

EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 2 December 2009

Session 3

£5.00

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Printed and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by
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EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE **32nd Meeting 2009, Session 3**

CONVENER

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

*Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP)

*Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

*Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD)

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Adam Ingram (Minister for Children and Early Years)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Nick Hawthorne

ASSISTANT CLERK

Emma Berry

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

Wednesday 2 December 2009

[THE DEPUTY CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:03*]

Autism in Education

The Deputy Convener (Kenneth Gibson): I open the 32nd meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee in 2009. We have apologies from Claire Baker, and Margaret Smith and the convener will be a little late.

The only item on the agenda is taking further evidence on the subject of autism in education. I welcome, from the Scottish Government, Adam Ingram, Minister for Children and Early Years; Kathryn Beattie, policy manager in the support for learning branch; and Ryan Gunn, head of the care and support branch. I invite the minister to make an opening statement, which will be followed by questions from committee members.

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): I thank the committee for inviting me to talk about this important issue. As I have said many times before, the Scottish Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that all children receive the best start in life, improving the life chances of all children and securing the right levels of individual support for all children to enable them to access the curriculum and develop as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society.

For no group of people can those national outcomes be more pertinent than for children with autism spectrum disorder. That is why there is already a broad spectrum of support in place to ensure that the national outcomes are more than just lofty aspirations for children with ASD—they can and should be achieved. Through the getting it right for every child strategy and the early years framework we have highlighted the importance of early intervention and the significant difference that early identification of additional needs and the provision of the right levels of support at a young age can make to a child's potential.

The curriculum for excellence joins those policies in emphasising the need for multiagency working, for outcome-focused services and, crucially, for a child-centred approach to service delivery. Those programmes also make clear the

valuable role of parents and the family in developing solutions and delivering outcomes and highlight the need to ensure that sufficient family support services are in place. Of course, the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 provides a comprehensive framework for ensuring that the needs of children with ASD are identified, met and kept under review. As the committee knows only too well, the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009, which we expect to commence next autumn, does much to strengthen that framework and the rights of parents and young people with additional support needs yet further.

We have also taken a number of steps to ensure that teaching staff have the right knowledge and skills to work with children with an autism spectrum disorder. Earlier this year the national framework for inclusion was launched as part of teacher training, further to strengthen the focus on classroom support for pupils with additional needs, including autism.

Teachers are required to undertake 35 hours of continuing professional development each year. Last year, the General Teaching Council for Scotland added autism to the particular areas of interest included within its professional recognition framework, which allows teachers to focus their continuing professional development on a particular area and gain recognition for enhancing their knowledge and experience. In April 2009 the Scottish Government published its autism toolbox, which draws on practical examples, literature and research to give guidance to local authorities and support to schools in the education of pupils with autism spectrum disorder. I regularly receive reports that that toolbox has been well received by the education community.

Without wishing to pre-empt the committee's questions, I recognise that observations can and will always be made about inconsistencies and different approaches adopted by different local authorities. It is right that local authorities have the flexibility to identify their own priorities and their own approaches to meeting needs based on local circumstances. By introducing the concordat with local government, the Government sought to empower local authorities to have just that flexibility. Record levels of funding are being made available to local authorities—£23 billion in the period from 2008 to 2010—to underpin the concordat.

It is every bit as important to ensure that central Government does all that it can to support local authorities by making the right connections, facilitating collaboration and building capacity. To that end, I will ask my officials to establish an education working group, such as that which

provided the framework for the autism toolbox, with representation from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, the National Autistic Society Scotland, the Scottish Society for Autism, the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists and other stakeholders from the autism community. I will be happy to keep the committee informed on the progress of the working group. I see the working group as a vital tool in identifying, sharing and disseminating the best practice that we all know is happening in schools and local authorities throughout the country. All children with autism spectrum disorder deserve to experience that best practice so that they, too, can have the best start in life. I am determined to ensure that we play our part in achieving that objective.

