

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 4 July 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

23rd Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

*Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)

*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:

Peter Peacock (Deputy Minister for Children and Education)

CLERK TEAM LEADER

Gillian Baxendine

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

David McLaren

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Tuesday 4 July 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 15:35*]

The Convener (Mrs Mary Mulligan): Good afternoon, everybody. We have only a couple of hours today and I do not want to delay matters. I propose that we take item 8 on the agenda, on our special educational needs inquiry, in private. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Rural Schools

The Convener: The next item on the agenda has been held over from the previous meeting—it relates to what has become known as the Stone report on rural schools. I invite Jamie Stone to say a few words and to make a few recommendations.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I apologise to you, convener, and to committee members for my absence last week. This report has been a long time in coming. It deals with three local authorities in the first section, and with Moray Council in the second and final section. Committee members will be aware of the reasons for that.

I put on record my thanks to the councils that were involved at all stages of the report. Compiling the report has been a very civil, open and interesting process, in which officials and elected members have gone out of their way to answer questions. As you can see, the report is quite detailed—perhaps I should apologise to members for its length—but on such an issue it is necessary to be thorough.

The report speaks for itself. The points are made for the committee to take note of in deciding what action would be most appropriate. There are several overarching aspects that, having written the report and having had the time to think about it, I feel are important. Many of the issues that concern rural schools also affect the way in which schools in not-so-rural areas are run, such as capital, revenue, change, teachers and classes. Those issues are important across the board.

Except in the Moray report, I have not really drawn attention to the role of the Scottish Parliament, but that role is important. Although it

was not said in so many words, I received the impression, when talking to the other three councils, that the role of the Scottish Parliament vis-à-vis the education authorities is important and that the jury is still out on it.

To say that there is fear over what the Scottish Parliament might or might not do is to paint the picture too boldly. However, education authorities feel that their role is to deliver and administer education; they might look askance if there is any diminution of that role. They argue that that structure has served Scotland well over the years. As we are aware, a favourite news story has been to speculate whether the Scottish Parliament will pull in education powers. The education authorities are following that discussion. This committee and the Parliament must address that issue and work out where we are. If we believe in local democracy and devolution to the lowest level—the level of delivery—I would counsel caution to this committee. That is connected with recent discussions that we have had on other, related topics.

Moray Council's comments on the way in which the system could be improved—for example, by implementing the 5-mile rule—and on the apparent delay in the Executive's agreeing to decisions that have been made by the local democratic body show that we have some issues to think about. I have tried to be entirely unbiased and factual in gathering issues and assembling them into a logical array. Quite what this committee may be minded to do, I do not know. It may be that—perhaps in the broader context of a Scotland-wide, rural and not-so-rural inquiry—we will want to take more evidence after the summer recess.

The report gives a flavour of the issues. A lot of work has been put into it; it is a fairly detailed document. Any further action is entirely in the committee's hands, regarding what avenues we might want to explore. I was and am the committee's representative. My role was to seek, record and bring back information and then to await the committee's deliberation. I would therefore be interested to hear any remarks that committee members may want to make.

The Convener: Thank you, Jamie. Before we consider what action to take on this report, I invite members to ask Jamie any questions that they have, general or specific.

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): In the report, you comment a few times on the need for research to be carried out into the educational provision made by small schools. In paragraph 6.1 on page 3, you refer to that specifically. Have you asked the Scottish Parliament information centre to undertake a literature review on that subject? I am aware that quite a bit of that research has

been carried out, not necessarily in Scotland, but in other countries with similar geographical concerns.

Mr Stone: I was very tempted to ask SPICe to carry out a literature review, but I decided that I did not have the right to do so before the report had been presented to the committee—I thought that that would be getting ahead of myself and this committee. I know exactly what Fiona McLeod means, but what is right in Dumfries and Galloway is not necessarily going to be right in the Highland area or in Moray. I was struck by the differences between provision in the different parts of Scotland—members may get a flavour of that when reading the report. If the committee is minded to go down the SPICe route, I would support that decision.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): This is a useful report. I was especially interested in the comments from the Moray area, which I know well. My constituency is neither rural nor in the central belt, so the polarisation between those areas does not appeal to me. However, the comments that the councils make about the ways in which they have dealt with school closures were interesting. Did the other authorities to which you spoke express views on clustering and on the idea of several small schools sharing a head teacher as a way of addressing the issue of small numbers of pupils studying together in rural schools?

Mr Stone: Yes. Dumfries and Galloway Council was furthest ahead in that context and has carried out some positive work. Members will be aware that Moray Council highlighted the possible legal hurdle of such an idea, as there has been recent press coverage of the issue of whether every school needs to have a head teacher. I am not aware of the final answer. I found Dumfries and Galloway Council's thinking on this issue constructive and interesting, particularly the idea of having a person—let us not call them a head teacher—responsible for a cluster of schools that might contain a secondary school. There seemed to be tremendous opportunities for staff development in having a person who could take such an overarching view. I do not know whether other committee members have any thoughts about the legal aspect of the exact definition of a head teacher; I do not know where we stand on that question. I left the matter with the tail-end Charlie comment from Moray Council, which has not yet been addressed.

15:45

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Jamie Stone's final point will be discussed during the review of the "Schools (Scotland) Code 1956" this summer. He might well be right not to give the person responsible for the

cluster of schools the title of head teacher, as that touches on difficult issues about whether schools should have head teachers.

Although we would broadly agree that the authorities that you mentioned are rural, Jamie, did you have any difficulty with defining rurality?

Mr Stone: Absolutely. For example, although Highland Council covers a vast distance from Acharacle to John o' Groats and Cape Wrath, Moray Council made the cogent point that, notwithstanding the rural deprivation factors, Moray is still one travel-to-work area. That point was also raised in Dumfries and Galloway, where more types of work now involve commuting. That means that the whole face of agricultural communities only 5, 6 or 10 miles out of Dumfries has changed—they are not so much farming villages with people involved in agriculture as a commuter belt. That posed questions about the nature of education for children in those communities.

Although the pace of change in Moray and Dumfries and Galloway is possibly faster than in the Highlands, the geography of the Highlands—including Argyll, the western isles, Orkney and Shetland—probably means that the area will always be rather different. It was brought home to me how much the definition of rurality in Scotland now differs from my preconception of it.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I have one or two thoughts on this report and the report that we had last week. Jamie Stone mentioned the 5-mile rule, which is one of a number of anomalies in Scotland that do not take account of the needs of rural areas. Perhaps we should speak to the Accounts Commission about how its information is interpreted. Any guidance to local authorities in rural areas should be relevant to those areas; for example, guidance on a 5-mile rule might mean something completely different in Falkirk from what it means in the north or the Borders. Besides asking the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to consider some code of practice, we should also ask the Accounts Commission to update its information, which was, after all, produced at the time of Strathclyde Regional Council and bigger local education authority departments. Local authorities must now adhere to recommendations, which should reflect the needs of specific local authority areas.

The Convener: If there are no further questions, I suggest that we thank Jamie Stone for his report and take the various points on board. Jamie has flagged up a number of issues that are difficult to define, such as rurality, the nature of the remit of local authorities and their responsibility for their schools, and the differences not just between local authorities but within a local authority boundary. The report also flags up resource allocation to

schools and school buildings, school closures and staff supply in local areas—those issues do not apply just to rural schools.

My suggestion is that we note Jamie Stone's report and move on with the committee's outstanding work, including the infrastructure report, which we can ensure has a rural element, so that any difficulties faced by the rural areas are picked up. We should also reinforce last week's report, which asked COSLA to draw up a set of guidelines on how schools throughout Scotland should go about consulting on school closures. We must take on board Cathy Peattie's point about asking the Accounts Commission to review its position in relation to the change in the current guidelines, from dealing with regional authorities to dealing with 32 local authorities.

