

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Monday 2 October 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

28th Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
*Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

WITNESSES

Eleanor Coner (Scottish Parent Teacher Council)
Iain Findlay (Scottish School Boards Association)
Don Giles (Scottish Qualifications Authority)
Judith Gillespie (Scottish Parent Teacher Council)
Ann Hill (Scottish Qualifications Authority and Scottish School Boards Association)
Michael Leech (Scottish Qualifications Authority)
David Miller (Scottish Qualifications Authority)
Alan Smith (Scottish School Boards Association)
Jeff Taylor (Scottish School Boards Association)
Paul Thomson (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

David McLaren

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

LOCATION

Glasgow City Chambers

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Monday 2 October 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 13:46*]

School Exams

The Convener (Mrs Mary Mulligan): I apologise for the delay, but we can now make a start. The committee is still a couple of members short, but they will join us later.

I will start by introducing the committee's adviser, Hamish Long. Hamish attended the committee meeting last week, but I forgot to introduce him. I will bring Hamish into the discussion when we discuss our line of questioning, but it might also be useful for members to meet him following the sessions with the witnesses. We are trying to timetable that into our arrangements, so that we have an opportunity to discuss what has been heard and how we will follow it up subsequently.

Last week, we discussed information about advice and discussions between the Executive and civil servants being made available. At that stage, it was agreed that I would meet the deputy convener of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee—Annabel Goldie—to discuss how to progress with that. I met Annabel on Thursday and we agreed that both committees feel that that information might be important, but that we will continue to hold our normal meetings to seek information as required. We agreed that, towards the end of the investigation—but not right at the end—we will discuss in our respective committees whether there are still gaps in the information. At that stage, we will decide whether to press the Executive further to release information.

I wish to state clearly that it is not a question of the committee saying that it accepts totally what the Executive said on confidentiality. We have said that we will await the outcome of the initial stages of the inquiry.

Following my meeting with Annabel Goldie, however, I have been made aware—through various reports—that information is being made available to the Executive-appointed consultants that is not being made available to the committee. I find that very disappointing. If information that is not accessible to members of this Parliament is

being made available to outside consultants, that calls into question how the Executive views the relative roles of the on-going inquiries. I suggest that I write to the Executive on the committee's behalf, pressing it to make available all the information that is currently being seen by anyone else in connection with the inquiry.

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I endorse that approach, and I am grateful to the convener for updating the committee. I attended the early part of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee meeting with Cathy Peattie because we were alerted that morning to a letter that contains a substantial amount of information that we will not see and which will be excised from the final report. That causes a lot of problems. I think that Cathy saw the letter the day before the meeting. She spoke at the start of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee meeting and I followed up her comments. Your move is correct, convener. I hope that it will have the support of all members of the committee.

I hope that it will be made clear that the committee must have everything. For example, there is a great deal of information that we need on who complained, who wrote to the Scottish Qualifications Authority, who wrote to the minister and who wrote to civil servants during the period from last September until March. I understand that the consultants will see that information, but it has not even been mentioned to the committees.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Convener, thank you for the actions that you have taken so far. I support what you and Mike Russell said. I would add the caveat that, in asking for the information that is being made available to Deloitte & Touche to be made available to the committee, we make it clear that we want the information to be made available to the committee irrespective of whether Deloitte & Touche asks for it. I would not want our request to meet with a response to the effect that Deloitte & Touche did not ask for that information, so the committee does not need to see it. The information that is available should be made available to the committee and to the consultants.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I agree. I became concerned at the meeting on Friday. If committees of Parliament are involved in investigations, all relevant information must be made available to them. It is inappropriate that consultants will see information that the committee will not see, so I welcome your statement, convener.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I welcome it, too.

Michael Russell: Given the great interest in the issue and the fact that there is a lot of reporting on

it, I presume that, rather than discuss the matter in public, you will make known at the start of the meeting what you intend to do, convener. That way it will be on the record and none of us will have to go around talking about it.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Heaven forfend—some of us might not be able to resist it.

Michael Russell: Heaven forfend indeed, Johann. I would not like to put you in that position, as you know.

The Convener: I will do what Mike Russell has suggested.

Ian Jenkins: What is the case regarding the Official Secrets Act 1989? Would we see the information and have to swear this, that and the other?

The Convener: To be honest, I do not know, but we are as able as anybody else is to take decisions on such matters. It is important that the committee sees the information that is available. We can deal with issues practically as and when they arise.

Ian Jenkins: I agree.

The Convener: I believe that we were in public session because I had not put the question to go into private session. Do we agree that we will go into private session?

Members indicated agreement.

13:53

Meeting continued in private.

14:27

Meeting resumed in public.

The Convener: Welcome to this meeting of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee. I welcome in particular members of the SQA board, who will shortly be giving evidence to the committee.

Before we hear that evidence, I would like to make a statement to the public, which might also interest board members. The committee has discussed the question of the information that is being made available by the Executive to the consultants who, like the committee, are conducting an inquiry into the SQA. The committee feels that any information that would help in the inquiry should be made available to it. I intend to write to the Executive to say that information that is available to Deloitte & Touche should be made available to the committee as a matter of course.

I welcome the chair of the SQA board, Mr Miller.

After Mr Miller has introduced his team, I will open the meeting to questions from members. I suspect that if I say that this session will last for an hour, it will last for two, so I will not put a time limit on it. However, I will be grateful if members keep their questions brief and witnesses respond with fairly brief answers.

David Miller (Scottish Qualifications Authority): I introduce Ann Hill of the Scottish School Boards Association; Michael Leech, lately of Stevenson College; and Paul Thomson, head teacher at Jordanhill School.

The Convener: I apologise to Mr Thomson for the fact that we have spelled his name incorrectly on his name plate.