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): Thank you for those opening remarks, minister. I apologise for my late arrival and for missing the first few minutes of your contribution.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Minister, the working group that you are setting up sounds commendable. Will it consider autism specifically or additional support needs generally?

Adam Ingram: It is an autism working group. As the member will be aware, there has been a feeling, particularly with regard to adult services, that there is a need to pull people together and create more focus. The group will be a useful mechanism for reviewing how well we are doing at meeting the needs of children and adults.

Ken Macintosh: I am sure that the minister will be aware that an autism bill is proposed south of the border. Might the Scottish Government do something similar, or might it consider the issue in the round and produce an autism strategy?

Adam Ingram: In effect, we have had an autism strategy over the past 10 years or so. It was probably started off by the Public Health Institute of Scotland report on needs assessment but, as committee members are aware, we have also developed our additional support for learning legislation, which is a generic approach to meeting the needs of children. It would not be helpful to focus on one particular group of youngsters who need additional support because that would tend to focus resources on that group at the expense of others. I do not think that we are contemplating going down that route.

Ken Macintosh: It is clear that it has been difficult to get a diagnosis of autism. Our witnesses last week, most of whom were education experts, were quite encouraging in that they stressed that they understood the ASL act to place an emphasis on support rather than on diagnosis. That said, there is clearly a wide variation throughout the

country in the time that it takes to get a diagnosis. Does that worry the minister? If so, what additional steps can he take? I am thinking particularly of working with colleagues in health.

Adam Ingram: Lack of consistency is always a concern. We want to ensure that every child throughout the country has their needs met. You will be aware that the ASD reference group that was set up on the back of the Public Health Institute of Scotland's needs assessment report back in 2001 worked for a considerable time during the course of the previous Administration. That work included training professionals in the use of agreed diagnostic tools and issuing a quality standard for ASD diagnostic services. Those things are in place. You asked whether people are achieving those standards. There is a Scottish autism services network, which shares information on issues relating to diagnosis and promotes good practice. I hope that that can work through the system. The aim of the project is to improve services and reduce waiting times.

In addition to that, a Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guideline was established in 2007 on diagnosis, practices, assessment and service provision. A review of that guideline will start in March next year. I hope that we can have a comprehensive review of current provision.

Ken Macintosh: It is clear from our evidence that autism can be diagnosed by a number of different routes. The assessment and recording processes that local authorities use also vary, which is slightly worrying in that there is variation across the country in whether children have an individual education plan, a co-ordinated support plan or another formal mechanism. Again, that can exacerbate the lack of consistency in approach. Is the minister concerned about that and will he take any action to address it?

10:15

Adam Ingram: I am primarily concerned about ensuring that the needs of youngsters are met. I am not so concerned about the mechanisms that are used, as long as they are effective. Again, though, I hope that the review of the SIGN guidelines and of the practice out there will give us better-quality information on which to base our assessment of those particular issues. I acknowledge that there are concerns, and I want to see them addressed.

Ken Macintosh: But if you do not have the statistical information from local authorities' records of children's needs, what process do you use to assess whether authorities meet those needs?

Adam Ingram: As you will know, under the Education (Additional Support for Learning)

(Scotland) Act 2009, we require local authorities to record all that information, which is not necessarily there just now in a form that would be helpful to us. I hope that, through the reviews, we will be able to get a clear handle on the issues that you raise.

Ken Macintosh: An issue that has been raised in evidence is that, as well as the difficulties that some children and families have in accessing support in school, the lack of support out of school can cause difficulties for many families. In that respect, diagnosis is even more crucial. Can you take an active interest in that, given that we are trying to educate the whole child and look at the whole context of learning?

Adam Ingram: As you will know, we are trying to look at a child's needs holistically, not just in school or whatever. The whole thrust of the getting it right for every child approach is to meet all the needs of the child as a whole person. Certainly, I am keen to see capacity building, if you like, in the ability of communities to support families, particularly children with additional support needs. That goes very much with the grain of our policies, whether that is the curriculum for excellence, getting it right for every child or the early years framework. I endorse what you say in that regard.

