three, together with the other child care provisions that we are putting in place. Is it quite clear that the way in which we measure the various programmes, which are funded in different ways—

**Peter Peacock:** Are you referring to childminding?

**Mr Macintosh:** I mean childminding, sure start and family centres—the host of publicly funded provision for families and children, particularly from nought to three years old. Are you clear that that provision should have an educative focus and centre to it and that we should inspect and judge the success of such programmes by their educative content?

**Peter Peacock:** There are two dimensions to that very big question. Early years education provision clearly has an educational focus, but it also has child care benefits and releases parents to participate in the workforce. Child care was designed principally around those latter factors to provide a care system that was safe and which looked after kids and helped families for economic or social reasons by allowing more economic activity or just more support in the family. However, I am anxious to add to that provision a much clearer educational purpose.

We should view such matters in the round. Over time, child care should begin to focus not only on care but on the stimulation of young people and how their early experiences help their education. I want that to become more explicit in the system, but it will require an awful lot of care and thought to determine how we achieve that. Child care is a very different sector—it is structured differently and the qualifications are different—so our expectations would have to be set out clearly, but that wider sector has a clear educational role, which we need to strengthen.

**Mr Macintosh:** I appreciate that the question is difficult for you to answer at this stage because you are working on the strategy, but would the focus on that early period be child centred? In other words, would the focus be on the development of the child rather than on the many other surrounding family care issues?

**Peter Peacock:** Absolutely. I am not thinking about specific outcomes such as results in reading tests or pre-reading tests; I am thinking about the

kind of questions that the early years education sector asks, such as how to provide the right framework for stimulation, what kind of activities carers should engage in while the child is under their care and what kind of activities will most help the child's development in a variety of ways. It is about putting the child's development at the centre and helping young people to build the kind of capacities that will help them not only when they move into primary school but for the rest of their lives.

In the early years sector, it is always difficult to know anything with exact clarity, but we are pretty clear that the earlier we can intervene—if that is the way to put it—with good, stimulating child care in the lives of young people who face the most challenges and have the least home support, the better chance they will have when they get to pre-school education, which could be a year later, if we are talking about two-year-olds. Therefore, we have to focus on the factors in child carers' work that will help to stimulate the child's development.

**Mr Macintosh:** Not all the funding streams come through your department, which is an issue. The sure start programme has been praised highly from a number of different directions. Have you assessed sure start and the way in which its impact is evaluated? If so, can that work be applied to other central Government funding sources?

**Peter Peacock:** I will make a couple of points on that and Val Cox can deal with your point about whether research is being done—I do not think that it is, but I am not suggesting that we should not undertake such research.

Sure start is a growing programme—I think that the fund is up to about £56 million a year—which does a myriad things. It impacts on local areas in different, targeted ways to assist key groups, particularly nought to three-year-olds and particularly with family support in mind. The programme is huge. All the evidence that I get back from interacting with the programme is that some extraordinarily good things—exactly the kind of things on which I touched in my earlier answer—are happening and helping to stimulate young people when they would not normally get stimulation, thus providing the support, security and nurture that they require in order to move on.

12:15

**Val Cox:** The minister is correct. We have not conducted formal evaluatory research in Scotland. We have conducted two mapping exercises, the most recent of which was published in December 2005. It explored the range of services that are currently being delivered in Scotland under the sure start banner. Although it was not a formal

evaluation in the sense that we would understand that, it provided some soft information about perceived changes that people attributed to their experience of sure start. Those attributions were made both by users and by providers of services. We can say without doubt that sure start services are highly regarded by service users. They are felt to be beneficial and service users believe that they have made a difference to their lives. However, we cannot say definitively that in X number of cases, Y number of positive outcomes were found.