That covers all the points that I envisaged we needed to cover at this stage. If anybody wants to add anything or take anything away, we can discuss it now.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I am happy to go along with that. However, it is important that we come back to this issue soon after recess to assess what has happened and where we might want to go.

One matter arises out of Cathy Peattie's report. We should note that last week Argyll and Bute Council took a decision not to proceed with the six rural school closures in its area. Members will recall that one of the issues that we flagged up was the importance of the special islands needs allowance for Argyll and Bute in securing the future of rural schools. In the interest of fairness, we may want to invite a representative of the council to a meeting after the recess to discuss the issue and what, if anything, the committee can do to help the council to secure that funding.

The Convener: The committee unanimously agreed Cathy Peattie's report last week. It is unfortunate if anybody in the media or outside saw that as an instruction from this committee to a local authority. If that is the case, the perception is wrong. It was quite clear that, although the committee accepted the report and the fact that there were difficulties with the consultation process, the decision on whether to proceed with school closures in Argyll and Bute was up to the local authority. We also accepted that island funding arrangements were an issue. However, that is being dealt with as part of an on-going review. I do not accept that this committee should examine the issue, which will be raised in another place. The local authority will have an opportunity to speak to the people who are carrying out the review and I am not sure what this committee could add to that.

Nicola Sturgeon: On a point of clarification, I did not suggest—and I do not think that anyone understood from last week's meeting—that we were instructing Argyll and Bute Council to do anything.

The Convener: I did not say that you had.

Nicola Sturgeon: You said that an unfortunate conclusion had been drawn from last week's meeting, which suggests that you think that some people drew that conclusion. However, I do not think that anyone did, including people from Argyll and Bute Council. It is important that I put that on record.

I can see from the eye contact among some of the Labour group members that this issue is causing some disquiet. I ask the clerks to clarify exactly what we communicated to Argyll and Bute Council last week on the issue of special islands needs allowance, because we definitely agreed something on that point. I am unsure whether the *Official Report* of last week's meeting has been published yet, but we must make clear what we agreed last week.

The Convener: It will be in the *Official Report*. My understanding is that we recognised that there was an anomaly and that Argyll and Bute Council did not receive funding under SINA. We accepted that that might be an issue for the council. However, it is not for the Education, Culture and Sport Committee to decide whether the council should receive that funding, which is matter for the on-going review of SINA. I understand that the local authority will have an opportunity to make submissions to that review.

Lewis Macdonald: The disquiet that Nicola Sturgeon refers to is disquiet at her interpretation of what was said by Argyll and Bute Council, or, certainly, at the difference between her interpretation and the interpretation that appeared in the press. It seems clear to me that Argyll and Bute Council referred to the recommendations in our report as though in some way it ceased to be responsible for its own decisions on whether to proceed with closing those schools.

It is important that the committee puts on record clearly that responsibility for each and every stage of those decisions lies with Argyll and Bute Council and not with the Education, Culture and Sport Committee. Moreover, such decisions do not rest on the link that the council attempted to make, and which Nicola is encouraging it to make, between its education policy and its application for SINA. We recognised the existence of an anomaly, but the way in which that anomaly is dealt with does not relate specifically to the education budget, to the provision of education services or to this committee. SINA has wider implications than that.

If any committee of the Scottish Parliament was to consider the case for SINA in Argyll and Bute, it would be another committee, such as the Rural Affairs Committee, the Finance Committee or the Local Government Committee. Those committees might find it a bit odd that the Education, Culture and Sport Committee chose to adopt a position on a matter that is not exclusively an educational matter.

It is important that we are clear about the position of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee and, above all, about the fact that the responsibility for school closures or education provision in Argyll and Bute rests with Argyll and Bute Council—full stop.

Fiona McLeod: I will pick up on what Lewis Macdonald said about SINA. As I understand the process, if the Parliament were to examine SINA, a lead committee would be designated and other committees with an interest in the matter would investigate and report to the lead committee. The Education, Culture and Sport Committee has followed that procedure on a number of occasions, such as when we considered section 28. We were not the lead committee, but as section 28 had an impact on education, we took evidence and reported to the lead committee. This is exactly the same sort of situation.

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): There is a case for the Finance Committee to consider the on-going review of SINA. It would be totally proper if the bureau were to designate the Finance Committee as the lead committee on an inquiry into SINA, or if that committee were to decide to conduct such an inquiry and to ask us for input.

It is interesting that people set so much store by last week's decision by Argyll and Bute Council to condemn our report. The council said that our report was inaccurate, ill-founded and based on the wrong information, which I find most disturbing. The council did not take into account this committee's criticisms of its consultation process. It grasped on to one line that got it out of making a decision; it tried to throw that decision back into the hands of the Scottish Executive by saying that it made the decision only because it did not get SINA money. That is my interpretation of what I read in the press.

The council criticised Cathy Peattie's report, which this committee endorsed unanimously. Our report said clearly that there were problems with the consultation process. That issue falls within our remit. However, the council refused to accept the legitimacy of that criticism. The parents who were quoted in the press said that they were disappointed by the council's response to our report.

16:00

Nicola Sturgeon: Karen Gillon's interpretation undermines the suggestion made by Lewis Macdonald about what the council tried to do. It usefully undermines it, however: I think that Lewis was misinterpreting the council's decision. I do not think that anyone has suggested that this committee could or did instruct Argyll and Bute Council to do anything; I do not think that Argyll and Bute Council took that from what we did.

Nevertheless, Cathy Peattie's report, which the committee endorsed last week, highlighted no more and no less than the issue of special islands needs allowance. In fairness to Argyll and Bute Council, we should not simply leave the matter hanging. I accept Lewis's point that this committee is not the appropriate one to look into the matter, but I suggest that we write to the Finance Committee and ask it, in any on-going review of SINA, to take evidence or representations from Argyll and Bute Council if it is not already doing so. It is a question of fairness to the council that the issues that this committee flags up are not simply left hanging in mid air because they might be politically uncomfortable.

The Convener: I really do not think that that is the problem. The question is who the right people are to deal with the matter. If Argyll and Bute Council wants an opportunity to make representations on the issue, that is fair enough. I will allow Cathy Peattie to comment and I will then try to wind this item up.

Cathy Peattie: We have agreed that it is not for this committee to tell any council what to do, but members will be aware that I have been concerned since the outset that we could find ourselves making decisions on petitions about school closures all over Scotland. That is not our role.

The report was about the consultation process, which was flawed. That is not just my opinion, but that of the parents and teachers in Argyll and Bute. There is an argument for seeking SINA money, but I do not think that that is part of our remit. Interestingly, the parents in Argyll and Bute have continued to e-mail and write to me. One parent, whom I will not name, said that schools were clearly being used cynically as bargaining chips for SINA money.

We do not want to go into that argument. I think that the Finance Committee or the Local Government Committee should consider the matter. Argyll and Bute has a strong case for SINA money, given that it covers such a wide area and contains many island communities. However, I repeat that it is not our role to make that case.

If the council secures SINA money, I assume that that will not simply be for education; the

council will have a wider agenda on how it spends the money. If the Finance Committee, another committee or a minister were to consider the case, and if we were asked to give evidence on the report, that would be appropriate.

Parents may be concerned that this case could serve as a smokescreen for future decisions. Moreover, there may be concerns that this committee will push the Finance Committee into accepting what we think any decision should be, based on the report. Those concerns would be unfounded. The report was based on the consultation process and I hope that it will affect future consultation processes in Argyll and Bute and other areas.

The Convener: I suggest that we note Jamie Stone's report; that as part of our inquiry into schools infrastructure we examine the rural element; that we submit the reports by Jamie Stone and Cathy Peattie to COSLA and ask it to review its guidelines on school closures; that we submit both reports to the Accounts Commission and ask it to review its guidance on school issues; that we consider Nicola Sturgeon's suggestion to send the *Official Report* of the previous meeting to the relevant committee, be it the Local Government Committee or the Finance Committee, to highlight our concern about SINA, which was raised in Cathy's report; and that we ask the appropriate committee to take into account the comments that have been made. Is that okay?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Special Educational Needs

The Convener: Item 3 on the agenda is the special educational needs inquiry. I welcome Peter Peacock to the committee this afternoon. If you desperately want to say something, minister, I will allow you to do so for a few minutes, but if you want to go straight to questions, I am sure that there are more than enough to keep you going.