Ken Macintosh: I have a few other questions on support, convener, to which I will return later. To return to the issue of the working group that the minister is setting up, will parents be represented on it?

Adam Ingram: Yes, I believe so.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We had an interesting discussion at last week's meeting about the role of teacher training in making teachers more aware of the problem of autism. It is good to hear that that is very much part of the 35 hours of professional development. We had a bit of a debate about the right stage at which to ensure that teachers had that kind of support and whether it should be done on the job, when different children on the autistic spectrum behave differently, and whether that is a better way of training teachers. One concern was whether support staff in schools have sufficient training in that regard. Is there anything that you can do to address that concern, so that somebody who is not going through teacher training is better able to cope, whether they are janitorial staff, a matron or catering staff, who are often very much on the front line of dealing with autistic youngsters when they are not in the classroom?

Adam Ingram: That is a pertinent question. The other day, I visited a school where a teacher told me how much she depends on her classroom assistant for help with a child with additional support needs. As the member knows, education

authorities have a responsibility to ensure that appropriate training is provided. The autism toolbox sets out guidance for local authorities on that front. You are absolutely right to say that we need to build the capacity within schools to meet the needs of children. I am talking not just about teachers, but about other staff as well.

Elizabeth Smith: Can you confirm that your working group will consider that issue, too? It is a real concern that was thrown up by two of the witnesses last week.

Adam Ingram: Indeed. That is obviously a key concern.

Elizabeth Smith: We have had pretty favourable feedback on the toolbox and the concepts behind it. Do you have any idea of what the uptake has been? Opinions varied at last week's committee meeting. Some people feel that the toolbox is lying on a shelf somewhere and has not been sufficiently used. Do you have any statistics to show what the uptake has been?

Adam Ingram: I have no specific statistics on that. The toolbox is distributed to all schools and education authorities. As you rightly say, we are getting a lot of good feedback on it. The best feedback that we are likely to get on the extent to which local authorities and schools are using the toolbox will be through HMIE inspections.

Elizabeth Smith: It is important to get some feedback on how extensively the toolbox is being used. It has a tremendous contribution to make in helping teachers. We were slightly confused by some of the evidence that we were given at last week's meeting, which suggested that we do not have the full facts about how well the toolbox is being used. In particular, it was suggested that there is regional variation in the uptake. We have no way of knowing whether that is accurate, so it would be good to check that.

We heard a strong contribution from a witness last week who stressed that some of the autistic children who have had the greatest success in developing into well-adjusted individuals are those who have had a good experience in extracurricular activities—not just sport, but music and drama. Have we any way of knowing how capable our schools are of involving in extracurricular activities those youngsters who are sometimes a bit left out?

Adam Ingram: Such matters should be covered in the plan for the individual child. As you know, we are going down the path of personalised support for young people, and that type of provision should be included in a child's plan. There is a big role to be played by activities that take place outwith the classroom, and whatever schools can provide by way of extracurricular

activities should be marshalled to support the child.

The Convener: There is a belief that the toolbox is very important, and a lot of thought and hard work has gone into its preparation. However, there is a need for assurances not only that it is being used widely throughout Scotland, but that its success is being evaluated. You did not get the chance to answer one of Liz Smith's questions because she asked another question. Perhaps you can tell us a little bit more about how the toolbox will be evaluated to ensure that it lives up to the expectations of so many of the professionals who spoke to the committee last week.

Adam Ingram: I tried to answer that question. The autism toolbox is an input, and what we really want to measure is the impact that the toolbox has had on outcomes for children and young people. I suggested that probably the best way to do that was through the inspection process. As you know, school inspectors have to assess provision for children who need additional support. We will also get feedback from a variety of other sources, whether through professional networks or through the special organisations that deal with autism.

The Convener: Could the working group that you have established consider the matter as one of the strands of its work?

