

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 19 January 2000
(*Morning*)

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE 2nd Meeting (Committee Room 1)

CONVENER:

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER:

*Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)
Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
*Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING MEMBER ALSO ATTENDED:

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab):

WITNESSES:

Eleanor Currie (East Renfrewshire Council)
Russell Dick (HM Inspectorate of Schools)
Michael White (Aberdeenshire Council)

COMMITTEE CLERK:

Gillian Baxendine

ASSISTANT CLERK:

Alistair Fleming

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Wednesday 19 January 2000

(Morning)

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

Improvement in Scottish Education Bill

The Convener (Mrs Mary Mulligan): Good morning. I welcome the witnesses who are here to present evidence on inspections in local authorities. We have apologies from Roger Stewart of West Lothian Council, who has caught the dreaded flu bug. Unfortunately, he could not send a substitute as his deputy, too, has flu. However, I am sure that we will get the information that we need from the witnesses who are here.

The witnesses are Eleanor Currie, the director of education at East Renfrewshire Council, Michael White, the director of education and recreation at Aberdeenshire Council, and Russell Dick of HM inspectorate of schools. I will give them time to make a short statement, and then I will open up the meeting for questions by members—I hope that that is what the witnesses expected.

Michael White (Aberdeenshire Council): Good morning. We are both an education and a recreation service—there is a great deal of overlap between the two. We volunteered to go through the process of inspection because we felt that we needed to have an external check on how we were doing. We also felt that the officers of the authority should go through similar processes to those that our teachers experience.

The inspection took place between April and June in 1999, and the bulk of the work was carried out in May. The staff who were involved were very supportive of the process. We undertook an evaluation of the process, which is publicly available.

Eleanor Currie (East Renfrewshire Council): East Renfrewshire Council is a brand new authority, which was created from a piece of Strathclyde Regional Council and two small district councils. When the chief executive and I were appointed in the shadow year, we agreed that we wanted to create an empowerment culture, in which every teacher from the bottom up was involved in the quality process. We have tried hard to become a self-evaluating authority. Indeed,

when HM inspectorate of schools produced “How good is our school?”, we were about to issue a similar document. We have been involved in the quality initiative since the beginning.

Each teacher in the authority self-evaluates annually, each school produces an annual quality and standards report, rather like those produced by HM inspectors, and the council produces a council-wide standards and quality report.

We were inspected in 1998. We volunteered to go first, because we wanted to see whether teachers were taking on board our new ideas and whether those ideas were enhancing quality. We are carefully monitoring the outcomes because we want to know whether our validation role, as the authority, was effective.

We did not see the inspection as something alien that was brought in from somewhere else. We worked in partnership with HMI, creating the performance indicators and devising the modus operandi of the inspection, which was the first of the three to take place.

I will give the committee a copy of my action plan. We pulled out 19 action points from HMI's comments. We want to say to schools—as we have done, with approval from almost everyone—that the action points are good and positive and that East Renfrewshire Council must take them on board. We expect to have a return visit from the inspectors in this calendar year and we want them to see what we have done with those 19 action points.

Russell Dick (HM Inspectorate of Schools): I will briefly give the context on behalf of HMI.

In the 1970s, before regionalisation, HMI compiled area reports on the authorities, so we had a bank of experience. We were also invited—and we agreed—to evaluate the education departments of Dumfries and Galloway Regional Council and Tayside Regional Council. In 1996, during local government reform, the senior chief inspector was approached by several directors of education who wanted feedback and evaluation on how the new arrangements in education were bedding in and on the effect of the single-tier authorities on the direction of education in their areas.

The senior chief inspector felt that there was a need for consistency and rigour if we were to undertake several inspections, or evaluations, of the education authorities. I was appointed as the leader of the team that produced the guidelines that would give us consistency and the performance indicators that would give us rigour.

We thought that it would be useful to involve directors of education, including those who had invited us in and others who wished to take part in

the work—from the beginning of the project, we have consulted closely directors of education in producing the guidelines for the three evaluations.

We also involved the Accounts Commission for Scotland from the beginning, because we thought that it would add an important element to inspection and because it was already involved in several evaluation exercises, using audit methods, in Scotland.

By way of further background information, I should say that, almost from the beginning of the process of preparing the guidelines and the performance indicators, we were conscious of best value. We tried to make the evaluations that we undertook with authorities follow the advice on best value as closely as possible.

The Convener: Thank you. Do committee members have questions for the witnesses? Please indicate if there is a particular witness from whom you would like a response.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): My question is for the education authority witnesses. You suggested that the evaluation was worth while. It may become a national process and we all know that pilot schemes with people who volunteer are different from what happens once a process has bedded down. I am bothered about all the work that goes on to make things look tidy before inspections take place—it becomes a big bureaucratic nightmare. People try to pull the wool over one another's eyes a wee bit.

I am interested in how you feel about the process. Was the inspection an obstacle? Was it a positive experience? Did it feel like a partnership and, if not, were there good debriefings and so on? Sometimes what is written in documents is bland—I do not mean these documents. Did you feel that the process was worth while and that you would be quite happy to visit it on your colleagues throughout Scotland? Do you understand where I am coming from?

Eleanor Currie: Yes, indeed.

My first point is that there must be a critical partnership. We entered into this exercise in order to consider ways of genuinely improving our performance; my wish was to improve the performance not only of schools but of the education authority. As Michael White said, authorities have never had a formal inspection procedure, other than those that Russell Dick has described.

Before I take on the bigger question, I would like to deal with a side issue. HMI now gives schools three weeks' notice of a forthcoming inspection. When HMI in the west attended our head teacher meeting to talk about this issue, everyone in the

room suggested that six weeks was far too long, for the reasons that you have just stated. People tend to tidy up, put posters on the wall and so on. Those are not particularly productive activities at that time.

There are cultural and contextual differences between councils, but if the rest of Scotland has also adopted "How good is our school?" and self-evaluation, we should be operating more or less the same system of self-evaluation. There should not be too many shocks for people, as the paperwork has now been available for a long time.

I will answer your main question by way of an example. I wanted to know whether teachers were happy with self-evaluation and whether the authority was supporting them enough, particularly in secondary schools. I do not have the time and the resources to find that out—even if I tried to in my own schools, I might not get to the truth of the matter. HMI, on the other hand, was able to bring in people from all over Scotland—it was not the local inspectors who conducted this exercise.

I received two invaluable messages from the inspection. In primary schools, individual teachers had taken ownership of the process and marvellous work was going on, but the picture in secondary schools was not so good. The situation was fine from principal teacher level upwards, because the management had taken ownership of the process. However, some teachers felt disempowered for two reasons. First, because they were not getting a promoted payment, they felt that evaluation was a job for the management. Secondly, some struggled with it and needed support. What came out of the process was a joint trade union agreement, over which I presided, to overcome the difficulties that we faced. The action plan includes 19 examples of how I have benefited from having an external view.