David Miller: Michael Leech and Paul Thomson are chairmen of two of the principal committees of the board.

The Convener: We will come to that. Before I invite questions from members, would you like to add anything to the written submissions that you have made?

David Miller: No. We are ready for questions—at least, we expect them.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): What is the role of the board and how does it work? There is obviously a complicated committee structure. Can you explain the role of each committee? In particular, what relevance did each committee have to the exam crisis as it developed? Which committee had the key role?

14:30

David Miller: There is the chairman's committee, which deals with small items if they arise between board meetings. There is the finance, planning and general purposes committee, whose objective is to ensure that the SQA operates in a financially sound way. It deals with other issues, as well. There is an audit committee, which is headed by a banker and runs the internal auditors, PricewaterhouseCoopers. There is a three-committee structure for national qualifications. Those committees are for school qualifications—Paul Thomson is on that committee—higher national qualifications and development work on Scottish vocational qualifications.

There is an accreditation committee, which runs on the other side of a Chinese wall and whose meetings I do not attend. That committee accredits other bodies to run the Scottish vocational qualifications programme.

Mr Macintosh: Which of those is the key committee for monitoring the exam process?

David Miller: The finance, planning and general purposes committee is the key committee.

Mr Macintosh: How involved is the board in the day-to-day management of the SQA?

David Miller: The clear objective of a non-executive board is to be not at all executive—we are there to give leadership and guidance. Members might say that that sounds odd in the current circumstances, but it is not our function to become involved in detailed executive matters. In fact, it would not be possible for us to do that because the other non-executive board members attend committee and board meetings on an as-and-when basis and have a fairly infrequent involvement. The board is charged with the strategic development of the organisation.

Mr Macintosh: As the exam difficulties emerged, should the SQA have been accountable to you or to the Scottish Executive education department?

David Miller: The board of the SQA is the ultimate body to which the SQA is accountable; we, rather than the Executive or anybody else, are responsible for the SQA.

Mr Macintosh: Would you expect to pick up on any difficulties as they emerged? Would you expect to be kept informed of developments in any crisis?

David Miller: Yes. We asked many questions about the time pressures that started about a year ago. We received reassurances from the executive—in answer to our very specific questions—that everything would be all right on the night. It appears now that what happened was one big error, but I suspect that it was the result of an accumulation of small errors, which caused delay and internal problems.

Mr Macintosh: From the board meeting minutes, it appears that the SQA executive and management brought issues to the board, rather than the other way round.

David Miller: That is not entirely true, but in any organisation the board tends to work to the executive's timetable. The SQA board had considerable input to what was happening through the committee structure and the board.

Mr Macintosh: Who is on the board and what experience do they bring to it?

David Miller: Everybody who was appointed was selected as an individual. However, in constructing the board we—I am speaking for the Scottish Executive, although perhaps I should not—have an eye on the whole area. For example, Ann Hill represents parents and Michael Leech represents further education. Schools are represented through a variety of people and the

Educational Institute of Scotland is represented. There are some businessmen on the board because of the vocational qualifications side of the SQA's activities. There are some bankers on the board, who are useful for the audit committee.

I can get the exact numbers for the committee if members want that, but I think that 15 members are appointed by the Scottish Executive and that we can appoint five more, bearing in mind areas that we feel need representation, either geographically or technically.

Mr Macintosh: You cover the spectrum of Scottish education, or at least the examinable curriculum. If there were any major concerns in Scottish education about the operation of the SQA, one would expect the individuals on the board to be informed of that and to raise the matter at board meetings. Is that what happens?

David Miller: Yes—from time to time people raised anxieties, which the board followed up. I followed up one late case in great detail and again received a reassurance from the management team. I can go into the detail of that if members want. Ann Hill quite properly raised concerns from the Scottish School Boards Association's perspective about whether examination papers were going to be available in schools. We dealt with that concern to ensure that they were.

There are a number of such instances. We were all aware that there was a problem with registration, which had a knock-on effect on markers and so on at a later stage. We pursued that problem and were assured that registration had been completed, although it was completed late. Similarly, the distribution of national assessment banks placed a huge load on the SQA. We were aware of the delay in those being issued. That was partly the fault of the Scottish Executive and partly because of a delay in printing. We had to reread documents and redo them before they could be handed out to schools to our satisfaction.

Paul Thomson (Scottish Qualifications Authority): It is fair to say that any expressions of concern by schools and colleges were reflected in discussions at board level. There are three head teachers, two college principals and two practising teachers on the board. All those concerns were voiced and appropriate reassurances were given to the board.

David Miller: May I make another comment, which might be relevant? I spend a lot of time going to schools. During the past year, I have talked to children, principal teachers, staff and head teachers. Although something that was not quite right in the system was mentioned on each occasion, those things were put right later. On none of those visits was I given the impression by

any head teacher or principal teacher that they were involved in an undoable project.

Mr Macintosh: We will come to the detail of specific concerns, which might or might not have been picked up. You talk about issues being raised by board members, which we would expect to happen. However, it is difficult to follow that in the minutes. Where in the minutes of the board meetings are those issues? When I read the minutes, I see that the issues were raised by the SQA, for example in the meetings in March and June. Are we talking about a culture in which issues are raised outside board meetings or informally?

David Miller: No. Some issues were raised with me between board meetings, because I am obligated to work a day a week. In fact I have worked a great deal more than that. I do not think that it is fair to say that the culture is such that we sit about waiting for the SQA executive to tell us what questions to ask.

A number of issues appear in the minutes. On information technology, we asked the IT boss to appear before the board to give a detailed demonstration of what was being done. That was done on our initiative, not on the initiative of the SQA executive.