Colleagues south of the border are in the process of undertaking a very wide-ranging evaluation of sure start in England, which is delivered using a rather different model from the Scottish model. That evaluation is still under way, but it produced some findings that were made much of in the press recently. We want to learn from the English experience of trying to evaluate a disparate range of services, delivered in a multitude of ways. We recognise the need to evaluate that, because, as the minister said, we are putting significant resources into the sure start programme. The amount will increase to £60 million in the year after the coming year. A lot of money is going in and we need to know exactly what the programme is providing. It is widely enjoyed and is seen to be beneficial, but we need to get underneath that positive feeling.

**Peter Peacock:** I want to pick up on a dimension to which the convener alluded in his question but did not address specifically. I refer to the issue of sure start joining up with other available funds, because there are many streams of funding. I am clear that we want those streams of funding to join up as much as possible in the activity that is funded at local level.

I will illustrate where our programme work needs to connect different levels of the system together. Before the meeting started, I said to Adam Ingram—who badgered me about the issue a couple of years ago, or even more recently—that two weeks ago Frank McAveety and I visited a nurture group in Frank’s constituency and met a variety of other people who are running nurture groups. It is hugely impressive work. However, it occurred to me that here we have young people, often from families with particular challenges, who come into a nurture group at a primary school at age five, but how do we ensure that their younger brothers and sisters, who may be facing exactly the same difficulties that gave rise to the child being in the nurture group, are connected to early interventions through the sure start programme, so that problems are picked up more quickly? We need to be constantly alert in the system to thinking about such issues, not as narrow strands, but as strongly connected strands of activity, so that throughout the system we build on the earliest impacts that we can make and try to prevent kids

from getting into special settings because they have had deficiencies in their upbringing up to that point.

**Mr Macintosh:** I and, I am sure, the rest of the committee would welcome any information that you can provide. I do not know whether such information will be published as part of the workforce review or strategy. The anecdotal evidence that we have heard is exactly the same as the evidence that you have received. Sure start is a non-stigmatised, child-centred programme with an educative focus. It is flexible for parents, so it is doing everything that we want it to do. However, it would be good to have some evidence, as well as some anecdotes, to attach to that.

**Peter Peacock:** We will evaluate sure start, as we do all our programmes, once we have enough experience to do that. However, sure start has so many dimensions that an overall evaluation is quite difficult.

**Val Cox:** I pick up the point that I did not entirely address earlier about the integration of sure start with other services. It is important that one of the key elements of sure start in Scotland is our expectation that the programme will be delivered jointly with other service providers that are funded from other sources. That is a given. The expectation from the centre is that that is how the money that is badged to sure start will be used. Sure start is intrinsically integrated with other services, particularly those from health care professionals.

**Fiona Hyslop:** Minister, the Executive started well on the early years agenda in 1999. How do you respond to concerns that there has been a dragging of feet since then, bearing in mind the early years workforce review in June 2004 that was announced on the back of the nursery nurses’ dispute? Prior to that, workforce development was already taking place as part of the national early years strategy that was promised several years before and it is yet to be delivered. Will you explain the timing of all those promises, why they have not been delivered and why there has been a vacuum for such a long time?

**Peter Peacock:** That is a highly political point, if I may say so. If I were being unkind, I would say that I can almost hear “press release” behind those comments, but I will not be.

I am glad that you said we started well; I think that we are continuing well. There is huge progress in the sector. We are not in any sense dragging our feet—rather the reverse. The points that I made in my opening remarks signal clearly that I want to go further. I am equally clear that I want more of an evidence base to know where to target resources, how to do that, to understand our

choices in this financial climate, and to know where the priorities are for future spending and so on.

You can expect to hear more from us about all that because we are anxious to move the sector on as regards the early years workforce report and all the possibilities that it will open up. We also want to find out how to get more support for the most vulnerable three and, in particular, two-year olds, for whom programmes can have big impacts. How do we measure the effect of that, as against extending universal provision? There are constraints that determine how much we can expand universal provision; physical constraints concerning premises, as well as staffing constraints. We have to think about all that very carefully and we are in the process of doing so.