I am also glad that the Accounts Commission was involved, although not all my colleagues would say that. We can discuss later the general approach in Scotland, but we need to examine financial systems. The Executive and the Parliament have made a major investment in Scottish education. We are the people responsible for delivering the system and we need to be accountable for how that money is spent. That must be done in accordance with how teachers can handle the system. Our job is to provide support and set challenges.

I hope that that answers most of your questions. Michael White will deal with those that I have omitted.

Michael White: I found the experience helpful and challenging. It was certainly not cosy. The staff who reported back in our survey felt that the major problems were in the build-up. I think that

we could streamline the paperwork that we sent out. There was a rigour about the process, and officers reported that it had made them think about and justify why they were doing things in particular ways. The Accounts Commission part of the report was not published, but it gave us some important pointers on our financial and resource management.

Other aspects of the service, such as personnel, staffing and property, would also benefit from the involvement of colleagues from other services. Some delusion can set in because people are too close to the service. They may worry a great deal about something that is not that important in the great scheme of things. Conversely, there is a danger that complacency can set in because people are very comfortable with something.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I want to pick up on a number of points, although I think that they have been dealt with as the discussion has progressed. I look forward to reading the 19 points in the action plan and am interested to hear that you welcome this kind of inspection. People often worry about appraisal and inspection, as they think that they are being policed and that that is not very positive for the authority or the schools.

I am interested in the performance indicators. Russell, you said that you wanted performance indicators that had rigour. We have been speaking to head teachers who have told us very clearly that performance indicators are no longer appropriate in our education system and should be re-examined. Tell me a wee bit more about performance indicators that give us rigour. Are they relevant? Do they take into consideration all aspects of education or are they simply about achievement?

10:15

Eleanor Currie: At the end of each of the three reports are listed main points for action. One might consider the statements to be dense, and so they are—but that is not a criticism. We had to tease out the practical points and carry out a task analysis of what we thought the inspectors were asking to us to do. That brought us to the 19 points that we have listed.

I see what we are doing as a cultural development of the education service; it is not about thrusting these things at teachers. We must work with teachers and encourage them to understand that they are reflective professionals and that if they are behaving professionally in a school they should want to self-evaluate. In East Renfrewshire, it took about 18 months to persuade the teaching profession of that. With help from all the teaching trade unions, we have overcome the secondary problems. When the inspectors come

back in June or August, we think that they will tell us that we have made progress. What we do is about winning hearts; it is not about issuing diktats. In my view, any authority that issues a diktat will not succeed. We must work with people to make progress.

The 19 points range from administrative issues, such as better collation of information in schools, to working with individual teachers and examining how teachers use performance indicators. I am talking about the 33 qualitative indicators in "How good is our school?". The authority is collecting evidence from all the schools and making it available to other schools that want to study examples of good practice, and individual teachers can visit colleagues in other schools. We have reached that level of trust with the profession. It has been a long, hard slog, but I can see no other way of turning the education service into a lifelong learning service than by working with people.

Russell Dick: Let me give some background on the performance indicators. They are not the same as the ones in "How good is our school?" although they have been developed in the same style and format. We have decided to call them quality indicators rather than performance indicators, as they focus specifically on the quality of management of education in local authorities.

The indicators are empirically derived from our evaluation work with authorities and from the experience of the director of education and the staff whom we have met. They have been shared with the education authorities and so have been arrived at through dialogue. A draft version of "Quality Management in Education" has been sent out to every education director and chief executive in Scotland; we are asking for comments on that document, on the basis of which we will modify the quality indicators. The end product will be a guide for self-evaluation that can be used by education authorities across Scotland.

Performance indicators and quality indicators change—the ones that we have been working on will undoubtedly change. We have to keep them under review because the service changes and the context of the service changes. We think that they are generic and are sufficiently open to cover all aspects of school performance and management, in terms not just of attainment, but of the wider achievement that authorities seek to foster in their schools.

Michael White: The role of education authorities, education officers and directors has changed so rapidly since the reorganisation of local government that their key task now is to inspire, motivate and challenge staff. We have moved away from a controlling and administrative role. In the areas in which we operate, it can be difficult to establish indicators of how well we are

achieving our goals.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): Many aspects of an education authority's work are managerial or administrative, rather than purely educational. Since reorganisation, many departments have broadened their remit to include other matters. I do not think that anyone would dispute the value of external audit of education authorities.

Does HMI on its own have the expertise to carry out rigorous assessment of all the functions of a local authority education department, or is a more collaborative effort required, in which HMI is involved, but for which it does not have sole responsibility?

Russell Dick: There is some validity in each approach. In the three evaluations, we focused on what we agreed with our colleagues was the main strategic function of education: how well people know their schools; what value they add to their schools; and how well they support their schools to improve. HM inspectors are involved in the inspection of schools from pre-school to age 18, so we are well equipped to make such evaluations.

The evaluations were collaborative in that we involved the Accounts Commission from an early stage, so that different skills and a different perspective were fed in. I cannot comment on what will happen on teams when the education bill goes through, but the code of practice in "Improving our Schools" says that we will draw on the expertise of colleague directors of education or senior officers within education services. I do not know how that will be arranged, but it will be beneficial and will broaden our expertise.

The Convener: Should there be dedicated teams in HMI to consider local authorities rather than schools, or would it be more satisfactory for inspectors to have a breadth of knowledge from inspecting both local authorities and schools?

Russell Dick: The inspectorate's way of operating is to draw on its breadth of expertise, so both approaches would be valuable. I can speak only about the three inspections that we have carried out. We had a core team of people who built up expertise on such inspections, and we drew on expertise in other areas as we needed it. We had both continuity and the involvement of people with knowledge of the local area or of wider aspects of education.

Nicola Sturgeon: Many of the responses, especially from local authorities, to the consultation on the draft bill in relation to the proposals for inspection of education authorities seem to fear that, rather than assessing the outcome of an authority's policy, HMI will assess the extent to which the authority is abiding by HMI

diktat. Are there any grounds for such concerns?

Russell Dick: My answer again refers to these evaluations. It is difficult to speculate about the future because I do not know how the bill will shape up. Our approach with the three authorities was to try to build on what existed and not go in with preconceived notions of exactly what the management—the structure, functions and operation—of an education authority should consist of. Our intention was to be as flexible as possible, but I will let my colleagues comment on the extent to which we achieved that.

For example, we knew that involvement in wider community education and local education area networks were an important objective of Aberdeenshire Council, so we tried to adapt our inspections and evaluations to take account of that. We did not adopt a narrow ideological perspective in Aberdeenshire.

Eleanor Currie: I will comment from a slightly different perspective. The indicators in the consultation document are self-evaluative. In this climate, it is unlikely that any director of education who sent out a diktat would be successful, and the same is true of HMI.

If I examine my performance as a director of education in accordance with the performance indicators, I will have evidence, without which it would be silly to go into an inspection. I assure you that robust discussion took place with HMI during our inspection, but it was not unfriendly. There was a critical partnership in which we were keen to improve.