Mr Macintosh: We will not go into specific examples, as I can see that all my colleagues want to ask questions. What you describe is what we would expect of the board, but that does not emerge in the minutes. Do you agree that the minutes of the board meetings give no flavour of the board's asking questions of the SQA? For example, nobody raised the matter of late marking.

David Miller: You will find that that appears under the chief executive's comments. Off the top of my head, I know that that is where the comment about late marking appears, because we were given reports on that under the chief executive's comments. I asked that there should always be such an item. That was his initiative, not ours.

Mr Macintosh: To clarify, I think that you are referring to the June meeting of the board of management. Point 15/5 on page 2 of the minutes concerns the report on the 2000 examination diet and reads as if all the information came from the chief executive. Are you saying that the report is inaccurate and that there was a dialogue in which you were raising subjects and he was responding?

David Miller: That is correct.

Johann Lamont: I am interested in the fact that your position gives you a strategic role and allows you to ask questions. At what stage do you establish that the answers that you receive are accurate? Does the process provide for you to go

beyond raising concerns so that you can get more than reassurance and obtain evidence that the situation has moved on? That issue is reflected elsewhere. Given your recent experience, how do you think that the structure of your board should change to ensure that more than simple reassurance is given? If people give you inaccurate reassurances, it looks as though you are left hanging; clearly, your role should have been stronger than that.

David Miller: I understand what you are saying. For instance, on the information technology question, we asked for the individual concerned to appear before us.

Although the audit committee of the SQA takes ideas from the board as a whole, it is responsible for setting the agenda for the following year and it covers such items. Neither the board nor, I think, the chief executive, had any idea about the extent of the delay with the information. When we were aware of it, however, we asked that the internal audit committee be set to investigate the whole process after the results—which we presumed would have a hole, but not a very big one—were issued. For sure, that was after the event but, as a finance, planning and general purposes committee note from June shows, we asked David Elliot to come to talk to us and offered him increased resources.

As for Johann Lamont's third question, I said to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee that I believe that the people on the board have appropriate seniority and experience and that the board has the right overall constituency. The situation would have been helped by the inclusion of observers from the Scottish Executive, as the Scottish Examination Board and the Scottish Vocational Education Council had. I had been chairman of both of those bodies. Such observers could have given a prompt. We asked—and I asked fairly aggressively—for their continued presence on the SQA board, but I was turned off that idea by an official who believed that the Executive had to cut costs and that removing observers was one way of doing that. It was explained to me that hundreds of people were going to different committees. There was also a concern that their presence meant consent, even when they did not consent. I am not sure whether I accepted that argument, because the arrangement had always worked well before. We also said to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee that it would help if—

The Convener: Sorry, can I just interrupt you for a moment while whoever's phone is ringing is switched off. I thank Michael Russell for switching off his phone. I remind anybody else whose phone might be on, including me, to switch it off, as phones can interfere with the sound equipment.

David Miller: That is somewhat better than what happened as we were walking here across George Square, when our adviser's papers disappeared. I am not sure what secrets might have gone with them, but he managed to get them all back.

It would also have helped to have had more regular meetings—we think twice a year—with the minister. SCOTVEC used to see the minister at least once a year. As a result, a formal letter covering the minister's expectations was written to SCOTVEC. That meant that there was a regular exchange of views, which continued with Helen Liddell and Brian Wilson. To meet the minister every six months would help.

I am not seeking to put blame anywhere—what happened is the board's fault. However, there was also a sense that the higher still development unit, which was handing over a block of concrete, so to speak, for each subject to be put into effect, was having regular meetings with our executive, which were reported on at the board meeting. We felt that part of the higher still development introduction was coming through those means: the Executive was involved in handing over information to our executive about getting on with higher still.

Johann Lamont: The role of your board is unclear: you can ask questions but you have no way in which to establish whether the answers that you receive are accurate. Nevertheless, you think that your board would be strengthened by the attendance of representatives of the Scottish Executive or the minister. Does the board constitute an unnecessary middle layer?

14:45

David Miller: The purpose of the board is to look after strategy. We were ensuring that the organisation was financially secure. The board had a considerable input through the committees.

With hindsight, we must accept that it would have been helpful to have had a closer view of the relationship between the Scottish Executive and the SQA in the handover of higher still. We are talking about one area of the very large responsibility of the SQA in further education, international work, workplace assessment and so on. The remit is enormously broad, although not unmanageable. If we had not mismanaged data, we would not be sitting here now. The project was doable.

Johann Lamont: Only if you had not mismanaged the data. There is a question about something so important being inside so much other work; there is a suggestion that it began to impact on your ability to deliver, particularly if, as you say, one of the problems was that you had so

much other work to do.

David Miller: No—and I am aware that the previous and much-respected chief executive of the Scottish Examination Board is sitting in the corner of this room.

What I find amazing—I said this to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee—is that this arose even though the same people were running the exam system this year as were running it last year, the year before that and so on all the way back. Only a section of the SQA has gone badly wrong, not the whole organisation.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I am going to go over ground that we have already covered because I am not entirely satisfied with the answers that we have been given. In your letter to Ann Hill of the 5 April, you say that it is at board meetings that

"detailed explanations have been given of the current situation and the actions being taken to ensure that SQA meets all its obligations."

Forgive me for saying so, but that is not reflected in the minutes of the board meetings.

The minutes of 23 March mention additional pressure on staff, but there is no mention of data collection or marking problems. We know, from the evidence that Ron Tuck gave last week, that by 22 June problems had been identified in relation to massive amounts of outstanding data, which four days later became missing data. However, that is not mentioned anywhere in the board minutes.

I note that you said that the chairman's committee met between board meetings, but in June it met on the same day as the board. None of the problems is mentioned. At the board meeting of 22 June, the chief executive's comments are on a report on the SQA's annual conference. Where were the problems being discussed? If they were not being discussed at board meetings, should they have been? Were you in receipt of enough information and did you ask enough questions?