The Deputy Minister for Children and Education (Peter Peacock): I am happy to do whatever you want, convener, but I would like to make a couple of points first.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee. I am pleased that the committee is doing an in-depth report into special educational needs, because it is an area of Scottish education policy that has not had enough of a public airing in past years. This is a good opportunity to give it that airing and to open it up to scrutiny. We welcome what the committee is doing and look forward to its report, which will help to inform a number of decisions that ministers will have to take.

Sam Galbraith sent information to the committee, and subsequently I sent additional information that the committee requested. As members know, two major consultation exercises took place in 1998 and 1999 with the Riddell inquiry. Those exercises were the basis for a range of actions that the Executive has taken and that have been brought together in "Improving Our Schools: Special Educational Needs: The Programme of Action", which has also been sent to the committee.

I want to talk about some general themes, from which I suspect questions will arise. The first theme is inclusion. I know that the committee was closely involved in the discussions about how inclusion policies would impact on the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill. I will not repeat those arguments—members are more than familiar with them. We have allocated something like £12 million to assist schools to make the physical changes that will allow us to increase access to, and inclusion in, mainstream schools. That is a major step forward, but much more will be done in years to come. For example, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995—which is UK legislation—will be extended to cover education, and that will impact on inclusion in schools.

The second theme is support and information for parents to allow them to have choices in matters relating to special educational needs. I know that the committee has undertaken inquiries into that. With Children in Scotland, we have set up the Enquire service, which is now receiving a number

of inquiries from parents and beginning to provide comprehensive support for them. We may have to develop such services further. Four initiatives have started up—in East Dunbartonshire, Glasgow, South Ayrshire and Stirling—to consider ways of further developing local services and, in particular, mediation services to help parents to be more involved in special educational needs provision. Parents should be able to exercise their rights more effectively.

In the financial year that has just started, we have been able to allocate something like £600,000, through an innovation grants programme, to a whole range of organisations in special educational needs. That will help to develop local services and will help in the effort to try new approaches to services in the sector. More than 40 organisations have received grant aid in that way, and their work will help us to understand better what we need to do in the future to address needs as they arise.

The third theme is partnership working with parents. Part of our approach—another significant step forward—has been to establish the national special educational needs advisory forum. That gives ministers and many others with an interest in the issue a vehicle for continuing dialogue on the administrative changes that we need to make in policy, and on the changes that may be needed in legislation. That will ensure that we keep up to date.

Some of the background material for the SEN forum has been sent to the committee, and I know that the committee is discussing issues such as the practice of assessing and recording needs, interagency working, and staff development and qualifications. That allows us to continue to review matters and keep abreast of changes that we need to make. I also know that the SEN forum is looking forward to receiving the committee's report, so that it can feed that into its discussions as well.

That concludes my opening remarks. I am happy to answer any questions that members may want to ask.

The Convener: Thank you. Do members have any questions?

Fiona McLeod: How do we intend to structure today's discussion? Will we go through the headings in our remit, then address general points at the end?

The Convener: Throughout our discussions, different questions have been given different priorities, and it has been up to the committee to decide whether to ask questions on specific matters within the inquiry remit or on issues that have arisen during the taking of evidence. It would probably be easiest to let members ask whatever

questions they have at this stage. We can pull the discussion together at the end.

Cathy Peattie: This has been an interesting inquiry for Education, Culture and Sport Committee members, who have been able to ask lots of questions. At times, each question has given rise to half a dozen others. Our visits to schools have revealed good practice, but a number of questions have also been raised. You highlighted one of the issues, concerning the record of needs process, which I am pleased to hear is under review. It is clear from information we have gathered from a host of people that that process needs to be reconsidered. There are many anomalies in how it is carried out.

Another issue concerns parental involvement in education. As Peter Peacock said, parents of children with special needs often feel excluded from the decision-making process. Even the best schools do not always consider the views of parents, although parents are key partners in their children's education.

Where inclusion is working in schools—and we have seen some good examples of that—it seems to work because of good teachers who are committed to making it work. Those teachers are often under great stress. When we asked them about the special training they received, they said that, initially, it was undertaken on a wing and a prayer, but that they have been committed to making it work. Special training has worked because they have been keen to develop their skills.

Teacher training is not the only issue; there is the related issue of teachers having enough time to share best practice with other teachers and to meet other people to discuss how specific initiatives work in their areas. If that is to happen, and if teachers are to deliver on inclusion, they need more time and training. I would be interested in your comments on that.

Peter Peacock: Our position on the record of needs was set out, in part, in a paper that was sent to the SEN forum; the paper contained people's views on what is wrong with the system. Comparatively few advocates would favour retention of the system in its current form. Given the nature of the debate on the issue, it is inconceivable that the system will remain unchanged at the end of the review that is being undertaken by the committee, the forum and professionals in the field. There are persuasive reasons for altering the system.

16:15

The trick will be to find a system that protects the rights of the children who have the most profound difficulties and ensures that they have

rights to certain things. The system must not be bureaucratic, but must enable information to be processed much more readily, so that the time of professionals such as physiotherapists and educational psychologists can be applied to helping children with educational difficulties rather than to administrative work. There is much to be done to ensure that. We have commissioned a special meeting in September of the special educational needs forum, which will spend a whole day discussing the issues on record of needs.

We have also commissioned a series of papers from participants in that forum, who will input different perspectives on the problems—there are widely differing perspectives. Out of that, we hope to find some clues as to the best way forward. We are not ruling anything out at this stage, and we will listen closely to what is being said, including what the committee says in its report. I hope that we will make progress on the issue, although there are some difficult problems to resolve.

From my past experience as a councillor, and from my experience in my present job, I have learned that parents find it extraordinarily difficult to engage with the system and to find the appropriate approaches to meeting their children's needs. Some parents find the system off-putting; some parents who are not very articulate find it difficult to engage professionals in a dialogue that they want to have and to feel empowered in that process. We have a long way to go in encouraging a more open and understanding approach to the way in which the professionals engage with parents.

We have tried to deal with that issue through the Enquire service, which has received around 600 inquiries so far. In association with that service, we are developing a range of support materials and information that should help. I worked for the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, and I understand how difficult it is for certain client groups to gain access to both information and an interpretation of the way in which that information applies to their circumstances. It may be necessary to provide advocacy on their behalf and to articulate their point of view, although mediation services are now replacing advocacy and are providing intermediaries who can help people to engage with the system.

We are improving the flow of information, which varies according to the condition of the individual child. Some voluntary organisations have a good supply of information, while others do not have such sophisticated procedures as those that have operated in the field for much longer. The condition of the individual child may therefore determine the parents' level of access to support and information. That is clearly not right, and we must ensure equality of support for all parents.

Enquire will help with that, but we must continue to examine the issue of mediation. That is why the four pilot schemes that I mentioned in my introduction will be so important.

There will also be occasions when advocacy is necessary, and organisations in the voluntary sector that are skilled in advocacy in other matters may be able to develop services for parents, to ensure that parents can engage properly with the system without intimidation. The Executive in no way wants to limit the support and information that parents receive in ensuring that the needs of their children are met. If the committee thinks that we could do more, as Enquire develops, we would be more than happy to listen, as it is in all our interests to ensure that the population is well informed on such matters. We would be interested in your views on that.