I am sure that most education authorities have thought about this and responded—I would be disappointed if there were any education authority in Scotland that did not want to improve, especially given the state of funding recently.

If we have to move towards certain targets—I know that that is another debate—we must support individual teachers and that brings us back to self-evaluation and professionalism. To think that HMI could come in and lay down the law, asking whether the five to 14 curriculum had been fully implemented—

Nicola Sturgeon: I did not say that I thought that.

Eleanor Currie: Some directors might say that that happens, although that is not my experience, which is what I am here to talk about. We must ensure that we, as directors, know where we are going on quality development.

As Russell Dick said, no doubt HMI will comment and give its view on whether we have taken the right path. We must remember that it is the path that was agreed by local elected members. We are operating an open political

system in local government. The council suggests the priorities and we are asked to deliver them. I have doubts as to whether HMI would want to come in with a diktat at that level.

Michael White: Recent publications suggest that it has been accepted that there is a wide diversity in Scotland. It is encouraging to see that the documentation about the new community schools does not contain a blueprint or a fixed approach. People in Scotland believe in the big agenda of lifelong learning, social inclusion and active citizenship. Each council will respond to that in its own way. That should be judged against a council's stated aims and objectives. Just as communities change through learning, so do councils. We should ask each council how it delivers services to meet local circumstances and whether it is taking the most effective approach. Within the broad parameters, it will be different for each council—we would not follow an identical method.

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): I must first declare that I used to be a teacher and I have a background in teacher training.

You mentioned various ways of improving schools' self-evaluation and quality indicators. Could we have a copy of the draft document to which you referred? Eleanor Currie also mentioned teachers working across schools. Having been involved in getting teachers to work together in departments, particularly in secondary schools, how do you see those developments moving forward?

My second question follows on from Nicola Sturgeon's point about the dual role of HMI—policy making and reviewing practice. There is much feedback from the councils on that and perhaps you could talk about whether those two roles are compatible and whether you anticipate that changing.

My main question is about possible duplication between local authority inspection and more external inspection.

Eleanor Currie: I will deal with two of those points. Getting teachers and head teachers to accept the idea of the sharing of good practice required long discussion; we visited every school, along with the conveners of the education committee. Teachers told us that they did not like the competition between schools and that it was making them feel uneasy. It took my deputy some time to decide to redefine competition as sharing good practice. It took us a year to 18 months, visiting schools and discussing the matter, before teachers realised that we would not be coming in with tacketie boots on and that it would be for them to improve on their own performance. We did a lot of work on getting teachers to suggest what

kind of continuing professional development they would like—we have tried to empower the teaching force.

In the case of national examinations, I have found that 30 or 40 teachers in a room will consider the numbers on the screen and will say, openly, "How are you away up there?" One primary school teacher will say that to another about the five to 14 targets. If one thinks back about 18 months, those were unpopular targets. There is interest in how one school can do much better than another, although they are similar. The heads and the staff get together—it does not need us to do that; we merely facilitate the discussion. That is the level at which the teacher swaps are arranged. That is not something that I could do—there would be no point in forcing that on people. They must have confidence in the person who will visit the school.

10:30

East Renfrewshire has two sides—Eastwood, which is affluent and Barrhead, which is poor and has high unemployment. We have been impressed by some of the good practice in Barrhead schools that do not perform so well in national measurements. However, when we introduce various indices, it is clear that some of the teachers in the Eastwood area could benefit from the practice of the teachers in Barrhead. That has worked well, but it needs to be done in an amicable and non-threatening way. That takes time, because it means developing a different culture.

I do not know how many authorities are using the cultural development model to improve pupil development and performance. That is not something that is openly discussed. However, that is only one approach and I am sure that there are many others.

The second question related to local authority inspections and HMI inspections. When we were inspected, the inspector criticised us—which did not please my deputy at all—for spending too much time on classroom observation, because that was largely what its inspectors did. We agree with that now, although we did not at the time. We have always said to schools that our quality development officers are not pseudo-inspectors—their job is to evaluate the self-evaluation process at school level. If a school is struggling and not matching its school plan—a rigorous planning system that stems from the chief executive and runs across all departments—the officers' job is to support and challenge at that level.

To take on board the HMI comments, we have examined the format in "How good is our school?", which contains seven key areas. After much

debate, we have decided that when our quality development officers make a "taking a closer look" inspection, they will consider only two key areas: attainment and performance, and leadership, management and quality assurance. Immediately, a perceptive head teacher asked why we were examining two areas. He said, "If you trust us and think that head teachers are delivering well, surely it is our job to examine attainment." In three years from now, we might be considering a lighter touch in our inspections.

In five or six years' time, I hope that HMI will be carrying out lighter inspections of education authorities. If we adopt a self-evaluative culture, use the indicators, achieve good learning outcomes and meet national targets, we can develop a position of trust.

Michael White: Teachers are in a different game now—self-evaluation has taken on a sharper edge. Pupils, too, have views of their own work—they can make good evaluations of teachers as well. Whoever carries out the assessment must know what it is like to be in that context. We have used peer involvement in career reviews and we find that it is beneficial. Someone who knows a certain catchment area, size of school or age profile of the staff can empathise with the person whose career is under review. If we relate that to the inspection of the authority, we must take account of the political dimension. We could not arrive with a national blueprint, because local, political decisions might have affected that. The climate for self-evaluation has changed, but there is a danger that it might become too cosy—we must be rigorous and challenging. The profession is developing towards a situation where that is the norm.

Russell Dick: The multitude of evaluations of local authorities is a danger, and it is a problem that has not yet been solved, so more work needs to be done to address it. In the three inspections, we worked out how our evaluations would cover a large swathe of best value, to take away the danger of Scottish Executive colleagues carrying out best value evaluations at the same time as our work. We have secured a good deal of co-operation and agreement from our colleagues in the Scottish Executive on the matter.

We have also worked closely with the Accounts Commission, recognising that that is the other body which does management audits and that it is also working on best value service reviews. We have established a good partnership with the commission.

We did not succeed in the inspections in ruling out the possibility that other evaluations were taking place almost simultaneously: European Foundation for Quality Management and Investors in People evaluations were happening in some

authorities that we inspected. We were conscious, therefore, of the pressure on those authorities, and if there is to be external evaluation, the system will have to address that problem.

The Convener: Are you happy with that, Sylvia?

Dr Sylvia Jackson: Could Russell say a little about the dual role of HMIs, including policy making and review?

Russell Dick: That is probably a wider question than I can answer at my level in the inspectorate. On this exercise, for which I was lead officer, my job as a senior inspector was to give advice to senior colleagues on what was happening on the evaluation of education authorities and the self-evaluation of authorities through quality indicators. My job is clearly not to suggest policy, either now or in the future.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): My question is about the inspection itself. I would like some more details about parental involvement in the inspection. I understand from the reports that there were different levels of involvement and that different numbers of parents were involved. I would like to ask the authorities how they use parental involvement in the curriculum, and I would like to ask the inspectorate about how it consulted parents as part of the inspection.