David Miller: It sounds like a lame excuse, but at the time when Ron Tuck gave us those details, the minutes were not as full as they might have been. That is something to which we will pay attention in the future. However, the problems were discussed and we were aware of them. The chairman's committee discussed only one issue, which was the appointment of fellows.

Nicola Sturgeon: Quite. That seems rather bizarre.

David Miller: The chairman's committee is very small and is intended only for such purposes.

Nicola Sturgeon: Can I clarify what the committee is for? Earlier, you said that the committee met in order to discuss issues that

arose between board meetings. It turns out that the June committee meeting took place on the same day as the board meeting and only in order to discuss matters such as the appointment of fellows. Which is the correct explanation?

David Miller: It was a coincidence that the committee met on the same day as the board. When we appoint fellows, we have a large number of confidential names, which we would not wish to disclose to the whole board; we go to the board with a recommendation about whom we would like to put forward. However, that day we did not do so. The appointment of fellows was the only issue that was debated and the only reason for the meeting. Usually, unless there is any substantive business, the chairman's committee meets only between board meetings. In the eight years that I have been involved with SCOTVEC, the SEB and the SQA, the committee has not had to debate anything substantive.

Nicola Sturgeon: We appear to have very selective minutes of board meetings where some problems were partly discussed. If those minutes do not provide the best record of discussions about the problems that were arising—because you say that you knew all about them—and the action that you were deciding on, where can we find such a record?

David Miller: I have to accept your implication. The only such record would be in the minutes of the board meetings.

Nicola Sturgeon: I have one final question, which might take us on a little bit, although you might want to come back to it later. In your evidence to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee last week, you mentioned that a member of staff alerted you to specific problems. What were those problems, who was the staff member and what did you do in response?

David Miller: I would rather not name the staff member, who is an extremely valued individual. I will name them if I have to, but that does not seem necessary. Do you want me to do so?

Nicola Sturgeon: Yes, I think that we require that information.

David Miller: Well, let me come to it. In early July, a member of the Scottish Executive told me that he was very concerned that the SQA had not covered some of the points to ensure that a resident teacher would be available in school to provide information during the holidays. Furthermore, he said that David Elliot's attitude to the issue had been extremely laid back. I asked him whether he wanted that to be an official or unofficial comment. He said that it was an unofficial comment and that he just wanted to let me know. As a result, I went to Dalkeith and spent some time with all the department heads, one of

whom told me of his concern that they were not going to get much more than 80 per cent right. I was knocked sideways by that comment. I had a conversation with Ron Tuck, who then had his own conversations.

At a videoconferencing meeting that I attended in Glasgow, in which the senior staff of the SQA participated from Dalkeith, I received a reassurance from them all that things were doable and that it would be right for us to go on the day. I asked the particular individual whether, given what he had told me, he still subscribed to that decision; he said, "Yes, absolutely." He told me that the SQA was a can-do organisation, that the members had their heads up and knew that they could do it. That was a fairly reasonable inquiry into a comment that was made to me unofficially.

Nicola Sturgeon: When did that happen?

David Miller: I have not minuted the conversation. However, it was some time after the schools broke up.

Nicola Sturgeon: Was it after the board meeting in June?

David Miller: Absolutely. It was at the beginning of July. I went to Dalkeith specifically to follow up that unofficial comment and to try to satisfy myself about the organisation.

Nicola Sturgeon: You will presumably be able to tell us exactly when it happened, as you will have it diaried.

David Miller: I do not think that it is in my diary; however, I will do my best to find out. The staff member's name was Bill Arundel, who is a much-respected and valued member of staff.

The Convener: That was useful. Thank you.

Michael Russell: I want to ask some specific questions about the minutes that have been provided to us. You are a board of management. Does the board receive copies of the minutes of all subordinate committees?

David Miller: Absolutely.

Michael Russell: Would that include the project board minutes on the awards processing system, or APS?

David Miller: No. The board of management receives the minutes of the board committees.

Michael Russell: Who would receive the project board minutes about setting up the new computer system?

David Miller: The internal executive.

Michael Russell: Would you see those minutes as chair of the board of management?

David Miller: No.

Michael Russell: So you would not know the detail of what was happening within the project board.

David Miller: No, not from those minutes.

Michael Russell: Would any of the specialist chairs see those minutes?

David Miller: No.

Michael Russell: Would you be surprised to learn—you may be hearing it for the first time—that, for most of this year, the project board minutes have indicated a substantial risk of not being able to complete the work because of problems with the delivery of software and the processing of external assessments? That risk was specified on 24 May, when the minutes said that, unless there was timely delivery of the software that was being waited for and unless something was done about processing external assessments, “serious challenges” would be likely in completing the task.

David Miller: We as a board, and I as chairman, were absolutely aware that the software was being written late, but that that was not a software or computer problem but a data management problem, which is a very different thing. We were aware that we were running close to the wire, but that wire was always held to be achievable, so to speak.

Michael Russell: The minute says that

“in addition to the timely delivery of the . . . software to support the processing of external assessments we would now be facing serious challenges in relation to the processing of large volumes of entries and results data in a short period of time.”

That is what you are referring to—that is data handling. The experts in your organisation were putting that down to difficulties in delivering software and in getting the staffing right for processing external assessments.

David Miller: I will ask my colleagues to comment on that. The sequence of events, as far as I was concerned, involved both an extremely short time scale to write software, which did exactly what was asked of it, and to deal with lost data. The problem was caused by data not being entered at all.

Michael Russell: That is not the point that I am making. The point that I am making is that, on 24 May, the experts in your organisation were saying to one another, in a meeting that has been recorded, that they did not think that they could do the work.

David Miller: I am unaware that that is what they were saying.