Adam Ingram: That is a sensible suggestion, and I will give it some thought. The toolbox will take a little time to settle down, but I would hope that the working group could examine the effectiveness of its introduction.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): Last week, we heard some positive feedback on the toolbox. A direct correlation was evident, in that children who were getting excellent experiences and outcomes had detailed co-ordinated support plans and teachers who were using the toolbox quite extensively.

What other support is there for teachers and headteachers, especially in mainstream schools which is an important issue because of the mainstreaming of some of these kids following the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000?

Adam Ingram: Earlier, I mentioned the national framework for inclusion, which is now a feature of all teacher training—initial training as well as continuous professional development. In response to Elizabeth Smith, I talked about the need for us to continue to ensure that teachers have access to the necessary training materials and training opportunities. On top of that, the glow intranet system allows teachers across the country to share their experience and ways of addressing particular issues. That will be a significant feature

of the education system in Scotland in the coming years.

We are also considering further guidance through our "Building the Curriculum" series, which assists teachers with work streams and also involves support for teachers who are developing the curriculum in special schools.

Of course, a two-hour awareness-raising session is not enough, and we need to put in place the kind of peer support and infrastructure that will enable teachers to share their experience and talk to one another about the best ways of dealing with individual children.

Christina McKelvie: When finances are tight, training and CPD budgets often get nipped and tucked. What sort of support are you putting in place to ensure that local authorities keep this issue as a priority?

10:30

Adam Ingram: We should remember that local authorities have statutory duties in relation to additional support for learning. Also, it makes good sense to ensure that children are supported at an appropriate time and stage. Otherwise, we will run into more difficult problems further down the line that are probably more resource intensive. It makes sense to ensure that the level of support for children is maintained or improved.

Christina McKelvie: You mentioned that problems in future years may be more resource intensive. We got an e-mail this morning from Dr Tom Welsh at the University of Northampton, who suggests that we look carefully at further and higher education. That might well be outwith your remit, but it is important to consider the whole education experience. Is any work being done, perhaps by the autism working group, to look at further and higher education?

Adam Ingram: As I said to Ken Macintosh, one area of work is to look at transitions, particularly into adult services and adulthood. It would be appropriate to consider further and higher education as part of that.

Christina McKelvie: That would be welcome.

We had the stakeholders here last week, and we were impressed by the way in which the voluntary organisations work closely with local authorities, the Government and other organisations. Their joined-up approach is impressive. What other support is available from public or voluntary sector bodies?

Adam Ingram: We value highly the contributions of the National Autistic Society Scotland and the Scottish Society for Autism. The voluntary sector can often provide the specialist

service that the public sector cannot provide at its own hand. We are keen to ensure that the partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors grows. That is marked out as an area for development. The world has changed in terms of the level of resources that are likely to come into the system in the next five to 10 years, but we cannot afford not to focus on the area. We must ensure that the necessary resources are going in.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I have a quick question on the back of Christina McKelvie and Elizabeth Smith's lines of questioning. Is there any difference between primary school teachers who have gone through four-year degrees and those who have done one-year postgraduate courses, in terms of their ability to deal with autistic children in the classroom?

Adam Ingram: I do not believe so. The training, and particularly the framework for inclusion work that is going on in the teacher training colleges, tries to address how to inculcate the values and belief systems and how to tackle the personalised learning needs of individual children. That is the big cultural change that has come through in the past 10 years or so, since the mainstreaming Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000.

Clearly, a four-year course can probably cover issues in more depth, but that is where the importance of CPD comes in, together with the support structures for teachers who deal with children with additional needs. They know where they can access the additional support that they might need.

The Convener: Minister, on your response to Christina McKelvie's question about the relationship between central Government and local authorities, would you expect autism to be mentioned in local authority single outcome agreements? Would that be appropriate, in order to give people some comfort that local authorities place the same priority on addressing the issue as the Scottish Government does?

Adam Ingram: The problem with single outcome agreements is that they tend to be high-level documents. There is a lot going on under the surface in relation to improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families, but I would not necessarily expect those agreements specifically to mention autism, in terms of support in schools. However, I expect there to be targets for attainment and on improving outcomes for children and young people, particularly in relation to educational attainment or final destinations. You would have to go underneath the top line, as it were, of single outcome agreements.