You mentioned the early years strategy and we have done a lot of work on that. There was a consultation in 2003, I recall, and since then we have done all sorts of things about our strategy for the children's hearings system, such as publishing "Getting it right for every child", which complements all this. The integrated children's services planning framework is now up and running within the community planning framework and there is the workforce review, as Fiona Hyslop mentioned. We have set out our vision for children.

I have made it clear to officials that I do not want to publish another early years strategy unless it really adds value to where we are currently. We are not quite there yet—we want to think about further things before we take action. However, I intend to move the situation on, whether by publishing another strategy document or just by making the direction of travel clear.

**Fiona Hyslop:** The Executive promised an early years strategy in 2003. We are keen to have a vision for early years development as opposed to a practical management plan and we look forward to hearing about that from the minister.

On a more supportive note, there is to be a major policy debate in Scotland, not least in the Cabinet, about priority spending in difficult circumstances. We have an aging population and there will be increasing pressure to direct resources to that end of the population at a time when there is a reducing population in early years. However, we know that early intervention can make a real difference, not just in education, but in a range of social circumstances. I am glad that you picked up on the need to help two-year-olds in particular because we picked up on that need in our study.

From a supportive point of view, what can we do to help you to argue for more resources in early years education? Realistically, how much pressure

will you be under to provide resources? Is that pressure why you are talking about managing logistics and practicalities, rather than having a vision for early years education and child care—although we might not be able to deliver it immediately—of having a teacher in every environment as part of a 10-year strategy? That would take us a step ahead of England, which is concentrating on child care. What can we do to help you?

**The Convener:** That is an interesting definition of "supportive".

**Peter Peacock:** I respect the spirit in which Fiona Hyslop's comments were offered, but I am not sure whether they are as helpful as they first appeared to be, because they put me at loggerheads with all my colleagues. I say genuinely that I have not talked about the next stages not because of immediate financial pressure, but because I want to get the proposals right. I want to be clear about where resources are applied to obtain the best results. The committee's report will help with that. Having undertaken its inquiry, the committee will highlight the priorities. I genuinely want to get the proposals right, so financial constraints are not the driving force. There are always financial pressures—we never have enough money to do everything that we want to do.

In the Executive's expenditure patterns in the past few years, early years services and education services—services for the front end of our society and for younger people—have had enormous attention. I fully expect them to continue to have that enormous attention. We know that we can do better. We know that we can improve the outcomes for our young people in the formal education system and in the sector that we are discussing, which involves many less formal settings. As Fiona Hyslop said, we know that if we invest earlier, we can build on early success rather than trying to recover from early failure by investing later. The general trend is of thinking about the right interventions earlier in life to support future success.

As a regular part of the messages that I give in speeches about education policy, I build in the fact that we have an aging population, fewer young people and fewer economically active people in the population. For our society to function in the future, we will have to make every individual more successful and we will have to ensure that everybody contributes to our economy and that fewer people fall out of the system. That is why we are paying such attention to curriculum reform and to people who fall into the not in education, employment or training category. All that points to the need for early success. Early success counteracts a huge number of problems. I am

clear that that will be reflected in future Executive priorities.

**Fiona Hyslop:** We have heard that the Scottish system is more child led and child centred in early years development in our nurseries than that in England, which is on balance more adult led. Research shows that teaching has the biggest impact on children from more deprived backgrounds. In the context of the early intervention agenda and the child-centred approach, should we not recognise that pulling out teaching support carries the danger that the very people whom we are trying to contact are those who will lose out?

You say that teachers can bring an extra dimension, but another school of thought is that teachers are integral to nurseries. There is quite a space between what you say and the other agenda. Are you prepared to make a move on that, particularly if it would impact on the vulnerable two-year-olds on whom you are focused?

**Peter Peacock:** You talked about pulling out teacher support, which we are not doing. Nothing in our policy says that teachers should be removed from such settings. As I said, we tried to give flexibility in how teachers are deployed; I have touched on those arguments. Please do not think that our policy thrust is to pull out teachers, because it is not.