How does the inspectorate try to gauge the views of parents who are not traditionally involved in organisations such as school boards? There are some people who involve themselves, but others who tend not to be as involved in their children's education.

Was there any pupil involvement in the inspection? Was there any consultation with pupils or with pupils' organisations? If so, what form did it take? If not, why not?

Michael White: The parental involvement in our inspection was largely through the questionnaire to school boards. There is a concern about how representative school boards are, and one of the biggest challenges facing us is to involve all of Scotland's parents in the service. I know that committee members will deliberate on that as they work through the bill.

Many of us are worried that parents are put off by the language, abbreviations and so on that they encounter in the system. We face an uphill task to make what we do understandable to parents, in telling them why we do this or that, and why we do it in a particular way. Parental involvement is a major point to consider.

From the questionnaires that were returned, it was clear that some school boards were unsure about some of the questions, and it was debatable whether they were able to answer the questionnaire properly.

On pupil involvement, your own children will tell you what they think of their school; it is debatable whether they have a concept of how good their council is. Some pupil involvement in whatever bodies succeed school boards, or in revamped school boards, will be essential.

One forgotten group is former pupils. Youngsters at secondary school would have a lot to contribute to a body concerned with their old primary school. There was no pupil involvement as such in the questionnaires—it was mainly a question of parental questionnaires through school boards.

Eleanor Currie: We decided to use the existing council mechanisms to work with parents. There is a parent consultative group on the curriculum, whose places are not to be taken by school board members—we are quite specific on that. We recognise Karen Gillon's point, that a broader audience is required. Each school asks two people to come along and, at that level, we leave it to the school. Those forums all take place in the evenings.

East Renfrewshire Council also has a black and ethnic minority parents forum. In our area, black people and people from ethnic minorities account for 2.95 per cent of the population, which is the highest percentage in Scotland. We did a lot of work on that, because big issues are at stake. We did the work; HMI shadowed us and attended the meetings—it did not address them. I do not know whether Russell Dick has reviewed that matter, but that is what we did at first.

Parents or grandparents of every child with a record of special educational needs are invited by those in the authority to meet them every term. About 250 parents have done that. It is their forum: they can talk about autism, Asperger's syndrome, or whatever they want. The whole idea is to try to engender self-help groups. The inspectors addressed one of the meetings as the parents wished to convey some messages back to the centre, on the lack of speech therapy and so on. It was an interesting meeting.

The chairs of school boards also meet the education conveners every term. We regard such meetings as being between elected members. The most recent meeting was a full and frank discussion.

There is a cultural organisational meeting—people from a diversity of cultural groups live in the council area—to which anyone may come. The conveners and I also participate, and the inspectors come with us.

I have not been involved with the pupils, but I know that quite a bit of work went on. An inspector said to me at one point in the debriefing—I hope that I am allowed to speak about the private

debriefing, from before the report was written—that a senior school pupil did not know who I was. I was not bothered about that. I am here to facilitate the system. If the pupils do not know who I am, it will let me do my local shopping and so on much more quickly. We left the work with the pupils to the head teachers. Visits were made to 45 per cent of our schools—I do not know about the relative figures for the other two council areas. The work with pupils was not engendered by me. If schools were going to talk about us, we would have taken a step back at that point—we would not want to be terribly involved.

All in all, we see around 1,000 parents in the evenings, and we also run surgeries on Saturdays, mainly in the more deprived areas, where parents can drop in to talk about their children's work.

Russell Dick: We tried to involve parents in evaluations in the three authorities in a number ways. First, we sent a questionnaire to all school board chairpersons. We asked them to consult parents in their school board area and to give us the responses to that questionnaire. We then analysed the results of the questionnaire and followed them up in the second phase of the inspection, by attending meetings of forums of school board chairpersons if possible, or by conducting telephone interviews with some of the school board chairs in other cases, to flesh out their response.

At the beginning of the evaluation, we got information back from the authorities about the range of consultative groups that they ran with parents and other stakeholders. We tried to sample those, again by attending meetings if possible.

I cannot pretend that we got as far as the parents who do not normally become involved in their schools. This is an issue for the authorities and for everyone to address: how do they consult all stakeholders effectively, not just the ones who want to become heavily involved? That is something that we will have to examine in the future.

As Eleanor Currie said, we attended forums including special educational needs forums in East Renfrewshire, and we gathered the views of other interest groups in the education authorities.

In a sample of secondary schools that we have gone to, we asked for a meeting with senior pupils as part of our day's programme. We suggested to the pupils that they have a stake in the improvement of the school through the school development plan. How much do they know about how the school is improving, and about the support that they and their school are getting for improvement?

Some education authorities are moving towards

setting up pupils' councils or youth forums. If we were to do any further evaluation of education authorities, we would be likely to go to them to consult the pupils.

Karen Gillon: Do any of your staff deal specifically with parental involvement or home-school link work, at both primary and secondary levels?

Michael White: That is not the sole remit for any of our staff. All staff deal with parental issues as they arise.

10:45

Eleanor Currie: Through the excellence fund No 2 programme, we have appointed for the first time two home-school liaison teachers. That has been enormously helpful. One is responsible for special educational needs, the other for deprivation-related issues—although not exclusively, as we have tried to be inclusive in taking the matter forward.

We are also considering what we grandly call family education. On a Saturday, psychologists make themselves available free of charge—we do not have the money to pay for this in Barrhead—and any parent can drop in to talk if they are worried about a difficulty that their child might have. That is followed up by seminars, reading and work on basic mathematics and numeracy. The pre-five side of the education department does quite a bit of work with families. However, we are under constant pressure because parents come for a short time and then drop off again. That is sad, because we were just getting them interested. I am interested in lifelong learning and motivating adults anyway, whether or not they are parents, to help children in a general sense. That is more difficult in rural than in urban areas, of course.

Karen Gillon: Is there an interface between community education staff and school staff in your authorities? If so, how is that monitored and developed?

Eleanor Currie: We are very different, I think.

Michael White: From the outset, we tried not to have a service within a service, and our whole system is based on lifelong learning. Different professional training, backgrounds and styles do not make that easy, but we are getting there. We like to think that everybody who works in the service is of equal worth. It will take a long time to achieve total parity, but we will go for it.

Eleanor Currie: In East Renfrewshire Council, we did not create a community education service in the beginning. Instead, we tried to carry out the statutory duties that are set out in the act slightly differently. We have a partnership made up of the

Workers Educational Association, the two further education colleges in the area and us. We have youth workers and community education professionals, but they are all part of the council staff.

We have formed the Partnership for Adult and Continuing Education. Everyone involved is a member of that body—the voluntary organisations are included. It supervises the planning of opportunities for adults, in the broadest sense. We are considering how, for example, the Scottish university for industry will relate to our community learning centres. During the many years that I worked for Strathclyde Regional Council, I learned that we need to avoid putting up barriers. When we created a new council, we did our best—I am not sure whether we have been 100 per cent successful—not to create artificial barriers between professionals who quite like each other. If they are into helping people improve their lives and social inclusion, there should be no need for barriers.