The Convener: Is that the difficulty, and one of the reasons why there is tension at present? If something is not mentioned in single outcome

agreements, it might not happen, given the pressures on local authorities to meet other statutory obligations. You rightly point out that local authorities have statutory obligations in relation to caring for vulnerable children, but the issue is the degree of priority that that is given.

Adam Ingram: It is clear that community planning partnerships have a job to do in monitoring the progress of single outcome agreements. The issue of how to progress the outcomes that you seek comes down to questions of detail. There will be debate about how to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and about resource allocation, and the issues will obviously be discussed in local authorities and council meetings.

There is plenty information in the public domain about local authority provision. It is not vital that single outcome agreements detail everything that is being done to further a particular aim or objective, but it is obviously vital that people are aware of what is being provided by local authorities and the plans for the future.

The Convener: If autism is not mentioned in the single outcome agreements, how will the Scottish Government—and you in particular, since you are the responsible minister—judge whether supporting autistic children in Scotland is being prioritised at local authority level?

Adam Ingram: As I indicated earlier, the inspection process tells us about provision. We are moving down the road of establishing indicators, particularly on outcomes, which I hope will develop beyond what we have now, so that we can better measure the impact of the policies that we have established.

We are still in the early stages of the single outcome agreement process, in terms of how the indicators are put together and monitored. We have a way to go to deliver on that. I depend on organisations such as Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education to tell me what the issues are with provision in local authorities or at school level.

The Convener: Mr Macintosh has some additional questions on support; it might be best to ask them.

Ken Macintosh: Does the minister accept that pupil support assistant posts are being cut around the country? Does your information from HMIE tell you that?

Adam Ingram: No.

Ken Macintosh: This week, we have received a submission from the Princess Royal Trust for Carers, which states that pupil support assistant posts have been cut in Aberdeen, East Renfrewshire and Glasgow, to give three examples. Perhaps I am the only constituency

MSP in Scotland—although I doubt it very much—to have been told about parents' difficulties with pupil support in the classroom, because teachers are prioritised over pupil support assistants, therefore pupil support is bearing the brunt of the education cuts. I accept that the relationship with local authorities is difficult and the process is new for the Government, but many of us are aware that there is a problem—evidence of it is available—so what are you doing about it? Are you seeking information? Are you worried about the situation?

Adam Ingram: I am obviously keen that local authorities follow through on the Government's policy intentions, and I engage with them regularly, not least in my tours around local authorities and my visits to schools and other institutions, when I raise the questions. However, there is by no means an even picture across the country. I have no reason to doubt that what you describe is happening. Obviously, I do not support that process, because I want pupil support resources to be maintained and improved upon rather than cut, but at the end of the day it is the responsibility of local authorities to provide for such needs. As I have pointed out, local authorities are under statutory obligations to ensure that identified needs are assessed and met.

Ken Macintosh: Indeed. As well as addressing assessment, diagnosis and so on, petition PE1213, which we are considering, specifically refers to considering

“whether all the support that is necessary within the education system is in place”.

Our evidence session last week and the written evidence that we have received confirm that the principles behind the ASL act have been broadly accepted by parents, education professionals and education authorities. There is no lack of willingness or good intention, but the whole process is undermined by the fact that not enough resource is available, specifically in some mainstream schools, for pupil support assistants, because the budgetary pressures—which clearly we all fear might get worse—mean that teaching is prioritised and pupil support assistants, for example, are targeted. There is evidence from Aberdeen, for example, that teaching support teachers are being taken back to the classroom to teach their specialist subjects rather than being left in teaching support. Will the minister do something to monitor the situation, ask for information about the numbers involved and perhaps collect information on the number of PSAs in local authorities?