As for the point about two-year-olds—

**Fiona Hyslop:** I mention them in relation to three and four-year-old education.

**Peter Peacock:** The point about two-year-olds slightly compounds the teachers issue that I touched on. Many teachers do not have experience of three and four-year-olds, as I said to Rosemary Byrne, and have even less experience of two-year-olds. However, many other professionals have lots of experience with two-year-olds and intervene in their lives constructively through family support and so on that emanates from early experiences in health services. That is passed on through the sure start programmes that Kenneth Macintosh talked about.

We must think carefully—indeed, we are thinking carefully—about what the right interventions are for two-year-olds, how we should structure those interventions, how we can achieve most for those children and how to get the right balance of care, nurture and educational input for them. That raises questions about which qualified staff should rightly work with them. Given all the factors, it is not immediately apparent to me that those staff should necessarily be teachers.

12:30

**Fiona Hyslop:** Has it been acknowledged that those two-year-olds probably need teachers for going into formal education?

**Peter Peacock:** Yes and no. I readily acknowledge that teachers can bring an extra dimension above an acceptable threshold, but many other people can bring strong benefits to the sector. We should not think that if a person is not a teacher, they will not provide adequate pre-school experiences—that is not the case. I do not dispute in any way that teachers can add extra dimensions beyond acceptable thresholds—that is part of the reason why we are considering such matters. We must think about the nature of the interventions in order to get things right.

We are learning a huge amount. A lot of the sure start stuff is still in its infancy. I referred to things that I recently saw in nurture groups in Glasgow, for example. We do not have a lot of collective experience in that respect, but we need to use what experience we have to make the right calculations about what we should do. I will not rush into making decisions because I want to get things right. However, I want to make progress.

**Dr Murray:** Evidence that we heard from DTZ Pleda Consulting showed that parents prefer informal care if they cannot care for their children themselves. Obviously, changes in employment law, among other things, have made such early stage care easier.

There was also a preference for having grandparents care for young children. Has any thought been given to how grandparents could be supported, particularly in the light of what the First Minister said recently about the importance of grandparents when there are extreme pressures in families? More generally, has any thought been given to developing grandparents' child care skills and to supporting them when they are the child's primary carer?

**Peter Peacock:** Are you talking about financial support as well as support to help grandparents to develop or impart their skills, for example?

**Dr Murray:** I am talking about both.

**Peter Peacock:** The short and honest answer to that question is that we have no immediate plans to change any financial provisions to grandparents, although—

**Dr Murray:** So grandparents would have to register as childminders.

**Peter Peacock:** I will ask Don McGillivray to say something about that, as he told me this morning about things that are happening that show movement in the position. Many grandparents care on both an informal and a more formal basis,

as I assume Don McGillivray will tell members. The issue is complex, but there are financial mechanisms that can potentially assist.

The other point that you made is also rather interesting. I have not thought in particular about other support mechanisms for early years child care that can be put in place in order to provide fuller support—officials can say whether they have thought about such mechanisms. We have thought about support for young people who are in the homes of very challenged families that perhaps include parents who abuse alcohol or drugs. A lot of family work is done in that respect, and grandparents are often involved with that intensive support; indeed, in some families, they take over parenting to a large extent. The First Minister has rightly pointed out that we must become even more sophisticated about that and a lot of thought has been given to it. There has been much less thinking about how grandparents can be supported in order better to support early child care and learning and to encourage them to stimulate their grandchildren. I will happily think further about that matter, on which we do not have a specific set of policies.

**Don McGillivray (Scottish Executive Education Department):** There is not much to add to what the minister has said. Essentially, grandparents can register as childminders; if they do so, parents who pay for care in that way can claim the child care element of tax credits. There is anecdotal evidence that grandparents have done that, but we do not have any great hard evidence about it.