We are trying to make progress on training, but I am sure there is much more that we can do. Partly in response to the McCrone committee report, we have begun to reconsider the initial teacher education that is provided, not only in relation to special educational needs, but in relation to a range of matters. It has become increasingly apparent that special educational needs guidance is an aspect of initial teacher education that needs to be addressed and strengthened considerably. Professionals must be made aware of the situations that they are likely to encounter and the support that will be required. My wife was a teacher. When she first came across dyslexia, no one knew what it was about. We must get beyond that in initial teacher education, and support people's understanding of special educational needs. Such needs are better understood now than they used to be. That aspect must be considered and I assure you that we will do a lot more work on it.

Secondly, on training, there is continuing professional development for teachers. It is not the case that someone learns their skills and the skills are there for all time. Ian Jenkins made the point that, over time, we learn more about such matters, so we must refresh people's understanding. Continuing professional development will have a big part to play in that. We have tried to increase provision by doubling to more than £5 million the amount of money that is available for in-service training. More than 13,000 teachers have taken part in staff development events on special educational needs in the past year or so. We must continue to push that.

A professional development award for learning support staff has been introduced and such staff are increasingly getting the benefit of that award. The "Schools (Scotland) Code", which featured in one of your earlier discussions this afternoon, is being reviewed. The code includes statements on

qualifications for people who engage with pupils with special educational needs, so we have the opportunity to review that. A lot is happening and we are determined to make efforts to improve all those things.

Good practice is part of professional development, but I have been struck, as I have gone round Scottish schools, by how isolated teachers are in their classrooms, let alone how isolated schools are from other schools. At the back end of last year, I was in one school in Lanarkshire that had a special educational needs unit attached to it. I was surprised at how little opportunity staff had to engage with staff in other schools who were doing exactly the same specialist job. We must do much more to facilitate that process. People can learn much more quickly if they see new good practice being applied. We will consider how we can do more on that.

Cathy Peattie: I, too, have spoken to teachers, who have a lot of skills to pass on, who feel isolated. Peer support and the opportunity to meet other teachers who have dealt with specific issues are important. Perhaps it is not staff development that is needed, but just space and time to meet other teachers.

The Convener: Before I bring in any other members, I will take the minister back a step to his point on training.

Some children take up the opportunity of mainstream education with the support of an auxiliary or a classroom assistant, but concern has been raised recently about the fact that the auxiliary who is supporting those children has not been trained in special educational needs. That concern was raised with me with specific reference to children who are deaf or have hearing difficulties, but it has been raised on other occasions. You may have mentioned additional training resources for auxiliaries, as well as for teachers. Will you comment on that?

Peter Peacock: I have not said anything specifically about that, but your point is well made. We could improve the experience of every child who has an auxiliary supporting them. There is a close relationship between the child and the auxiliary over a prolonged period, and the more we can support the auxiliary in understanding the child's full circumstances, the more the benefit. I will take that point away and ensure that we address it.

Fiona McLeod: As well as auxiliaries, you must also consider classroom assistants. I have a concern about pre-school education. A record of needs can be opened when a child is two years old. If baseline assessments are to be made from pre-school into primary school, all those who work in pre-school would need the same level of

training.

Peter Peacock: A lot of initial work is being done on child care, pre-school qualifications and a career structure. This is a new sector for a great many employees, and it is blossoming substantially because of the new resources that are going into it. That brings its own problems, in that well-understood or recognised qualifications are not yet in place, nor is there a proper career structure that people can progress through. That is all being dealt with. I take Fiona McLeod's point that addressing special educational needs in that context is as important as it is in the school context.

Karen Gillon: I welcome Peter Peacock's comments on teacher training, particularly about initial teacher training. It has become apparent in my visits and discussions that initial teacher training is not meeting the needs of children with special educational needs and in particular of those who enter mainstream schools in the first instance. Those children's needs are not picked up quickly by the classroom teacher, through no fault of the teacher but because of a lack of understanding of many of the issues in this area. Recognition of special educational needs at an early stage and early intervention can be the catalyst for success in allowing the child to move on in the mainstream setting or elsewhere. Dyslexia is the obvious example that is often given. A lot of information on it is available now, but we need to do some more work on other areas.

I think that you dealt with the issue of support for teachers who are working with children with special educational needs. It is an area that we need to develop continually. The committee needs to recognise and put on record that this is a team approach. Teachers are part of what is often a large team, which spans health, education and other services. Within the school, the whole school is often involved. I have visited schools in which the classroom assistant was the key person, alongside the dinner lady and the janitor. They all had a role to play in keeping the young person in the school. We need to recognise the role that the school and the other support staff play in the special educational needs programme. That will become more evident as we move towards a presumption on mainstreaming. The Parliament needs to recognise those people as well as the teaching staff.

The future of grant-aided schools has been raised, alongside the presumption on mainstreaming. If money is being given back to local authorities and mainstreaming is presumed, how can the future of very specialised schools be ensured? Will that become a difficult debate, in which people cannot always find the answer? We

visited in my constituency a school for children with cerebral palsy who have very specialised needs. How will those children be mainstreamed when the school moves away from grant-aided funding? Has there been any discussion of those issues? How do you or the team think that we can square the circle?

Peter Peacock: I will address your earlier points before I talk about grant-aided schools. You made an important point about early intervention and early diagnosis. The system now has a greater capacity because pre-school and nursery education is universal. We have access to three and four-year-olds that we did not have comprehensively. Clearly, that gives us an opportunity to diagnose problems much earlier. That reinforces Fiona McLeod's point about the need to underpin the training of those in that sector to ensure that we pick up cases as quickly as we can when problems manifest themselves. In some respects, when problems fully manifest themselves is age related.

Your point about taking a team approach is useful. There is no doubt that teachers on their own cannot provide all the resources that are required to meet the needs of children with difficulties. A range of professionals is required. Part of the problem with parents intersecting with the system is that they do not do so with only one professional. We need to ease the process for parents and young people as much as we can. The developments on individual education programmes for children in schools represent a mechanism for pulling together much more comprehensively the types of support that are required for an individual child's needs. That will develop over time.

I think that, at its most recent meeting, the special educational needs forum began discussion on the barriers to different professionals working together. If the forum has not started that discussion, it is certainly about to do so. That is another matter that needs to be addressed. Recently, I visited a secondary school that was piloting new approaches to supporting children with special educational needs. The school was changing the basis on which it operated to allow teams to interact more effectively. A learning support base has been created in the school through which professionals from the range of services flow: classroom assistants, janitors, teachers, auxiliaries, physiotherapists, psychologists and social workers. That provides a melting pot in which people are able to agree to actions that suit individual children. We cannot expect teachers to carry all those responsibilities alone. We require a multidisciplinary approach. I hope that the individual education programmes that are being developed will act as vehicles for that.

16:30

There are several points to be made about grant-aided schools. The presumption is that provision should be made for children to attend mainstream schools; no longer should a parent have to fight to get a place for their child in a mainstream school. Similarly, when it is thought appropriate that a child should attend a specialist provision, according to the collective judgment of parents, professionals and the child, there should be no fight to secure that. We must ensure that we find the right balance. That will take time. We must act in the interests of the individual child, in any given circumstance. Although we expect the majority of children to go to mainstream schools, there are occasions when that is not appropriate. However, the child's circumstances may change over time. A child might move from a mainstream school into a specialist school or vice versa, depending on their condition, and we must allow for that to happen.

The debate about the seven grant-aided schools is extremely important. We do not underestimate the difficulty that we face in striking the right balance. Putting those schools out of business is not part of our agenda and we will not make any rushed decisions that would jeopardise the future of those schools. We must be absolutely satisfied that we have got the balance right. Sam Galbraith and I have received advice from officials on the matter and we have asked for further advice. I must make it clear that we will not rush any decisions. For example, we are deliberately waiting to hear what the committee has to say on the matter before coming to any conclusions.