Adam Ingram: I certainly look for feedback on what is happening across the country. I have already stated that it is short-sighted of local authorities if they are going down the route of cutting back on classroom support for teachers as

a short-term cost-cutting exercise, because it will have long-term ramifications that will no doubt rebound on the local authorities in due course. Clearly, local authorities have to establish their own political priorities and must be held accountable for them. We do not have a relationship whereby local authorities are necessarily accountable to me as the minister, but they are accountable to their local electorates. We must ensure that local electorates have available to them all the information to hold local authorities to account.

Ken Macintosh: I find some of the minister's remarks encouraging. Perhaps you will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that you are saying that you accept that if resources are not put in place by local authorities, it will undermine the good intentions of the act and so on.

10:45

Adam Ingram: Clearly, it will do that. There is no denying that.

Ken Macintosh: Would you also accept that although local authorities choose to protect statutory services, they are also under an obligation to do so? Therefore, not only do things such as pupil support suffer: non-statutory services, such as the voluntary support that can be available to parents of children with additional needs, often lose out, too. The whole fabric of support, in and out of school, can suffer.

Adam Ingram: That is a fear when we are moving into a scenario in which public spending is being squeezed. People retreat into their bunkers, and there is a salami-slicing approach. We need to try to ensure that people do not do that, and that they discuss the key priorities and ensure that they are properly resourced. We are talking about something of a cultural change, which is what underlies many of our programmes and approaches, including getting it right for every child. We are hoping that people will work together on joint ventures, rather than just look at their own little budgets or professional areas. We are aiming to put together a team to support children and young people. Everyone brings everything to the table.

Ken Macintosh: What is the specific role of the Scottish Government in that? We had a long meeting with the previous cabinet secretary about that in relation to local authority budgets generally, and about teaching numbers and class sizes in particular. This applies especially to additional support for learning and dealing with autism. If the minister receives evidence that there is a perceived problem, and it is flagged up in Parliament and elsewhere, what can the Government do, other than just encourage local

authorities to develop a new culture? Can it take specific actions? Clearly, there are a number of regulations, budgetary controls and all sorts of other tools in the minister's toolbox.

Adam Ingram: I do not know whether Ken Macintosh is suggesting that we should return to ring fencing—we know that it was a particularly inefficient way of distributing resources. I recall that one Labour council leader has told me that the council managed an 11 per cent efficiency saving in the first year without ring fencing.

We need a meeting of minds: many policies are now created jointly between local authorities and national Government and we are trying to develop that partnership approach. Obviously, there will be highs and lows within that relationship, but we need to get through the lows. Ken Macintosh highlights an issue that is important to many families up and down the country. I want to ensure, as much as it is in my power to do so, that children and youngsters get the support that they need to fulfil their potential. We just need to work co-operatively to that end.

Ken Macintosh: I am a little disappointed. I am not saying that we should return to ring fencing, but the minister does not seem to recognise that the removal of ring fencing from local authority budgets has led directly to cuts in education budgets throughout the country and to a reduction in the number of pupil support assistants. I cannot see any way of avoiding that fact. It is difficult to make progress if we do not recognise the problem in the first place. I acknowledge the minister's good intentions, but I am still looking to see how they can be translated into action so that we can protect families and children in the classroom.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I wonder whether Mr Macintosh would make the same argument for ring fencing the Scottish Government's budget, given that Westminster might not be happy about some of the things that are happening here.

One of the things that came out of the round-table meeting last week was that there is a general consensus that pupils with autistic spectrum disorder should be supported and responded to rather than excluded. When is guidance on exclusions likely to be available?

Adam Ingram: We intend to issue new guidance early next year. That will clarify that the provision and support that is identified in individualised education programmes and co-ordinated support plans should be taken into consideration before a pupil is excluded and that, when a pupil is excluded, the identified additional provision and support should be continued.

Kenneth Gibson: Many submissions—such as the one from NHS Ayrshire and Arran, which I

have before me—say that, although a lot of work is done in schools by individual staff, there appears to be no

“clear understanding of how to translate a diagnosis of a lifelong condition, into practical strategies to foster development.”