**Dr Murray:** If a grandparent has only one or two grandchildren, they may be reluctant to undergo training or to make the changes that they are expected to make to their home in order to qualify to care for their grandchildren more formally.

I was interested in what was said about integrated provision. The committee has heard evidence on the role that health visitors can play in identifying vulnerable families and children in need of support, instead of a postcode analysis of where deprivation exists. Have you any thoughts on how that integration can be improved? In some areas, we have seen examples of good practice where health visitors are located in family centres that provide support to parents as well as pre-five child care and education. How can this be improved across the sector to provide better support for families? Can it include interaction with the voluntary and private sector?

**Peter Peacock:** You have put your finger on it. One challenge for us is to identify, highlight and share good practice. From constituency work, you will have noted that, in the provision of child care, the health services are increasingly linking with the voluntary, private and public sectors. Sure start

programmes attempt to make connections between health care, child care and education, and the nurturing of young people. The starting well programme also focuses on that broad territory. Although experience is being accumulated, we have not done well on drawing it out, cataloguing it and sharing it more effectively across the system.

**Val Cox:** The Hall 4 report on child development and screening, of which the committee may be aware, proposed a review of the existing routine surveillance and screening programmes for young children that will be implemented UK-wide. In Scotland, the guidance notes that were issued specifically point to the desirability of each early years education centre having an allocated health visitor. Health visitors will be able to advise centre staff about children whom the health services have identified as particularly vulnerable. They will also be able to provide training to help further identify vulnerability on health grounds. The importance of integrating health and care services more generally is being recognised and more definite steps are being taken in that direction.

**Dr Murray:** The evaluation of the English sure start programme was less positive than the Scottish one. It was noted that it provided greater advantage to moderately disadvantaged people than to the very disadvantaged. What specific lessons can be learned from the English sure start programme to ensure that it is implemented better in Scotland?

**Val Cox:** We are interested in learning the important lessons that are emerging from the evaluation of the sure start programme south of the border. Not surprisingly, press reports claim that the programme is reaching moderately vulnerable families very well but has difficulties in reaching the most vulnerable. Therein lies the QED. If people's problems are so intractable and they are reluctant to avail themselves of existing social services, even a service as non-stigmatising and outward reaching as the sure start programme will have difficulties in engaging them. A formal evaluation has not yet taken place of the programme in Scotland. When it does, similar difficulties may well be found.

The programme is delivered differently north and south of the border. South of the border, it tends to be far more centrally driven, with relatively small local add-ons; in Scotland, it has been exclusively locally driven. We believe—although we have no supporting evidence, so we do not know—that having a locally driven programme helps service providers to target the particularly vulnerable people in their areas. That is the basis for our approach, but it remains to be seen whether it will pay higher dividends than the approach taken south of the border.

**Mr McAveety:** Minister, how important is the tax and benefits system to the overall strategy?

**Peter Peacock:** First, tax and benefits are reserved issues, so my knowledge of them is not as detailed as you might expect if they were not reserved issues. However, they are a very important component of what we are doing.

As Don McGillivray hinted, new things are happening as a consequence of incentives in the system. Additional services have been created, and individuals will be able to take up services that they would not previously have been able to take up. The tax credit system and the voucher system for employees allow the expansion of services that would not otherwise exist.

There are amazingly complex interactions between the tax and benefits system and the subsidised places that we can provide in child care and early years provision. The most vulnerable groups are particularly affected. As we develop policy, my colleagues here keep in touch with what is happening in the south. We have to consider where we put our money and what the interactions will be. For example, we must consider whether people will still be able to receive the same benefits from the tax and benefits system. The interactions are intricate and complex.

Do you want to add anything, Don?

**Don McGillivray:** You have covered the point well, minister.

**Mr McAveety:** I did not ask the question as a way of asking for a review of policy—although that would be interesting.