Michael Russell: They were saying that they were going to have huge difficulties and “serious

challenges”. You say that you were told that in early July. What was happening in the organisation during the six weeks between 24 May and early July that meant that you did not know that the problem existed?

David Miller: I well knew that we were running very close to the wire in the introduction of the software. I was aware that there were problems, but we were being given reassurances that those problems would be overcome. With the greatest of respect, in most walks of life having a challenge does not necessarily imply failure.

Michael Russell: You have not read these minutes and I think that you should. All the way through, they indicate that the group was having considerable problems and that large risks were involved in the completion of its task. Should your staff have drawn that to your attention?

David Miller: Yes, I would have thought that they certainly should have done. It was being made clear to me and, I think, to the board that, although there was a problem, it could be overcome.

Michael Russell: Why do you think that the staff did not draw your attention, or the attention of the board, to the difficulties? Nicola Sturgeon has quoted from the board minutes in which a whole range of things are discussed. The chief executive points out, for example, that you came sixth in a design competition for your annual report. Why were they not telling you the things that really mattered?

David Miller: They were telling us that they were having considerable problems. We were not given the detail of those problems, but we were assured that they would be overcome. Why we were not told I have no idea. The organisation is not one with a culture of discouraging people from talking openly at any level.

Michael Russell: Is it an organisation with a culture of passing the buck?

David Miller: No, I do not think so.

Michael Russell: Would that not be a fair interpretation of another set of minutes—that of the meeting of the finance, planning and general purposes committee of August this year? The minutes contain a section in which members are updated on what had happened, which is followed by a lengthy section in which members seem incredibly keen to say that they had had lots of assurances from Mr Tuck and Mr Elliot, that therefore they could not have been expected to know that anything had gone wrong and that it was nothing to do with them. Is that not a passing-the-buck exercise by that committee?

David Miller: I would stress the fact that we were not there as executives.

Michael Russell: Is it not a passing-the-buck exercise to note things in such detail in a minute? Some seven days after the problems had started, people on your board were very keen to say that it was all the fault of Mr Elliot and Mr Tuck and nothing to do with the board. Do you regret that?

David Miller: I am absolutely unaware of the context in which that was said. That is not my memory of the tenor of the debate—although it is obviously a fact that the meeting was minuted.

15:00

Michael Russell: I will read the minute to you.

"Members referred to the discussions which had taken place at the last meeting of the Committee on 1 June . . . Mr Elliot had offered reassurances to the Committee with regard to a successful outcome of the examination diet and stated that contingency plans had been put in place to cover every eventuality."

It continues by saying that the minute

"had been highlighted by the Convener when the minutes of the meeting were considered by the Board of Management on 22 June. Mr Tuck was present at the meeting and had concurred with the Convenor's report. The Committee considered therefore it had been entirely reasonable to rely on the assurances from Mr Tuck and Mr Elliot regarding the 2000 examinations. Indeed in the absence of firm evidence to the contrary there was no alternative but to give full weight to the assurances of the Chief Executive and the Awards Director."

Does that not say that your organisation had decided on 15 August that it knew what had happened, that only those two individuals were to blame and that no one else was involved?

David Miller: No, but it would be unreasonable to have expected us not to have a discussion—such as the one we are having today—about where our responsibilities lay and whether we had pursued them as far as we could.

Michael Russell: Mr Minto was the convener, but you were present. Do you now regret the way in which the minute is written? Would it not have been better to have waited for a fuller inquiry, such as the investigation that we are carrying out or the Deloitte & Touche one?

David Miller: There are five inquiries, actually. I do not think that that minute tries to pre-empt any such outcome.

Michael Russell: On your watch as chair of this organisation, you have had what is probably the worst disaster ever to hit Scottish education. Have you considered resigning?

David Miller: My position is entirely at the disposal of the First Minister.

Michael Russell: That is not what I asked you.

David Miller: I know that it is not.

Michael Russell: Did you, at any stage, consider resigning?

David Miller: Of course I considered that. However, I do not think that it helps an organisation if it is completely destabilised from top to bottom. The First Minister is responsible for my appointment and can terminate it whenever he wishes. He may already have decided to do that after these meetings.

Michael Russell: Do you think that it was unfair to allow Ron Tuck to go without you going as well? Do you think that that says something about the attitude of the organisation?

David Miller: No, it does not. It was the right decision. I think that Ron Tuck thought that as well. The decision was an agreed one. It was not something that I made him do and he did not simply walk off. We agreed that it was the appropriate thing to do. It was also helpful to the SQA, and that was his principal motivation.

Mr Macintosh: I want to go back to how we follow up what was discussed in the minutes. Minutes of meetings are useful because they not only record what was discussed but can be followed up. That allows us to see what actions have been taken.

The difficulty that we are having, Mr Miller, is that, although you say that you were aware of a general problem—and the executive minutes, as Michael Russell points out, show that the executive was extremely aware of problems with this year's exam process—the board minutes do not reflect that. The finance, planning and general purposes committee is important in that respect, yet, although the report of its meeting on 1 June takes up quite a substantial section, it is not as large as it could be—it is three quarters of a page long and takes the form of a statement delivered by Mr Elliot. It is not followed up, except in the sense that you agreed in the general board meeting to note Mr Elliot's paper. We do not get the impression that you were raising concerns, asking questions and following them up at subsequent meetings.

You just told Michael Russell that you were aware that software was running late. How did you find that out? What did you do about it? Who did you ask in the board meetings?

David Miller: I saw Ron Tuck weekly and I also saw the computer people quite regularly. I made it my business to go and talk to them. Without going into the absolute detail of what was going on, I accepted the assurances that they gave.

Mr Macintosh: I accept that picture, but I cannot see where it is written down. Would I be right in saying that the questions were raised and that the board was aware of the problems but that that

process was not minuted in a way that is meaningful to an outside observer?