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): I want to go back to Karen Gillon's point about involvement and consultation of parents and pupils. Each of you talked about the attempts that have been made to do that. Do you think that it is important in the inspection of local authorities that we consult both pupils and parents? At present, none of you has a mechanism for doing that effectively, so how do we review the mechanisms that are in place?

Eleanor talked about services such as drop-in psychologists, but noted that parents soon stop coming. That might be because it is not what they wanted. How do we evaluate whether what we are offering is what parents and pupils want? We must do that if parents and pupils are to be included in the inspection process.

Eleanor Currie: I will deal with the issue of parents first. We are considering a new project with Professor John MacBeath of the University of Strathclyde. Russell Dick talked about the quality indicators and "How good is our school?". We are devising similar qualitative questions for parents about their child's education. Every parent will be involved in that. We will collate the information by school and consider the responses of parents as major stakeholders in their children's learning. The results will be shown to the schools and we as a directorate team will discuss them with head teachers. The scheme is at an early stage, and we are seeking copyright release of materials to take it forward. Three authorities are working on it at present and are about to pilot it.

Fiona McLeod: Which are the other two?

Eleanor Currie: Highland Council and North Lanarkshire Council. Renfrewshire Council came

in at a later stage, but from a slightly different perspective.

I am excited by that, as I would genuinely like to know what every parent thinks about their child's education. What they think about us in the office is another thing, but I am interested in their being supportive of and participative in their child's education.

On pupils, our council sent in a response that you have probably seen. Because we have had the visit from the inspectors and because I was involved in the group, we did something different. My deputy visited every school and asked pupils to respond to the draft legislation. Some very interesting things came out of that. Michael White has alluded to pupils wanting to talk about their teachers. In some schools, they did so in their first statement. Pupils said, "We don't like modern languages here," for example. That is what we need to hear. If we are serious about developing the education service, we will not bat that down.

I am keen on the active citizenship agenda. It would be good if Scotland had a national pointer document on that, because although we are all doing good work, we are doing it in many different ways. There is nothing wrong with diversity, but pupils feel that we must listen to them much more. John MacBeath's book, "How Schools Speak for Themselves", is worth reading, because teachers, practitioners and pupils are all involved in the learning game, to use the jargon. That is the kind of cultural development that I would like to take forward. We have a long way to go with pupils. Getting them to see how they can benefit is an educational process.

Michael White: Sometimes I find it interesting to put on my parent's hat. My three boys have now left school, but I sometimes felt alienated from the school. The timetable of 10-minute interviews was totally unsatisfactory. If I had not been in the job myself, the jargon and the language would have been totally baffling. The paperwork was written in a language that many folk would find hard to follow. As I said earlier, the major challenge for the teaching profession—including us—is to change our style, culture and way of operating with parents.

Most schools have some variation on a pupils' forum or pupils' council. Many schools now conduct exit interviews with children who are in the last stage of their schooling. They come up with very perceptive analyses of what they have been through. There is hope there and we must build on it, but as a profession we need seriously to address the alienation of large numbers of parents. When it is someone's own boy or girl, it really matters to them. I am not sure that we have got that part of our job right.

Eleanor Currie: The committee might find it useful to examine the responses of the 32 authorities in their annual report on support for parents through the excellence fund. This has not been directed from the centre; on the contrary, these are grass-roots developments. The committee would probably be interested in some of the important work that is going on. In many poorer communities, parents are the key to their children's having stamina in education.

The Convener: Russell, would you like to add anything?

Russell Dick: This is an even tougher question to answer than some of the others, but I will have a go.

In the evaluations that we are conducting in the three authorities, we thought from the start that it was important to get parental views on how education was being managed in those areas. We were supported in that by the directors of education in our group: the consensus view is that parents' involvement in their authority and knowledge about how it works are important to the management of education authorities. That appears in the self-evaluation quality indicators.

The next step is to try to find out what mechanisms education managers have to consult and involve parents, and to check how effective those mechanisms are. It is a slightly indirect process—we are not going directly to parents and saying, "What is your involvement in your local school?" Instead, we are relying on the mechanisms—we are asking for views on them and on their effectiveness. If there were no mechanisms, we would debate with the director of education their management of consultation.

There is a similar process with pupils. We have to say, "We think it is important that pupils have some kind of say in their education. What mechanisms do you, as an education authority, have to stimulate that process and how effective are those mechanisms?" It is even more difficult with pupils, because the people at director and local authority level are, in a sense, more distant. Nevertheless, as future citizens, pupils should have some knowledge of what is happening or be involved in their local authority. We would try to evaluate the mechanisms for that.

Fiona McLeod: You say that what you are doing is one step removed—you are evaluating the council's mechanisms for consulting parents and pupils. Previously, you said that you tried, at every school you went to, to sit down in discussion with the senior pupils. There is a slight contradiction there. What I am trying to get at is whether it is important that you involve pupils and parents in inspections.

Russell Dick: It is important that, as far as we

can, we involve pupils and parents in inspections. Remember that those were pilot inspections. The inspection team asked itself, "How can we find out how much pupils know about the way in which their local education authority is managed and the input that they can have?" The approach we came up with was to go to secondary schools to find out whether pupils know anything about their local authority, how they can be involved in how their school development plan is produced and the influence that they can have in their own school. I am not sure whether what we did was 100 per cent effective, but its purpose was to gather that information.

The Convener: As usual, we have reached the last few minutes and everybody wants to ask a question. I have four names, so I ask those people to be relatively concise.

Nicola Sturgeon: The strong message that is coming across is the importance of fostering a partnership approach to improvement, between the inspectorate, local authorities, teachers, parents and pupils. We all agree with that. It has been interesting to hear about what is happening in practice to bring about such partnership.

In sharp contrast to that, the general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland, Ronnie Smith, made the rather bold statement that the relationship between the inspectorate and the teaching profession is in crisis. Do you think that that is justified? If so, why? How can we move forward in a more consensual way that avoids expressions of hostility between two crucial partners in the process?

The Convener: That question may be slightly off the subject on which you had been asked to speak. However, if you want to answer it, it would be helpful.

Eleanor Currie: I would like to ask Ronnie Smith for his evidence of that crisis, because it has not been apparent in my area. Teachers are under a lot of pressure; we need to take account of the climate in which the McCrone committee is working. As a Scottish Joint Negotiating Committee adviser, I have been involved for many years, and I know all the difficulties. I am sure Michael White will agree that if we want a professional teaching service, we need to take the teacher issue on board. Ronnie Smith's comments are unhelpful. No teacher has said that to me or to any of my colleagues; the trade unions in East Renfrewshire have not articulated that to me.

Michael White: The feedback in the report from the staff indicates that there is no fear. The report was professional and thorough, and I did not detect a crisis. We are all in the business of making Scottish education as good as possible. If we set the correct tone, all parts—the authorities,

HMI, the unions, teachers, parents and pupils—can help to achieve that. It is the setting of that tone that is crucial.