However, I want to put those comments into a wider context. The seven grant-aided schools provide excellent, well-used services. The policy rationale that underlies our position is that most of those schools are not predominantly national resources, but local ones and that national funding is currently supporting a local resource. That point was highlighted by the Riddell committee, which said that a different distribution of the money could provide greater local support for children across Scotland. We must find an answer to that, without artificially skewing resources because of accidents of history in the development of policy.

The seven grant-aided schools are an important part of the fabric of provision for children in Scotland. However, there are 33 other independent schools which also provide a range of services, some of which are analogous to those provided by the grant-aided schools. Many of those schools are thriving, and we believe that the schools that are currently grant-aided could also thrive in such an environment. There are also 178 local authority special schools. Although the grant-aided schools are important—we will not diminish

their role or jeopardise their position in a hurry—they are only a small part of the total provision. Our overall objective must be to provide as much local support as possible, so that families do not have to travel large distances or relocate in order to access the provision that they need. That is the underlying theme of the policy. There is a long way to go.

Fiona McLeod: I have a few specific questions. In every submission and all the evidence that we heard, the issue of resources was raised as the foundation of inclusion and the provision for special educational needs. If I remember rightly, section 12A(2)(c) of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill allows that local authorities will not have to spend disproportionate amounts to achieve inclusion. How do you intend to ensure that local authorities will be given the necessary resources for special educational needs provision throughout the country?

Peter Peacock: In local authorities' grant-aided expenditure settlements each year there is, in the education GAE, a line for special educational needs. It has increased from £150 million in 1997-98 to £178 million in the current year, a £28 million increase. Those are not spending guidelines, but allocations to local authorities based on particular sets of calculations. There is growth in that generally. Ultimately, it is up to local authorities to determine how much they allocate to SEN.

The pattern of expenditure across Scotland is one of progressive growth in the sector. I imagine it is an area where growth in expenditure will have to continue to occur, not least because of the application of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to schools. We must ensure that every school is equipped to accommodate children with special needs. There will be a pattern of increasing expenditure, but there will always be a debate about whether it is the right amount.

In addition to the general allocations, we have been trying to put in money through the inclusion programme, the early intervention programme and one or two specific areas such as the innovation grants. We have been trying to feed the system with new resources to stimulate more action. I do not believe that resources are a big issue. However, I accept that we will have to keep that under review and ensure that, especially as we want more children to go to mainstream schools, adequate support is there for them. I can assure you that we will take great care to keep that matter under review.

Although she was off sick that week, I do not want to rehearse the full debate on the section in the bill that Fiona McLeod mentioned. However, exceptionally, a local authority may consider that it would be unreasonable to incur a sum of money in relation to a particular child, and therefore not

include that child in a mainstream school. I made it clear in the debate in Parliament that the term unreasonable does not mean unreasonable in relation to the cost of that child compared to the cost of other children, but relates to the expenditure on that child compared to the total education budget of that authority. It is a high hurdle. It would have to be truly exceptional unreasonable expenditure before local authorities could use it as a reason for saying that a child should not be accommodated in a mainstream school. I do not expect that to happen often. The clear presumption is that we must make provision for children to attend mainstream schools.

Fiona McLeod: It was clear in the submissions that resources are a major issue in special educational needs. Do you intend to monitor the application of section 12A(2) to see how many times it is applied to exclude children and whether there is a pattern across local authorities, and to determine whether it is a resource implication that local authorities require you to address?

Peter Peacock: I am happy to give that assurance. I make it clear that we are not just saying this: we want mainstream provision for children. The way the section is constructed is designed not to give rise to its being used by local authorities as an excuse or an opt-out. I have made it clear in Parliament that local authorities are not to regard it as an opt-out. It is a serious test. However, if we ever felt that it was being used in that way, we would revisit the position. It is not our intention that local authorities should habitually use money as an excuse for telling people that they cannot go to a mainstream school.

Fiona McLeod: I have two other points. First, we have talked about partnership and interdisciplinary working. I want to pick up on two items where interministerial working needs to be undertaken in this area. I took part in the dyspraxia debate and presented some research evidence to Iain Gray on a very simple test for dyspraxia that could be carried out at pre-school with minimal training. The minister referred to the SIGN—Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network—guidelines and clinical guidelines. Are discussions taking place on this issue between the health and community care department and your own department to ensure that we do not just use a clinical model?

Peter Peacock: Absolutely. I have a particular interest in the issue, and attended the dyspraxia debate to demonstrate that ministers listen to each other on such issues. It was a toss of the coin whether Iain Gray or I replied in the debate, because there is a complete crossover of interests between health and education. I have had more than one internal discussion about these issues

and about how, for example, we ensure that there is an education component to research that is funded out of the health budget but touches on conditions that might have an impact on education. There has been research, some of it controversial, into different diagnostic techniques for a whole range of conditions. I can assure the committee that we are acutely alert to such research and discuss it with colleagues in the health department.

Furthermore, the learning disabilities review, for which Iain Gray was responsible, has recently been completed and we have received the recommendations of the Beattie committee, which is part of Henry McLeish's portfolio, and we have had discussions about ensuring that we do not miss connections between those separate elements. The staff with me today and others are constantly involved in joint teams to consider the very close connections between various areas.

Fiona McLeod: I was involved in the debate on the Education and Training (Scotland) Bill last week. From evidence that we have taken and from my visits to local special schools, I have found that parents have grave concerns about what happens to their children after they reach 16. I hope that your department will be closely involved in the production of guidelines and regulations to ensure that 19 and 20-year-olds who have gone through mainstream education will not be disadvantaged when applying for individual learning accounts, because their needs are not met by resources.

I had grave concerns about one aspect of the papers that you provided. You said that you are closely listening to the special educational needs advisory forum and have asked it to report on such issues as records of needs. However, when I read the minutes of one of your meetings, I was very concerned to find the forum's criticisms of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Bill and section 12A in particular. From my reading of the forum's concerns and of the bill as presented to Parliament, it does not sound as if the ministerial team listened very closely to the forum. I hope that that is not going to set a pattern.

Peter Peacock: We had a full discussion at the forum's first meeting, for which members have the minutes. As a result of that discussion, we agreed to circulate forum members with copies of the draft section before they met next and before an amended section was lodged, to ask for suggestions on how the section might be amended. There was an on-going dialogue with members of the forum.

Furthermore, there was a mature understanding that not everyone's interests would necessarily be satisfied, because their interests can be quite different. We also explained to forum members that there were certain legal constraints in drafting

matters and that we had to use certain language because it related to requirements in the education acts. We sought genuinely to meet people's requirements within those parameters.

I can assure the committee that we listen carefully to the forum. One of the interesting things about the forum is that—as I am sure members have discovered—it represents such a wide spectrum of opinion that it will not always be possible to reach a complete consensus. The Executive regards it as an important way of informing us about current thinking and about the things that we need to challenge and re-examine.

I will pursue the point about individual learning accounts with officials and with Henry McLeish's department to ensure that we have some insight into the matter. I understand the point that was made. One of the features of building up provision for children with special educational needs in the school system is that the support systems in the community may not be as strong as they move away from school. That presents particular challenges for parents and the wider community. That is part of the purpose of the Beattie committee report, which we need to keep addressing. It is also part of the purpose of the learning disabilities review, which is taking a range of matters forward progressively. I hope that that area of provision will improve gradually over time, but I will follow up the specific point that was made.

16:45

Nicola Sturgeon: I have three quick points to make, two of which have been touched on. First, I want to return briefly to grant-aided schools. The minister's comments will be welcomed—I welcome them and suspect that grant-aided schools will. A number of witnesses have suggested that there needs to be a better definition of the types of special need that should be dealt with nationally and that there needs to be continued national funding for them and for the research that is undertaken in some grant-aided schools. Is that being actively considered, because it might be one of the ways in which the right balance might be struck, which the minister suggested he was trying to do?