David Miller: I will ask Michael Leech or Paul Thomson to make a comment. I think that I have talked enough.

Paul Thomson: If you look at the minutes of the board, the national qualifications committee and the higher national qualifications committee, at every meeting you will find a report on the implementation of higher still, which would contain a number of statements about the progress of the various projects within higher still. In their meetings, the board members or the members of the two principal committees would ask detailed questions about what the reports actually meant and whether the assurances contained in them were accurate.

Knowledge about the difficulties with the awards processing system emanated from many of us, as heads of centres. We reflected back to the organisation the concerns that we were experiencing, which mirrored the general concerns of centres around Scotland.

At that time, we asked questions. If it was felt that the report had given assurances, it would be right to say that many of the questions asked would not be reflected in the subsequent minute, as it would be assumed that the report that had been tabled covered adequately the issues that had been discussed. On many occasions, the specific questions asked by me and others were not minuted.

Michael Leech (Scottish Qualifications Authority): I was also one of the board members who pressed questions on the awards processing system. I remember that I raised the issue in September 1999 and again in December 1999. One of the ways in which the chief executive responded was to attend with one of the other directors a meeting of all Scotland's college principals in January, in order to answer questions face to face with heads of centre. We were given reassurances such as, "We know that we are up against tight deadlines and we know that we have some delays, but we are pressing ahead with a programme to get things back on track in time for the summer." That is an example of how we tried to work on the interdependence of the institutions and the SQA in order to obtain the satisfactory delivery of the operation.

Mr Macintosh: I will ask a short follow-up question just to nail down this issue. The minutes of the executive have been mentioned. I will take as an example a memorandum from Don Giles to the management team, dated 21 June, in which he says:

"I suspect there is not a unit plan in SQA which has not been overtaken by events."

He goes on to say that management would have to

"identify how far we have been blown off course".

From that, you get a picture of the exact scale of the problem. At the beginning of his memo, Don Giles says:

"I am very conscious that for some months now, we have been increasingly concentrating and devoting . . . our resources"

to getting the exams right.

One sees that in the executive's memos and minutes, but not in the board's memos and minutes. I am wondering why that should be the case.

David Miller: It might be helpful if I explain one of our downward processes.

There was obvious concern about the number of people who were presumed to be affected by missing data. The figures started coming in about two or three weeks before—I cannot remember the exact time—when something like 20,000 candidates were affected. I rang Ron Tuck regularly, and that number was coming down all the time. On the day before—that is, the day on which the brown envelopes were meant to go in the post—the number was down to between 1,000 to 1,400 candidates, with 0.5 per cent of the courses being affected, as opposed to the two point something per cent that turned out to be affected.

On the morning on which the brown envelopes should have been received, I went through to Dalkeith to say to the staff how grateful we were for the enormous effort that they had put into the work. I was telephoned and told that the numbers were down to only 300 or 400 affected candidates, as far as higher students were concerned. I went to Dalkeith and walked into the examination hall, where there were several thousand certificates that had not been posted.

It is not very easy for a non-executive member to be able to trace that sequence of events, particularly sitting in front of the press making assertions that turn out to be complete nonsense. However, those assertions were based on the belief that the number of candidates affected was going down steadily.

When we saw the minister in July, he asked, "Why don't you hold back publishing the results a week if you feel you should?" We decided not to do that, as the figures were so low that a delay would have been a huge disappointment to the majority. The sensible approach was to deal with the situation and with the fallout as quickly as possible thereafter.

With hindsight, I am extremely grateful that we

published the results. If we had delayed for a week, we would not really have been any better off by knowing that the additional items were missing. We were following a story that had a perfect logic about it. I cannot say more than that, but my visit to the exam hall that day was not one that I enjoyed very much.

The Convener: We shall return to the issue of communications after 10 August. However, there are a few supplementary questions on this point before we move on.

Ian Jenkins: Why in heaven's name were we running late with the software for the most important exams in the Scottish education system? What was wrong? Ken Macintosh touched on that when he said that each unit had been taken over by events. How much blame can be laid at the door of changes, good or bad, in the higher still development unit? Was that unit causing you problems that you could not cope with in the time available?

David Miller: You are talking to a one-day-a-week individual, and I apologise if I get this wrong, but the higher still development allowed a very short time scale for the software to be written. Some 14 months before, the design rules were still being produced, so the software had to wait until the design rules were clear, which may not have been helpful. However, I stress that the project would have been doable if we had not made a mess of the information.

Ian Jenkins: It sounds as if you are saying, "It was doable except that we didn't do it."

David Miller: I understand your cynicism, but it would have been doable.

Nicola Sturgeon: I would like to return to the points that Ken Macintosh raised. You said a moment ago that you thought at one stage that 20,000 students might be affected and that that figure was revised downwards over time to 1,000, before going up again. What disturbs me is that nowhere in the board minutes is there any mention of the number of students likely to be affected, nor is there any change in the tenor of those board minutes.

If there was a point at which you thought that 20,000 students might be affected, it would be reasonable to expect some sign of panic in the board minutes, yet there is nothing. If I have understood you correctly, you are saying that that was not because the board was not aware of the problems, was not discussing them or was not taking action, but simply because you have a pretty poor minute taker.

I want to address this question to Ann Hill, as a board member, albeit a board member who did not attend board meetings over a period of time. Do

you agree with David Miller's account of what knowledge the board had and what it was doing about it? Is it just a case of awful minutes?

Ann Hill (Scottish Qualifications Authority and Scottish School Boards Association): As somebody who relied very much on the minutes over the past six months, and because I had raised the problem of electronic transfer of data from schools as far back as March this year, I spoke to at least two members of staff at the SQA throughout the year. They continually told me that the project was achievable and, having read the minutes, I found the minutes acceptable because I did not know that the board was not talking about that.