Ian Jenkins: I am interested in the inspectors' feedback into the policy process. A local authority might tell you that it has problems with the age at which kids receive pre-school education; pupils might be saying, as Eleanor suggested, that they do not want to be forced to do modern languages, while some teachers might believe that modern languages are not appropriate to certain aspects of the curriculum; there might be teachers who think that, in the statistics on exam success, the relative ratings are an abomination that sets one department against another on a flawed statistical basis.

Does the inspectors' debriefing accept those issues and say, "This is where education authorities and teachers are having difficulties and where the distrust is arising," or do you just say, "There is the result of the inspection—that is what we think about that authority," and move on to the next inspection?

11:00

Eleanor Currie: I would hope that the target-setting exercise is phase one of our progress towards improving performance. Forget the statistics on free meal entitlement and all the other things we know about; each teacher requires personal improvement objectives that mean that we can all see how pupils are progressing. We are getting close to that now. The comparison of one department with another was only a mechanism to observe how pupils were performing and to establish views on the extra resources that have been invested in education. The local improvement objectives in the report give us a chance to consider that within the culture of the council and within each school. I have never been able to understand why some teachers do not want to be accountable.

Ian Jenkins: I am not asking about that, although I will debate the relative ratings with you at some point. I am talking about when, in an inspection, an education authority says, "These are the areas that we find difficult to handle."

Eleanor Currie: I can give an example. Before our report came out, we had a private meeting at which we saw a draft report. The chief inspector for the west of Scotland was there, and it was suggested that we create structures that I knew would not work in East Renfrewshire. Although the inspectors disagreed with me, we had a logical discussion and changed the way in which we did things. I said candidly to the inspectors, "If you insist, I will put out a recommendation on this, but please take on board what I am saying. Because

of the culture we have here, you are cutting across two or three other areas." We came to a logical conclusion about what we would do.

Unless Michael wishes to speak on this, it is really Russell who should say what happens in the Scottish Executive.

The Convener: Russell, do you want to answer that?

Russell Dick: Yes.

Quite simply, no inspection is a one-off, although inspections are particular to the three authorities we inspected, or indeed to any school that is inspected. Evidence is accumulated over a number of inspections. My job is to pull together general messages and pass that information on to senior managers. It is for senior managers to use that information for ministers as they see fit.

In taking general messages from inspections, I pay attention to things that I have power to do something about. For example, it emerged from our evaluations that many officers in education authorities seemed to want to learn more about good practice on benchmarking. As a result, my job was to go to my senior manager and say, "Is it possible for us to produce or commission some kind of advice on benchmarking?" That was an area that that was within my authority. Otherwise, the messages coming from inspection reports, authorities and schools go to our senior management group and help to form their view of education.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): My question relates to the inspection of authorities and schools, although it might be at a slight tangent to what you have been outlining. However, it is important that we take evidence on this matter.

At previous meetings, we have discussed Rudolf Steiner schools. I would like to direct a question to Michael White; Russell Dick may want to answer it too. I am not sure whether Eleanor will have anything to add.

An obstacle to bringing Rudolf Steiner schools into the local authority state network is the way schools are inspected and the way local authorities are inspected as regards schools. The obstacle arises because although the ethos of the Rudolf Steiner schools is different from that of mainstream schools, they would be inspected using the same methodology as is used for mainstream schools.

Can Michael White tell me whether his local authority, which has a Rudolph Steiner school, could adapt its management system to understand and take account of that difference, while leaving a relevant management system in place? Similarly, could HMI accommodate the different teaching

ethos while retaining a proper inspection methodology? Will parents still be sure that the local authority is being run properly in taking account of a Rudolf Steiner school? Will they be sure that the school is being run properly within the ethos of how Rudolf Steiner schools teach?

The Convener: As Brian admitted, that was a little at a tangent to what we had been discussing, but if the witnesses want to give their views, they are welcome to.

Michael White: There is always a place for tangential thinking. In Aberdeenshire, we have lots of youngsters who are not educated in Aberdeenshire schools—the Waldorf school is actually in the city of Aberdeen. I do not see any problem. As was said earlier, there is no straitjacket restricting how we do things; there is no blueprint. HMI already inspects private nurseries and playgroups. We have strong relationships with home educators—parents who educate their children at home. If your care is for all of Scotland's children, it is a logical extension to include the children who are educated in different systems.

Throughout your professional career you come across things that stop you in your tracks. Sometimes you see different ways of doing things that are quite spectacular, things that you had not dreamt possible.

Russell Dick: The relationship between Steiner schools and local authorities is outside my competence. All I would say is that Steiner schools, as I understand it, are independent. When we inspect an independent school, we inspect that school specifically on the aims that it sets itself. Therefore, for Steiner schools, we would take into account their particular ethos, and we would ask how well they were achieving what they said they wanted to achieve.

Mr Monteith: Thank you, convener, for your latitude.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): According to all three witnesses, there is no doubt that the process has been quite successful, although I am conscious that the education authorities have their pilots and volunteers. Eleanor talked about self-evaluation being at the heart of the process. She also talked about the 19-point action plan.

How do you follow up on the process? Inspection reports cannot exist in isolation. If part of the process is to ensure that the wider community feels that its schools are improving, that its education authority is improving and that the community is part of the process, how do education authorities go about sharing the results of the inspection with that wider community? Similarly, how does HMI follow up its reports when

points have arisen that should be considered?

Eleanor Currie: I will leave the 19-point plan behind to let members see it. It gives a time scale, shows what the appropriate personnel have to do and how they have to report, and gives the success criteria. It is the usual sort of business management model.

Inspection is not the important thing; the important thing is what we do afterwards to improve. Inspection is the catalyst to start off the next generation of improvements. That takes us back to the questions; who does it, how is it done, and all the rest. Does it really matter? If, through the legislation, you can keep the education service moving ahead, we would support that.

I am looking forward to the inspectors' return visit. Unless Russell tells me otherwise, I do not think that we have to devise any procedures for that for education authorities. They are due to come to me between June and December. If a school was being inspected—we have tried to keep in touch with the school procedures as much as possible—a return visit would be made and the school would look at the recommendations and the 19 points that I have drawn out of the report and comment on how well they had been achieved. We and our stakeholders would be asked for our comments. I welcome that. Even though the process is a pilot, it would be good to take it through to its conclusion. Then, if the legislation goes through, the statutory inspections would begin. The inspections are the catalyst, and, as I said, I think I have benefited from them.

Michael White: We have shared the report widely and there has been a good take-up. It came at a good time for us, because we were considering refocusing on what we do and restructuring the roles of officers. The report gave us some clear pointers. It is a snapshot in time. I too welcome a return visit from the inspectors to see whether the changes that we have made have addressed the issues that were flagged up.