My second point relates to Fiona McLeod's final point. We all recognise that the presumption of mainstream education is a step in the right direction, but as Fiona McLeod said, some of the concerns that the advisory forum identified were also expressed during parliamentary debates. You said that the intention—which I do not doubt—was that parents would not have to fight for their children's inclusion in mainstream education. One of the concerns that was expressed by the advisory forum was that there would be more of a

fight. Obviously we need to find consensus, but we cannot satisfy everybody. What will be done to monitor operation in practice to ensure that the system is working as you intended, to allow you to identify any problems and to take further steps if required?

My third point has not yet been touched on. One of the things that came across from educational practitioners to whom we spoke—especially teachers at a school that Cathy Peattie and I visited—is that the requirements of the current target-setting system can and do operate as disincentives to inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream education because, to put it brutally, they can depress schools' efforts to achieve their targets. It has come across strongly that there is tension between setting targets and encouraging parents to use the results to choose schools, and the social inclusion agenda. Are you aware of that? What are your thoughts on how to get round the problem to ensure that we genuinely encourage inclusion?

Peter Peacock: I will deal with Nicola Sturgeon's points in reverse order. I understand the argument about setting targets. People have made the same point to me as I have travelled around. There are a couple of points I can make. A school can adjust its targets down—to take account of the point that Nicola made—in light of the number of children with special educational needs and records of needs. We are also moving towards a system in which children have an individual education programme, which will not necessarily specify outcomes in terms of exam results, but will be expressed in terms of other forms of achievable outcomes. That will become one of the main vehicles for targets in the special educational needs sector.

In a school that has only children with special educational needs and for whom there are high expectations, there would have to be a different mechanism for examination results. Individual education programmes will deal partly with that. Schools should be able to make the appropriate adjustments. We are prepared to keep our eye on the matter in case any further action has to be taken.

We are introducing staff development programmes for individual education programmes. Staff members will therefore be helped to use their professional skills more appropriately—if that is the right expression—in developing appropriate targets for children with special needs. With the individual education programmes, there will be a movement away from measuring and away from overall targets, but where overall targets exist they can be adjusted down. To put that in context, one of the reasons for having targets is the need to have expectations for children. For too long—

especially for children with special educational needs—expectations have been too low. We should set ourselves challenging targets.

I was asked about mainstreaming and how it will be monitored. I will have to go away and consider that. Mainstreaming is a new provision in the bill and we will have to consider appropriate ways of gathering information on it. We have information on appeals in relation to the record of needs, but that would not necessarily give us the information base that we require.

I undertake to consider the matter. I do not want sections of the bill being used as an opt-out. If I thought that that might happen, I would want to act to prevent it. I will come back on how we propose to do that. The bill has not yet received royal assent, so the debate is perhaps a bit premature.

Points were raised about the definition of special educational needs and whether there are certain types of special needs that can be accommodated only in a national centre. It was suggested that we should have national centres with an element of national funding—that is an interesting point. I am not aware of conditions that can be dealt with adequately only in a national centre. Apart from the seven grant-aided schools that I mentioned, another 33 independent schools cover broadly—but not totally—analogous work. I would have to think very hard about whether there was a case for a national centre. My instinct tells me that it would be better to distribute resources throughout Scotland in a way that meets people's needs. Unless there were incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, that would be my preferred route.

If there were only three people in the country with a particular condition, who could logistically be accommodated only in a national centre, I would be happy to look into that. However, I am not aware that that is a big issue.

Nicola Sturgeon: I agree—I cannot think of any special need that, because of its nature, can be dealt with only on a national basis. However, when the number of children suffering from a particular condition is very small, that is different. We can consider the example of deaf children. I do not know the number of profoundly deaf children in Scotland; I imagine that it is not high. However, children with that particular special need seem to be inclined—more so than is the case with children with other special needs—to be with other children with the same need. In such cases, there might be a need for national provision. All I am looking for today—and I think that the minister has given it—is an indication that his mind is not closed to that possibility.

It is useful to know that the minister is aware of the issues that surround target setting. What is needed—and this is not an easy thing to do—is to

raise parental awareness of some of the issues. We have heard that parents of children without special needs have a fear that inclusion of children with special needs will impair their children's educational attainment. I do not want the debate to be about target setting, but in a culture in which parents are encouraged—rightly, to some extent—to consider the academic performance of schools, it is not difficult to understand how that kind of hostility might come about.

Does the minister have any thoughts on how parents, especially those who do not have children with special needs, can have their awareness raised about the positive advantages of inclusion?

Peter Peacock: That is a fair point. I am happy to look at ways in which we can help to raise awareness, because we do not want the majority of parents in one setting to act against inclusion because they feel that a school's reputation will be diminished because targets are not met.

A similar point has arisen in a different context. There was a report in one of yesterday's papers about bullying of children with special educational needs, and how that might force children to seek places in a special school when they would otherwise want to be in a mainstream school. We do not want children with special educational needs to be singled out for the benefit of the reputation of schools. We need to raise the whole community's appreciation of the benefits, not just to individual children but to the whole community, of accommodating within local schools all the needs of the community. That goes as much for targets as for bullying and other issues.

Fiona McLeod: I will make a suggestion and see what the minister thinks of it. If every child had an individual education plan, the targets for the school would be set according to its population as it is and as it changes. No child, therefore, would be singled out, because every child would have their special needs recognised. Would the Government consider going down that road?

Peter Peacock: We are in the business of promoting the concept of personal learning plans. The new community schools are piloting some of that. Ultimately, we are moving down a road on which every child will have a personal learning plan that seeks to help them achieve their full potential. That will result in major implications for resources and the way in which teachers operate, but that is the direction in which we are moving. Increasingly, we have to recognise that children learn at different speeds, whether or not they have learning difficulties. They learn in different contexts and do so more effectively at different times of day. We need to move down the road of tailoring education to meet the needs of individual children as well as the needs of groups of children. Over time, the agenda will shift and develop. I am not

saying that that means that broad targets will not still be appropriate—they probably will be—but the achievement of goals in personal learning plans will become increasingly important.

Karen Gillon: I apologise if I misunderstood the minister's answer, but one of the issues that came out of a visit that I made was that annual targets for some forms of special educational needs might not be appropriate. One of the schools that I visited worked to monthly targets. If they had been asked to set a target at the beginning of the year for a particular child they would have undersold that child's achievements in a number of areas and overstated them in areas in which they felt that the child might achieve more. Monthly targets are shared with parents and have proved to be a positive way of developing a child's potential. The school was concerned that it might be difficult to define annual targets for certain types of special educational needs and that that might stop progress.

Peter Peacock: You are referring to individual education plans and the need to tailor them to an individual child's needs. Plans might have to be reviewed several times because of changes in a child's circumstances—for example if the child improves their performance because their capacity is greater than was first thought, or if the target has to be lowered because the child's condition changes in some way. There must be flexibility. Those matters are being addressed in the context of individual education plans.

The Convener: I would like to bring this discussion to a conclusion. Ian Jenkins, do you want to ask the last question?

Ian Jenkins: I have a couple of hours' worth of questions.

The minister's comments on individual learning plans emphasise the idea that there is a continuum of educational needs. The issue of where the barrier between special educational needs and other educational needs comes down is interesting. We are asking much of teachers if we expect them to bring in individual education plans and take in special educational needs people. Do you accept that there are practical implications—I do not mean to make a big thing of it—for class sizes, timetabling and training, which is an issue that Cathy Peattie raised?

There are logistical problems related to the idea that every school should have access to occupational therapists, physiotherapists and so on. I accept the drift of where members are going. Although it is easy to talk about those issues, it is not easy to put them into practice without placing terrible demands on people who want to be reassured that we do not expect too much from them too quickly, without giving them the required

training and the resources.

Who oversees placement decisions? Is there a place for an arbitration service that would be clearly separated from the local authority and that would not be felt to be biased in any way against, or unsympathetic to, the views of parents? I have many other questions, but those will do for now.