I have gained more information from the minutes that have come to me since last week, between the officials at the SQA and the civil servants. That is something that board members may want to consider in future. We may want to see more of those minutes, as they contain more information. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but I always assumed—and that may have been a mistake on my part—that those issues were being addressed as we went along. From the minutes that I was looking at, I assumed that if an issue was not mentioned it had been dealt with.

Nicola Sturgeon: When you were giving evidence wearing your SSBA hat, you said that problems were being reported to you from October 1999 until March 2000. Presumably those problems were being reported to the SQA. Did it worry you, as a board member, that discussion of those problems did not appear anywhere in the board minutes? If you were going simply by the board minutes, it would appear that the SQA was not aware of the problems that you were supposedly passing on to them. Surely that must have sent some kind of panic through you.

15:15

Ann Hill: Yes, but when I had the opportunity to ask people, I found that we were all being told the same thing. Yes, we realised that there was a problem with data management—

Nicola Sturgeon: Who was telling you that everything was all right?

Ann Hill: Ron Tuck, mostly. It was the same for all board members. You heard today from David Miller that when matters were raised at board level, we were told that everything was achievable.

Nicola Sturgeon: But according to these minutes, nothing was being raised at board level. You were passing on concerns from your members—presumably from school boards, teachers and parents—about things that were causing problems. You are saying that all you had

to rely on was the board minutes. According to the board minutes, none of the concerns were reaching the level of the board. Surely that must have panicked you.

Ann Hill: It did slightly. We raised the issue with Ron Tuck by telephone and fax back in March. Between March—I was about to go into the evidence of the Scottish School Boards Association.

The Convener: Yes. I know that we raised the two issues, and that it is difficult for you wearing two hats. We need to contain your comments at this stage to what you did as a board member of the SQA. Members will have the opportunity to come back to you later about what you did as the chief executive of the SSBA.

Ann Hill: As a board member I simply raised the issue with the staff at the SQA. You do not normally go to the chairman if you have a problem; you raise it with the staff and they will take it to the board. The fact that David Miller knew about it is evident from the correspondence.

Nicola Sturgeon: But from the minutes it seems obvious that nothing that you raised was being discussed. Is that an accurate assessment?

Ann Hill: I assumed that the issues were being discussed.

Nicola Sturgeon: And you just thought that there was a poor minute taker.

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): I have a number of questions on information technology issues, but I will come back to them so that we can keep on this track. Did board members receive the minutes of the diet 2000 implementation group that was looking at making sure that the results were delivered on time?

David Miller: No, we did not.

Cathy Jamieson: So you will not be aware that there is a comment in one of the minutes that is pertinent to some of the issues that have been raised:

"It had also become apparent that complete openness and honesty was not universally adopted."

That refers to some of the information that was being passed around within the SQA.

David Miller: I was unaware of that.

Cathy Jamieson: Would it be your view, looking back now, that there were members of staff within the SQA who had not acted with "complete openness and honesty" in providing you and others with information?

David Miller: At some level that has to be the case.

The Convener: Cathy, I will come back to you on the IT questions.

Mr Monteith: I would like to clarify some points from the answers that you have given. Does the same secretariat produce the minutes for board committees and executive groups or committees?

David Miller: I will ask Don Giles to comment on that.

Don Giles (Scottish Qualifications Authority): The answer is no.

Mr Monteith: So different systems are in place for the production of minutes.

David Miller: Apparently it is a different minute taker.

Mr Monteith: So that would explain a different approach to what is reported in the minutes.

David Miller: Yes, but as chairman I have to take responsibility for not ensuring that everything that was spoken of was in the minutes, because they are sent to me as a draft for approval before they are passed by the board. I assure you that detail was given to us, although not a huge amount, about the difficulties and we were speirring into them.

Mr Monteith: If you do not know the answer at the moment, would it be possible to provide details of how minutes of the different groups are taken so that we have that evidence?

David Miller: Yes, absolutely. That can be done.

Johann Lamont: Presumably the minutes of the previous meeting come before the next meeting, and if they do not reflect the discussion, it is within the power of the board to say that.

David Miller: Absolutely.

Johann Lamont: So it would not be about the minute taker. Poor minutes are a reflection on the board rather than the person taking the minutes.

David Miller: That is why I am saying that it is my problem. The minute taker is innocent.

Johann Lamont: Surely it is the board's problem.

David Miller: Okay, but it is the chairman who sees the minutes before they are passed by the board. There are comments in all those minutes that indicate that we have difficulties. The figure of 20,000 appeared after the last board meeting, as we were watching this go down. That is when I was told what the numbers were. I tracked them very carefully and wrote letters to my board colleagues to fill them in on what was happening. I told them that we would go on 9 or 10 August.

Nicola Sturgeon: Do we have copies of those letters?

David Miller: I wrote two briefing letters to my board colleagues. If committee members do not have copies of those, I will ensure that they get them.

The Convener: We will check that.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I want to return to the issue of the function and responsibilities of the board. Some members of this committee have had experience of serving on boards not dissimilar to yours. I know that hindsight is a great thing, but again and again we come back to your saying that you did not ask for the details. You accepted reassurances from Ron Tuck and others at face value. Did the board look at itself at any stage and ask whether that was the way in which it should be functioning?

The Convener: Would you speak into the mike, please? It is quite difficult to hear you.

Mr Stone: Did you hear my question, Mr Miller?

David Miller: Yes.

Mr Stone: Given that some of the assurances you received proved to be worthless, does that leave a question mark in your mind about previous years' exams?

David Miller: Absolutely not. Until this year the system has been impeccable, with a lower error rate than almost any other exam board. That is borne out by the fact that many people come to ask us how we manage that. The international group within the SQA is helping all sorts of overseas countries to develop their systems.