Russell Dick: We will return to these three authorities—not to reinspect them, but to consider specifically the main action points in the reports. We will assess how much progress they have made and then send a letter to the education authority—a letter that will be made public—giving our evaluation.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Plurality was mentioned earlier. I come from the far north, where the provision—and closure—of schools is always hugely controversial. In some circumstances there could even be over-provision. Would HMI take a view and make representations regarding school provision?

Eleanor Currie: The Accounts Commission for

Scotland has that role through its value-for-money studies. That is what is interesting about the Accounts Commission joining forces with HMI on an inspection. I made clear to the commission that there are no bars on which schools it can go to—it can go to any school it wants to. It has not done that before. People from the commission sat with teachers and head teachers. As I am not from a rural authority, perhaps members should hear from Michael about closures of small schools.

Michael White: I have had an interesting experience in my career: I was head of a two-teacher rural school that was closed. I fought vigorously to retain the school; I still think that it has a place. However, in the final analysis, what is best for the youngsters is the most important thing.

There is a tension between inspection of the curriculum and the delivery of the service, and a hard-nosed economic approach. In my attempts to keep my wee school open, I was defeated by the economists and the accountants. I think that I persuaded them of the school's educational merits, but, at the end of the day, their views triumphed.

Russell Dick: As I said earlier, we have tried to involve the Accounts Commission from the beginning. As it worked with us, it began to develop performance and quality indicators for finance and resource management. Those indicators are included in the draft self-evaluation. They include questions on the effectiveness of the management and use of resources for school improvement.

Mr Stone: The Accounts Commission will, by definition, take a financially weighted approach. Surely children travelling for long times and long distances is an educational issue, and HMI should take a view.

Russell Dick: That is one reason for our wanting to work in partnership with the Accounts Commission. We bring an educational judgment; it brings its particular skills and expertise. We reach a final evaluation based on the performance indicators.

Mr Stone: In years to come, might that be seen in a document such as this report on the evaluation of quality?

Russell Dick: That is really a matter for Parliament. It depends on whether it sees this process continuing.

The Convener: Thank you, members, for your questions; and thank you, witnesses, for answering them so clearly. I am sure that what you have said will be useful should there be anything in the bill on the inspection of local authorities.

Work Programme

11:15

The Convener: We will move on to item 2 on the agenda, which is an update on committee business. I would like to address three matters under this item. If members wish to address any other matters, they can indicate to me their wish to do so.

The first issue is Hampden. As far as I am aware, there is no further news, but the Minister for Children and Education, Mr Sam Galbraith, has said that once there is information on what is happening, he is more than happy to attend a committee meeting and take any questions.

Mr Monteith: We have experience of the minister taking questions, in committee and in the chamber, and we have not felt enlightened by it. When we spoke about this matter previously, I mentioned our having a briefing—it had been promised to us—so that we can get behind the public discussion and be enlightened about the consultants' report which, for plausible reasons, is not in the public domain. Has the minister suggested that he will be willing to give us a private briefing?

The Convener: It is for the committee to decide whether it would prefer a briefing or a formal question and answer session, for which the minister will make himself available. The difficulty is that he does not feel that it would be useful to do that until the committee has more information.

Mr Monteith: I cannot speak for the committee, but I have not benefited from public questioning of ministers. Ministers see it as being a way to protect their backs, rather than give us useful information. There may be an issue over when the meeting can be scheduled so that useful information can be imparted, but I would be happy to have a private briefing, because I have no doubts that the word of this committee to maintain privacy is good. It would be a welcome example to Parliament to show that committees can hear information in private and keep it private. That is not showing contempt for the public. It shows that we go about our business in a professional manner.

Nicola Sturgeon: The two options are not mutually exclusive. Brian is right; we want information, not to spend another hour banging our heads off a wall while the minister thinks up dozens of different ways of saying, "A'm no tellin ye." First, we should ask for a private briefing. Depending on the nature of that briefing, it may be desirable to have a public meeting at which we can question the minister, when the questions and

answers will be a matter of record.

Brian makes a fair point. We should not waste time on this matter if we are not going to get answers in a public meeting. I support having a private briefing as our next step. It is what we asked for before.

The Convener: How do other members feel?

Karen Gillon: I would like to go one step further, once the Hampden issue is resolved, and meet other stakeholders and partners in that project. We should meet the Scottish Football Association and other people who are involved, and ask them serious questions. A briefing may be useful for background information, but other people have been involved in this matter and have played significant roles; we should meet them.

Fiona McLeod: That is what I have been asking for all along. We have to have a briefing, because the statements that we are getting do not answer our questions. We must be concerned about how this matter is dragging on.

Mr Monteith: I support Karen's view. Many of us feel that once there is a settlement, we need to speak to other parties, but we should not press for that at the moment because we should not endanger the outcome.

The Convener: I suggest that we ask for a briefing with the minister. Then we could consider whether we want to pursue Karen's suggestion and decide on who we would invite to an open question session.

The second issue that I wish to raise is the draft national companies report. Does the committee agree to meet in private next week to consider of the report?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: It was suggested that, before we finally discuss the report, we provide the Scottish Arts Council with the chronology of events from the report so that it can check that the dates are correct. Is that acceptable to members, given that we will not be publishing the report until after next week?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The third item that I wish to raise is the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill. It will be introduced today, and the Executive will launch it formally tomorrow. I will be asked to attend the Parliamentary Bureau meeting on Tuesday to suggest the timetable for the progress of the bill through committee. At the beginning of next week's meeting we may have a draft timetable for members to comment on.

I know that our meeting clashes with a bureau meeting, so Mike Russell will not be here. He can

either channel his comments through committee members or speak directly to me beforehand. Gillian Baxendine will talk to him about that.

The timetable will be tight. We have to make time to ensure that we have all the information that we want. We are trying to arrange the timetable so that the bill will reach its final stage by the summer recess.

Are there any other issues that members want updated on?

Mr Monteith: Yes. Can you tell us when we might be expected to look at the ethical standards in public life bill, as undoubtedly we will be asked for an opinion on the part of the bill dealing with section 28?

The Convener: I will ask Gillian to comment on that. I asked that question as well, because I have received many letters on the subject, as have other committee members. We had not been identified as consultees on the bill, but Gillian might have an up-to-date position.

Gillian Baxendine (Committee Clerk): It is open to the committee to look at that issue if it chooses to. When the bill comes to stage 1, it will be up to the bureau to decide whether we are nominated formally as the lead committee on the bill.

Mr Monteith: I am not asking about whether we will be the lead committee. Clearly, local government is the prime subject of the bill, but in as much as section 28, which we know as section 2A, impinges on education—for example on curriculum matters, teaching and rights—I cannot see any way in which the bill would not come before this committee for an opinion, regardless of whether we decide to provide one.

The Convener: That was my concern. Obviously, we have a role to play. My understanding is that, when the bureau timetables the bill, it will identify which committees need to be consulted.

Nicola Sturgeon: It is inconceivable that the bill would not come to this committee at some stage. You say that the bureau will identify committees that have a role to play. Can we say to the bureau that we demand a role? Would that be appropriate?