17:00

Peter Peacock: Ian Jenkins asked where the trigger point comes in the spectrum of needs that everyone has—we are all different and we all have different learning capacities and learning requirements. That is one of the themes of the review of the record of needs. There are some people who believe that a record, in the traditional sense, is not required because people's needs must be defined, irrespective of who they are. The difficulty with that approach is whether, in a universal system, one could guarantee that those who have the most profound needs get the attention that they require. We would have to have some guarantees in place in such a system. However, those issues are being addressed as part of the debate on the record of needs.

That is also happening, in part, in relation to placement decisions. A parent can appeal to the First Minister or to Scottish ministers about the record of needs that has been created for their child, or about a failure to open a record of needs. However, once an appeal has been heard, there is no further avenue of appeal over where that child might be placed. That gives rise to a situation where parental requests are not always fully met. Some parents can seek a placing request, into which an appeal system has been built. While we do not rule out the possibility of some further form of appeal system, neither do we rule it in. We want to roll that into the full review of the record of needs process. We have an open mind about whether that is a necessary development.

We recognise that mainstreaming will become much more commonplace and we must have the teaching resources in schools to be able to support that system properly. That approach probably means that we will need more auxiliary support, more physiotherapy and more of a range of services, such as special rooms or units in schools, which can provide children with support.

Part of the McCrone committee report, which is being discussed over the summer with various interest groups, addresses the need for support for classroom teachers. Equally, flexibility exists in local authorities. Should a class have a higher incidence of children with special needs, it is open to the local authority to add auxiliary or classroom assistant support or to reduce the class size to meet particular requirements. Such decisions rest

at local level so that local authorities can apply their judgment to local circumstances. Only maximum class sizes and so on are specified in regulations; we do not specify minimum class sizes. Therefore local authorities have a fair amount of flexibility, and I hope—I believe—that local authorities address those requirements.

The Convener: I thank the minister for attending our meeting.

As ever, I am conscious of time, so we will push on with item 4 on the agenda, which is feedback from committee members on visits that have taken place. We will hear about three visits this week, the first of which was to Kirkcolm Primary School in Stranraer.

Karen Gillon: I had an interesting visit to Stranraer—I had a nice run down the coast on a lovely summer evening. I visited a unit for children with autism, which was part of a small rural school. The unit grew out of a pilot project on pre-school education that had just one pupil. It now has one pupil in pre-school and one in primary 1. A great deal of one-to-one support was given to the pupil by a special needs classroom assistant. That was the key to the success of the project. The pupil was integrated for many subjects. Initially, the pupil was not integrated at all, but as the year progressed, he was integrated into several subjects. The only subjects in which he was not integrated were numeracy and literacy subjects, where there were obvious problems.

The unit was interesting and well worth visiting. I spoke to the head teacher, the staff and the special needs auxiliary. The visit showed me how—certainly for autism—one could work toward successful integration. Both school and special needs staff had to have the will to make that work, as well a great deal of resources to ensure that support was in place for the child. Sometimes the staff-to-child ratio was 3:1.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Did you say that the unit was in a primary school?

Karen Gillon: Yes.

Mr Macintosh: What happened when the children went to secondary school?

Karen Gillon: We do not know yet because the unit has been running for only 18 months and the pupil is in primary 1.

Mr Macintosh: Were you able to meet the parents?

Karen Gillon: No.

The Convener: The second visit was to Donaldson's College by Kenneth Macintosh and me. Ken, do you want to kick off?

Mr Macintosh: Donaldson's College gave evidence at a meeting of the committee. We all remember Mark Macmillan, the young chap who gave evidence, and Janet Allan, the head teacher. Many of the points that they made in evidence then were raised again on the visit, such as the concern about losing grant-aided status and the impact that that will have on fees. General concerns about the future of the college were also expressed.

The people whom we met defended the college's record as a national school—they made that point quite forcefully and impressively. They also made other subtle points about the services that Donaldson's can offer. They said that if one were to rely purely on local authority funding for an individual child's needs, one would not necessarily be able to use that funding. For example, one could not appropriately use local authority funding to pay for services for one child, such as school clubs, discos and so on, which are sometimes used by the young adult community in Edinburgh.

There was a brand new speech and language department, which we did not have a chance to explore but which was interesting. A huge investment is being made there. That part of the visit touched on a whole area that I have not yet had a chance to consider in the special needs inquiry—speech and language problems. Donaldson's is taking a very interesting approach, which could change the nature of the school.

Another small point that was mentioned in passing was about psychologists not specialising in deaf issues. I made a note of that but have not yet followed it up. Parents mentioned that the fact that psychologists did not specialise in deaf issues was a difficulty for all the parents and children at the school.

The school is extremely impressive. The ratio of staff to children is incredible. In the class that we went into, there were two teachers for three pupils. That is excellent. The education that the children get is fantastic.

The most interesting part of the trip was meeting the parents. Almost two dozen parents from all over Scotland came to speak to us. They reinforced what Mark Macmillan told us at our meeting on 14 June. Most of the children at the school had experienced loneliness and bullying in mainstream schools before going to Donaldson's. The parents were supportive of Donaldson's and were keen to defend it.

Although nearly all the children have a record of needs, the parents were unhappy with the record of needs process. They were concerned about the lack of information that is available to them and the difficulty in accessing it. Because of that, they had difficult relations with local authorities, which

became the main point of conflict in their lives. They made the point strongly that they were not treated as equal partners in the process, despite policy. They felt that all the decisions that affect their children were financially driven, rather than needs driven. That is worrying. They said that, after their children gained access to Donaldson's—which was a battle for all but one of the parents in the room—the parents lost contact with the local authority and had relations only with the school.

The Convener: The committee had met Janet Allan and Mark Macmillan before. The children that we met at the school had much more complicated needs than Mark had. The school covers a wide spectrum of needs. For example, one of the children had some autistic tendencies. There was a recognition that, although the school specialised in deafness, it was not the only need that the children had.

Our meeting with the parents was useful. They talked about the lack of information about options that were open to them—a lot of them had heard about the school from family members or friends. They kept coming back to the point that the decisions about their children were finance led and that the local authorities that did not use Donaldson's did not tell people that that was an option because they did not want to pay for it. The issue about addressing the needs of the child, rather than doing something that the local authority felt was financially appropriate, was stressed by the parents. It would take a lot of effort to convince them that decisions were not purely financial. There should be more information and education about the issue.

Ken Macintosh made a point about educational psychologists not specialising in hearing difficulties. I understand that they generalise instead of developing specialisms. That could be a disadvantage.

Cathy Peattie: I have a general question. In the schools that I visited—I do not know about members who visited other schools—we did not get the opportunity to speak to parents. That is a problem for us. Perhaps we should record Donaldson's approach to working with parents as it has obviously been important. It also highlights the importance of another party being involved in the record of needs. Conflict arises from the available budget and the needs of the child. People must deal with those issues, but parents might not be aware of what is available and the choices that they can make, as people will not tell them because of the financial implications. That is a real issue in ensuring that every child gets the best that they can possibly get.

17:15

Ian Jenkins: Convener, you made the point about local authorities not being willing to spend that much money. According to Donaldson's evidence, if the school did not get the basic grant, it would have to charge the local authorities about three times as much. It will be a big investment in the placement.

The Convener: I have no evidence that it is cheaper for local authorities to keep children at home or to educate them within the main stream, but that was the perception of parents. That was why they thought that they had to fight to get the place at Donaldson's rather than attend a mainstream school. We must examine the funding that is available. You are right in that there will be a follow-on to that. If the money that is made available as grant aid to schools at the moment is withdrawn, each of the schools that I have been to—I have been to three out of the seven—has said that its costs will increase substantially.

Ian Jenkins: That is why I asked Peter Peacock to consider arbitration where people must examine the child's needs as one of the top priorities in making the decision.