Often, support such as we discussed earlier enables the child to develop better support mechanisms. However, once a child is perceived to have achieved equilibrium and is no longer displaying overt difficulties, support can be withdrawn much earlier than it should be. NHS Ayrshire and Arran argues that such children need to be able to access social skills and support so that they can develop practical skills and do not end up moving backwards. It particularly emphasises the importance of ensuring that the disruption that is caused by the transition from primary school to secondary school is minimised. What are your thoughts about how it can be ensured that such linear support is introduced and maintained for those children?

Adam Ingram: When we were discussing the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Bill, we discussed vital issues such as transitional planning. Kenneth Gibson rightly points out that there needs to be continuity of support between stages. A particularly difficult stage is the move from children's services to adult services. I hope that the working group that we have established will be able to consider that particular area.

We are moving towards a personalised system of support, so that every child has an individualised education plan, health care plan or whatever. That is how to ensure that we can deliver the support that Kenneth Gibson suggests is needed, rather than support that attaches to a person simply because they are at a particular stage, but which then falls away as soon as they are beyond that stage. We are moving away from that old-fashioned approach towards greater personalisation.

Kenneth Gibson: Basically, there should be more flexibility in the system than there has been in recent years.

The impact of children with ASD in the classroom has been raised with me by constituents. Clearly, that impact can differ depending on the needs of the specific child and the age of the class. It is difficult for teachers to convey to the other pupils that a child with ASD is different from them in terms of their behaviour in a class. Young children in particular can misunderstand why one child can behave in a certain way when other children cannot.

With children with ASD, a disproportionate time has to be spent dealing with the needs of that child

and integrating them into the class. This is rather a complex question, but how can that be managed to ensure not only that the needs of the child with ASD are considered and dealt with, but that the impact on the rest of the class is minimised? How is that difficult balance managed?

Adam Ingram: “The Autism Toolbox”, which we mentioned earlier, contains classroom strategies, advice and guidance for teachers on how to deal with such situations. Teachers need to be properly supported to enable them to manage their classes and deal with individual pupils who may be more demanding of their time than others because of their additional support needs. Expertise in that area is developing all the time, and we need to ensure that that expertise is available to the classroom teacher to help her to deal with the situation that she is facing. Every child is different, and an experienced teacher brings to bear many tools when she is engaging with her class and with individual pupils.

Kenneth Gibson: I came across an instance in which a classroom teacher had a child in the class who was a disruptive influence. The child has been seen on two occasions by two different medical professionals, both of whom have said that the child does not suffer from autism. However, the teacher and the school are convinced otherwise. How do you deal with such a situation, in which a child is exhibiting what the teacher considers to be behaviour that is on the autism spectrum, while medical professionals say that the child is not on the spectrum? I am sure that that is not an isolated case.

Adam Ingram: The bottom line is that that child has social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Whether that is defined as autism is perhaps irrelevant. Although dealing with SEBD is an area that we need to develop further, it is recognised as an additional support need, and a plan needs to be put in place for that child. The child’s issues need to be dealt with, regardless of the diagnosis.

The Convener: Do you have a final question for the minister, Ken?

Ken Macintosh: Yes—I always like to have a final question for the minister.

The Convener: I am sure that the minister would be disappointed if you did not.

Ken Macintosh: My question is about the carers strategy, on which the minister is also working. Dealing with autism in the classroom is part of a wider picture and some of the pressures that children feel most acutely are in the home. How will the carers strategy address the needs of children and families who are dealing with autism?

Adam Ingram: Family support is an important aspect of the bundle of services that are required.

I need to get back to Ken Macintosh on the carers strategy as I do not have that information to hand today.

Ken Macintosh: Thank you. I really just want reassurance that the additional support needs of children and their families are taken into account in drawing up the carers strategy and that that particular set of needs is addressed.

Adam Ingram: Okay.

The Convener: That concludes our questions to the minister. I thank the minister and his officials for attending the committee. We will have an opportunity at next week’s meeting to discuss how we take forward any further work on autism.

Meeting closed at 11:00.

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