The Parliament here and the Parliament at Westminster control different things, but what kind of dialogue can we have with the Treasury on flexible approaches to such issues? I am defensive of the settlement for the Scottish Parliament, but tax and benefits pop up in just about all our consultations with different groups. What is the Executive doing to address those concerns?

**Peter Peacock:** Dialogue goes on all the time between my officials and officials in the corresponding department down south. We use information from the Treasury and we take its policy direction into account. A feature of Treasury activity in recent years has been the extent to which it has prioritised changes to taxation and benefits to help families and young people.

We also have dialogue with ministerial colleagues about budget priorities as we move towards a budget. I would not disclose their details, but such conversations always take place. We have to consider the impact of Treasury policies on our policies, because there is a connection. We also seek to influence Treasury policies whenever we think it appropriate.

**Mr McAveety:** In a number of consultations, concerns have been expressed about the overall resource and its capacity to expand. If we want to make our workforce more effective through training and development, we must consider how to offer rewards with limited resources. We must find imaginative ways of leveraging in additional resources from everybody—including families and the Exchequer and the Executive.

It is a bit like Scottish country dancing at school; everyone has been told the rules, but you are buggered if you are going to be the one to start in case you embarrass yourself or get caught out. I should say that that was the experience for others, not for me.

A number of providers have told us that their arrangements with local government are inconsistent. Urban and rural areas in one part of the country might have very good partnerships, but in other parts, from what people are saying, the experience seems, frankly quite awful. What room is there for the Executive to set national standards in that respect to create the expectation that existing standards will be raised?

12:45

**Peter Peacock:** I cannot imagine you feeling inhibited at any point in your life, Frank. I am sure that Scottish country dancing was not a problem for you.

A framework certainly exists that can release more resources; indeed, people are finding out much more about it. For example, although the child care voucher system is still in its early days, take-up is increasing. Individuals claim their vouchers, which can be deducted for tax purposes; as a result, they feel the benefit through their ability to access provision and through an increase in their personal income to pay for it. We are constantly considering how our funding streams interact with the benefits system in order to optimise such activity and to bring in more resources.

You are right to highlight the differing nature of arrangements across the country, because that is a feature of this area of work. The fact is that local government provision is administered differently according to local choices. However, people who are involved in these processes not in the public sector but in the private and voluntary sector have informed me of some quite extreme difficulties and differences across the country. I am anxious to improve the situation. Indeed, I would not hesitate to issue further guidance or to examine certain provisions if I thought that doing so could change matters. We want the relationships between the different sectors to be constructive, positive and planned, and we want people in the private and

voluntary sectors to feel that they are very much part of local decision making on priorities and so on. We also want local authorities to treat their partners with equity. I would be happy to consider any further measures to improve those relationships.

**Mr Ingram:** In your opening remarks, you highlighted the sector's low status. I guess that we will have to wait for your response to the workforce review before we can get our teeth into your position in that respect.

It has always struck me as slightly odd that, as far as budget allocations are concerned, early years education has tended to miss out to later stages of schooling. It seems that, as children get older, we spend more money on them; however, if budget allocations were used more judiciously in the early stages, we might be able to deal with many of the problems that you have highlighted. The need for early intervention has never been greater.

Are you able to assure us that, in your department's budget allocations or in guidance to local authorities, early years education is now moving to the top of the priority list instead of remaining in its traditional position at the bottom?

**Peter Peacock:** Early years provision has been moved to the top of our agenda, which is why there has been such a dramatic expansion over the past few years. When we became responsible for these matters, early years provision throughout Scotland was patchy; now it is universal. We have given significant priority to the early years programme and are now spending £150-odd million on it. That funding was not made available before. The budget line for nursery teaching is £25 million; another £40 million is going into our child care strategy; and another £60 million is being invested in the changing children's services fund, some of which can be used on these matters. There is a lot of cash going in, and the allocation has grown.