Mr Macintosh: Donaldson's has changed. It was the first school in the world that catered for deaf children, which we should be proud of in Scotland. In recent years it has changed considerably. Janet Allan said that half the school population had multiple difficulties or disorders. That was a change for the school. The implication of that was that they would always go to a school such as Donaldson's as there was no possibility of a mainstream placement for them. It was not a question of choice. Donaldson's was the only place for them.

The Convener: The final visit by Ian Jenkins and me was to Burnfoot Community School in Hawick.

Ian Jenkins: It is a well-known school that has been visited by many ministers. There are photographs of them all over the walls. The day that we went was perhaps not the best day to see the school in action, because the staff were tidying up before the end of term and going to the primary 7 farewell concert.

Burnfoot gave the impression of being a good school—a community school in every sense. As far as special educational needs were concerned, we did not see much evidence of the youngsters that we have mentioned with profound difficulties. We knew of one youngster who was clearly well integrated and well catered for. I will not go into the details, for identification purposes.

The aspect of educational needs that we got the impression was being well catered for was in

relation to pupils with behavioural difficulties. We were impressed by the way that they were being catered for and looked after. There was an assertive discipline programme, individual learning programmes and all the measures that we would want the youngsters to be given every chance to benefit from. They received good attention, good programming and good facilities. I am not sure if I can say much more than that it was a good school, working in the way that we would want for the youngsters. The management seemed to have it taped. I am sorry if that is not enough, convener.

The Convener: That is fine. I would just like to add that the school was a very good example of a community school: the parents were supportive and came in to work with their children and for parent classes. We met groups of other adults in the community who were returning to learn in the school environment. It was a first-class example of what can be achieved at a community school. As Ian Jenkins said, it was very well managed.

The school was highlighted as including children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, not necessarily the kind of medical, physical or mental disabilities that we have seen in other places. Some children there have special educational needs and are being well catered for. A lot of that was down to the huge number of staff, both teaching and support staff. Other professions were also involved, including social workers, educational psychologists and various auxiliaries. For me, that underlined the need for resourcing such support, which has huge implications. However, it was working and having a result. The head teacher gave us a sheet with the attainment results for the past three or four years. We saw the huge difference since planning and arrangements for how the school worked were changed.

While facts and statistics cannot necessarily be appreciated from the bare statement, there was obvious evidence of an improvement in the education that children and other people going into the school are receiving. The improvement is making a difference to their lives, but there is a recognition of the resources that are required. The committee will need to consider that as this inquiry proceeds.

Ian Jenkins: Some of the youngsters either had been or in other circumstances would have been absentees. The school is managing to get pupils in by working with parents in the school and in other classes. It has changed the ethos.

The Convener: It is developing its nursery and an increasing number of children are going there—and not just because more children are becoming three years old—whereas previously there had been a reluctance to attend. There has been a vast improvement. We got a very positive message from the school all round.

Mr Macintosh: What was the attitude of other children and of parents at the school? We often hear about concern about the effect of targets, about staff concern at being assessed by unfair criteria and about parents' concern at sending their children to a school where the academic attainment might not be the same as at other schools.

The Convener: We did not meet any parents except very briefly. Ian Jenkins referred to some of them waiting to go into the concert.

We had two indications: one is the fact that parents are now coming into the school. In the past, that had not always been the case. Secondly, as the head teacher himself acknowledged, children in the locality used not to go to the school as it was not seen as the kind of place to go if you had ambition, but it is beginning to attract more and more children from the local area. They are not going elsewhere. We could not give members evidence of that as such, but that point was raised.

Ian Jenkins: The headmaster was not afraid of targets. Rather, he embraced the idea of targets. I was not always keen about such things, but the headmaster was very proud of how they are shaping up against targets. He clearly thinks that that is important in not undervaluing the potential of the youngsters.

Cathy Peattie: It sounds like a good story. The message for me is that the approach to parents must underpin the agenda. Parents were encouraged to come into the school for their own educational needs. The barrier that we face is that many parents do not feel welcome in schools and are not really included as partners. I hope that we will move towards the new community school model not only because it encourages agencies to work together, but because it gives parents a different, participatory role. In such a model, parents are seen as partners, both in terms of their children's development and their own education. Unless we change the current approach to parents in schools, we will not change the situation for parents and children.

Fiona McLeod: I want to take the opportunity to record the fact that I was unable to attend any of the visits because of diary commitments, but that I visited two special schools in my constituency because I thought it important to be on board. I would like to draw the committee's attention to the inclusion of parents at both schools that I visited. In Merkland School in Kirkintilloch, the fourth year pupils run a cafe on a Thursday morning. The pupils do everything, including making the food—the cheese scones are famous. Parents come in to buy a cup of tea and I joined them. Parents find that experience very valuable—not only those who see their children working in the cafe, but the

parents of younger children who get to see what the school is doing and what their children will be able to achieve.

I also visited Isobel Mair School in Giffnock, which runs parents groups that meet regularly. I went back one morning to join one of the groups to discuss issues of concern. There is good practice out there and we must ensure that everyone knows about it.

I also want to mention Martin O'Neill from Merkland School, who won a gold medal at the special olympics in the Netherlands.

The Convener: I am sure that you gave him our congratulations.

Ian Jenkins: The school that I mentioned in Hawick is a new community school. There are issues around resources and funding there, too. Pilots have an awful history of being well funded, then adopted as the right approach, but not extended properly. Burnfoot Community School has three-year funding and needs to get it renewed. It would be a shame for such a project to have its wings clipped because the pilot scheme came to an end. The extension of pilot schemes must be done properly.

The Convener: Thank you for those comments. We have about three minutes to get through the remaining agenda items. I will run through them very quickly, but members should indicate if they wish to comment.

Roman Remains (Cramond)

The Convener: We have had a response from the Executive to Brian Monteith's report on the Roman remains at Cramond. Unfortunately, Brian is unable to attend the meeting this afternoon because he has an engagement at the other Holyrood—the palace—but he is happy with the suggestion that we ask the local authority to comment on the report and the response from the Scottish Executive.

Fiona McLeod: I was surprised by some of the Scottish Executive's comments on Historic Scotland and how it tried to distance Historic Scotland from the management. I had understood from Brian Monteith's report that Historic Scotland was more than happy to get involved in setting up a management team.

The Convener: My understanding is that Historic Scotland has realised that it does not own much of the remains and that they are therefore not within its remit. However, if Historic Scotland were to be asked to get involved, it might take a different view on the matter. At this stage, we should invite comments from the local authority and take it from there. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Committee Business

17:30

The Convener: The conveners liaison group has agreed the research proposal on consulting children and young people. The contract for that will be let over the summer.

A new programme for meetings after the recess has now been drafted. The Education, Culture and Sport Committee will meet every Wednesday morning. It seems preferable to have a set time and day for meetings, rather than to shift around as we have had to this year. Members will be formally notified of the meetings when all the information is given out.

Annual Report

The Convener: Members will notice that there is a word count of 397 words at the bottom of the annual report. We have been asked to submit annual reports of about 400 words. If members want to make any changes to the report, I would ask them to suggest what can be left out—to keep the report to about 400 words. However, if members think that something has been omitted, we will endeavour to include it. The annual report runs until the end of April; anything that we have done since then should not be included.

Lewis Macdonald: In the paragraph beginning

“Inquiries were begun into special educational needs”,

it might be useful to note that the committee also took evidence from the BBC and the Scottish Media Group on relevant aspects of broadcasting in Scotland.

The Convener: That was well spotted. Do members agree to the report with the inclusion of that comment?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: We were going to discuss the last item in private, but we have run out of time. Perhaps members can give any comments on the special educational needs inquiry to the clerks. We will come back with another draft of that report at the next meeting after the recess.

Finally, this is Gillian Baxendine's last meeting before she goes on maternity leave. We wish her all the best and look forward to hearing her good news in September. We look forward to having her back at the committee some time after that.

Meeting closed at 17:32.

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