Gillian Baxendine: We can make representations if the committee feels that it should be one of the contributing committees.

The Convener: I think that everyone is agreed on that, because no one is shaking their head.

Mr Stone: This is a question for all members of the committee; perhaps it is a matter for future discussion. We have mentioned what emerged about the budget from which the money for

Scottish Opera was drawn, and where the money for Hampden came from. I wonder whether there is an education budget issue, in that whoever controls the budget controls the service.

I suggest that the committee take evidence about how moneys are allocated. Decisions are taken, probably for all the best reasons, about Scottish Opera and other matters, but we must know more about where the chunks of money come from. We need to know that not so that we can interfere with ministers' work, but to give us an understanding of how the decisions are made. That is my view and I wonder whether other members support it.

The Convener: I shall ask Gillian Baxendine to comment on that.

Gillian Baxendine: When the annual budget bill is introduced, all subject committees have a role in commenting on the budget in their areas. There will be an opportunity for—a requirement on, in fact—the committee to consider the budget at that stage.

Mr Stone: With respect, that is not quite what I was asking. That would be consideration of an annual budget, as takes place in a council. I am talking about budget monitoring—that is where there is the opportunity to fire funds. We know that the minister has that power but, in the spirit of openness, the information should be more widely known.

The Convener: I hear what you are saying. This part of the agenda deals with things that have passed rather than with issues for future discussion. However, now that you have raised the matter, will you give me time to consider how to programme that into the committee's timetable and report back to you?

Mr Stone: Of course I will.

Nicola Sturgeon: I support Jamie Stone's view. My question is perhaps better directed to the clerk rather than to you, convener. A budget bill is being introduced this week and I understand that the time scale is quite tight. At what stage does this committee have to make an input into the process?

Gillian Baxendine: I have not been notified of the precise timetable, but I can come back to the committee on that.

Mr Macintosh: We discussed this matter in the Finance Committee yesterday. This year, the time scale is being curtailed because of the nature of this first year of Parliament. In a regular year, we will be given a departmental report by 31 March and be asked to deliver our opinion on the departmental budget. That will be not a static process but an on-going one. We will be asked to come back to consider the budget more than

once, so there will be an element of monitoring. We will also be able to examine cross-budget firing of resources and any in-year changes, which are particular concerns for the Finance Committee. That will be part of this committee's remit.

The Convener: We will find out exactly what is expected of us this year—we will have to programme that in with our other commitments.

Children (Leaving Care) Bill

The Convener: Item 3 concerns the Children (Leaving Care) Bill and the children's commissioner. Fiona McLeod first raised the matter. How do you see the committee taking the bill forward, Fiona?

Fiona McLeod: The committee must have a role in this matter. I raised that point before last week's debate on children leaving care, during which the problems faced by such children were raised a number of times. Peter Peacock conceded that the matter needed further consideration—he was talking not about withdrawal of benefits from such children, but about how the system is monitored. This committee should consider whether benefits should ever be withdrawn from such a vulnerable group of people.

Gillian Baxendine has said that we could approach the Executive to take the matter further. More than once during the debate, the minister said that the majority of submissions to the consultation were in favour of withdrawing benefits. From my reading of the documents that I have seen, however, I think that the exact opposite is the case.

Clause 6 of the bill refers to Scotland as part of a whole package relating to England in Wales. What does the bill do? It takes benefits away from young folk here. The Executive has commissioned research on through care and after care in Scotland, and it will be at least two years before we see the results of that research. Why are we taking benefits from people now if we do not yet know whether it is appropriate to do so?

The Convener: I appreciate what you are saying. During the debate, the minister said that there was no question of benefits being removed before a package was in place. Of course, we must establish whether that is the case. As you said, there are other provisions in place in England and we must find time to consider that. However, it will be difficult to timetable any more work, especially if we are to fit in the two previous items. I would like to put the Children (Leaving Care) Bill on the agenda, and I shall ask Gillian to comment on the timetable for that.

11:30

Nicola Sturgeon: We may not need to timetable it now. The course of action suggested by Gillian Baxendine is probably the right one. We should ask for information on the background to the policy and how it is to be implemented. Last week, the minister said that a working party would be set up; we should ask for more details about that and about the timetable that is involved.

Fiona McLeod made a good point about the context. Only one clause of the bill applies to Scotland. We must find out whether the Executive plans to legislate for Scotland on the other aspects of the benefits system that are currently being dealt with in Westminster. It would be useful to start with a written submission, on the basis of which we can decide how to timetable our discussion on the matter.

The Convener: Gillian, is this something that will be decided immediately, without our having time to consider it?

Gillian Baxendine: No. The bill is still on second reading in the House of Lords. It has to complete its passage through the House of Lords and the House of Commons before it can be enacted.

Nicola Sturgeon: There is another matter that we should ask the Executive to clear up. I asked a question during the debate, but was not entirely satisfied with the answer that I received. We must find out how closely the Scottish Executive is tied into the Westminster timetable on this bill. The matter may be reserved, but it has huge implications for devolved areas, so we need to know who is calling the shots.

The Convener: That is a relevant point. We shall get that information and ask for a report on the matters that have been raised.

Karen Gillon: I did not hear the debate last week. However, I notice that a ring-fenced budget is recommended for England. We must seek clarification about whether the budget would also be ring-fenced in Scotland. The last thing that we want is for the available money to be used up on other social work services, depriving the young people who need it most. We must also ask the minister what safeguards will be in place for those young people who are leaving care and who do not receive appropriate support.

Mr Stone: Members will recall that it was suggested during the debate that social workers might not be up to it. My line is that that is not a reason for not offering support. However, it is a reason for examining how social work departments operate and whether they have the manpower resources that they need. I do not know whether that would lie at our hand under the

definition of education, but it is something that we should not let go of. Perhaps we should encourage another committee—I am not sure which one—to consider that.

The Convener: I take it that social work is covered by our remit, as we have responsibility for children.

Nicola Sturgeon: If it is in Sam Galbraith's remit, it is in ours.

The Convener: Members will have received copies of the minister's letter about the appointment of a children's commissioner. I am keen for the committee to look into the matter and to find out what information is available and whether there are people who could provide us with further information. If members agree, I shall add that to the committee's agenda.

Nicola Sturgeon: I think that we should take that up. I am glad that Sam Galbraith is coming round to that way of thinking. I am sure that it has nothing to do with the fact that Tony Blair has recently come round to it, too. We should take up Sam Galbraith's offer of a memo outlining the options, which we can discuss when it is on the agenda. We should also designate a committee member as a reporter.

The Convener: That is a good suggestion. Does everybody agree with it?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: That is decided then.

Fiona McLeod: Sam Galbraith also said that he thought that the committee should undertake an inquiry into consulting young people. Perhaps we should let him know that we are already doing that. He offers to prepare a memorandum on the children's commissioner. Could we also have a memorandum on what is happening in the children and young people's group of the Executive and on its ideas on consultation?

The Convener: Yes.

I thank members for attending.

Meeting closed at 11:35.

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