A wider question underlies your point. As I recall, a member of the committee who is temporarily not with us, Wendy Alexander, was organising a series of lectures last year—or perhaps about 18 months ago. She brought Professor Heckman across from the United States, and he argued strongly for the clear benefits of the notion that, the earlier we invest, the more we can build success. He said that if we invest too late, we will never be able to turn around the lack of success and will just end up investing huge sums. Such views have given rise to a debate about our strategic priorities in this area.

I am acutely conscious of the fact that, the more we can solidify and strengthen early years

education, the greater by far the benefits will be compared with trying to compensate at a later stage in the system. You will appreciate that we have inherited systems that have been established and funded for some time and that to make huge, seismic shifts is difficult for a variety of reasons. However, please do not underestimate the extent to which we want to make the right early interventions and the right investments to get the benefits.

On the point about the low status of the sector, you will have to wait a bit longer to get your teeth into a response. However, in a sense, the purpose of holding a review was to address the perceived low status of the sector. In the sector, we have highly skilled and highly qualified nursery nurses and other workers, including teachers, and we want to make the system more qualified, with more careers opportunities, so that people see the sector as offering a career and will invest time in making a career there, which would be to everyone's long-term benefit. It is very much in that spirit that I want to move the workforce review along.

**Mr Ingram:** I suspect that policy in this area will be a key feature of the 2007 elections. I was interested to note the suggestion of our colleague, Wendy Alexander, to apply the tartan tax to beefing up our early years education efforts. I will be interested to find out whether that becomes Labour policy.

**Peter Peacock:** Part of Wendy Alexander's purpose in life is to stimulate debate.

**The Convener:** She has a declared interest in the matter.

**Mr Ingram:** I will switch tack and take the parents' perspective. As the minister probably knows, we received a report from DTZ Pida Consulting that indicated that although most parents welcome access to the free pre-school scheme, they feel that the arrangements could be more flexible to suit their needs, particularly in relation to employment. Parents are arranging their lives around getting their kids to and from their current places on the scheme.

In your opening remarks, you highlighted the issue of all-day care and wrap-around care being very patchy across the country. You suggested an initiative on that front. Will you give us more detail on that?

**Peter Peacock:** I do not have a specific initiative on that per se, although I do have a series of thoughts on the matter, which are being factored into our policy thinking on the need for more flexibility in provision. I agree very much with Mr Ingram's summary of what DTZ Pida said. It is our experience from the contact that we have and the work that we have done with parents that they

are saying exactly that. They see new forms of provision—which is sometimes very expensive but is there—and they are accessing and using it. The time span goes from 6 in the morning to 6 at night or beyond, and the age range goes from nought right through to the primary school years. There are all sorts of flexible arrangements that mean that parents do not have to build their lives around existing facilities or pick up their kids, take them somewhere else and then leave them there. We have much further to go on this.

So far, the private sector has perhaps been more adept at adjusting than the public sector and, possibly, the voluntary sector have been, but I have seen examples of flexible services being provided in the public sector, and if that is possible in some instances, it must be possible more widely. However, we have a long way to go to shift some attitudes. That forms part of our consideration of future policy, but we need to determine what else we need to do to facilitate that. I am in no doubt that we need to move further in that direction.

**The Convener:** There are no further questions, so I thank Peter Peacock and his team for coming along this morning and for answering our lengthy series of questions on this important subject.

That concludes oral evidence taking in our early years inquiry. We will consider our approach to our draft report in due course. No doubt, the minister will be interested in our report when it is published, and we will be interested to have his response.

Before we move into private session, I remind members that this is our only committee meeting in February. We will hold the final public participation event of our pupil motivation inquiry at Our Dynamic Earth at 10 o'clock next Wednesday—our usual slot. I am trying not to schedule a meeting on 22 February so that we can all concentrate on the likely stage 1 debate on the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Bill. Our next meeting is currently scheduled for 1 March. I will let members know as soon as I can should we need to hold a meeting on 22 February.

12:56

*Meeting continued in private until 13:25.*



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