I do not think that we debated whether the board was operating properly. I will ask my colleagues what they thought, but I think that it is an extremely good board.

Mr Stone: In hindsight and given what we now know, do you accept that your approach was rather too hands off?

David Miller: Ours is a non-executive board. These poor people come to committee meetings eight or nine times a year. It is very difficult to see how, on that basis, they could do more. Any board relies on the existence of trust between itself and the executive. I do not believe that Ron Tuck misled us; I think that he was misled. If the Scottish Executive were asked—I do not know whether it has been—it would say that it had been misled.

Officials from the Scottish Executive also received assurances from the SQA executive, which they saw far more often than any of the board members did. I am a non-executive director

of a number of companies, and it is difficult to know how someone in that position can deal with a situation in which the executive, for whatever reason, is giving them information that is not right.

Mr Stone: May I follow up on that?

The Convener: I would like to move on, but I will take questions from Jamie Stone and Nicola Sturgeon.

Mr Stone: Other people in this room are non-executive directors of companies. If someone is dropped in it, they are likely to feel pretty raw about that. Do you regret the fact that better information was not supplied to you as board members?

David Miller: I am sorry. I missed your question.

Mr Stone: If someone is a non-executive director of an organisation and something goes wrong, they will feel that they have been dropped in it, will they not? Surely that would be a motive to make damn sure that the information that you received was accurate? Any signal that it was not should surely have set alarm bells ringing.

David Miller: I understand what you are saying, but there was no indication that the information that we were being given was wrong. On the day that I went across to the SQA to thank the staff, I was accompanied by a message that the number affected was now down to about 300 higher students. One relies on that information. We did not discover—and the chief executive certainly did not discover—how big the problem was until the following day.

Nicola Sturgeon: I want to pick up on something that you said a minute ago. In your opinion, who misled Ron Tuck?

David Miller: This and other inquiries are about establishing that.

Nicola Sturgeon: I am curious to know whether, as chairman of the organisation, you have a view on that.

David Miller: I do, but it is one that is being explored by other people, who will come out with what they believe to be a definitive statement. I do not really want to be compromised.

Cathy Jamieson: Suggestions have been made within the organisation that some people, if not lying outright, have certainly been economical with the truth. If the inquiry is to get to the bottom of that, we need to have some steer about who those people are.

David Miller: One member of staff is still subject to disciplinary procedure. That is the issue.

Nicola Sturgeon: Is that the only member of staff that you are referring to?

David Miller: Yes. It is the only one that I believe knew exactly how bad the situation was and, for whatever reason, did not communicate it.

Nicola Sturgeon: My final question on this section is for Paul Thomson. You are the head of a centre. Presumably you were communicating concerns to the SQA about how the whole system was operating. What were those concerns? Are you satisfied that they were discussed in the proper forums?

Paul Thomson: Yes. I raised those concerns personally over the telephone.

Nicola Sturgeon: What concerns?

Paul Thomson: Well, let us go back to the very start of the process with registration and entries. As we all know, that system ran late, due to the late design specification. Like other centres, my own centre had difficulty getting the information accepted or we were getting returns that were not 100 per cent accurate. In response to my concerns and those of other centres, the SQA set up a liaison group, in which SQA co-ordinators met staff from the SQA to explore those difficulties and try to sort them out. That is the kind of issue that would appear in the minutes as the response to the concerns raised at the board or the NQC.

Nicola Sturgeon: That did not appear in the minutes.

Paul Thomson: You will find that it appears in the minutes somewhere that such a group had been established.

Nicola Sturgeon: Not the minutes I have seen.

Paul Thomson: Communications were sent to centres by the SQA—and by Ron Tuck in person—explaining some of the difficulties, apologising for them and saying that the liaison group had been established.

Part of the trouble for the board and for the organisation as a whole is that the design of the system meant that we could not be certain of the scale of the problem until the last minute. Centres could continue to submit candidate data until the last minute. Indeed, if candidates complete the final unit of a course some time in May, the data cannot be submitted until the last minute. A centre—and the SQA and its board members—would not realise that there was a major problem in processing the data until all the data had come in. Data were coming into the SQA from centres all at the same time in May and June and the external examinations were being processed.

Nicola Sturgeon: Is that a fundamental problem with the system?

Paul Thomson: It is difficult to say, as I am not an expert on operational areas. I asked whether the system could cope with the quantity of data

that was coming in and we were told clearly that it could. In the event, it could not; however, we did ask about that. The scale of the problem did not emerge until after the last board meeting, in June.

Nicola Sturgeon: But the questions that you were supposedly asking were not minuted.

The Convener: I am anxious to move on. A number of people have asked specific questions about those who you feel may have been responsible for not always giving the correct answer. I want to press you further on that, Mr Miller. You said that one individual was under disciplinary procedure. Could you say briefly why you conclude that the situation was partly the responsibility of that individual?

David Miller: He was head of that section.

The Convener: Is it not possible that he too was being misled?

David Miller: It is, which is why I would rather not go any further. I have been asked two questions: do I think I know where the problem is, to which the answer is yes; and whether the problem might be lower down. It might indeed be lower down, which is why I do not want to—

The Convener: You do not know definitively that it was that individual, but from where you sit, as the chair of the board, that is where you see the responsibility.

David Miller: Yes. He is the subject of a disciplinary procedure that will no doubt produce its findings in due course.

15:30

The Convener: I am anxious to move on. The next issues that we were going to address were those of staffing. We may come back to the matter that we have been discussing during this part of our session. I ask Brian Monteith to kick off.

Mr Monteith: Last year, the number of executive directors went from four to three, following the departure of one of them. Two divisions, operations and information technology, were, in a sense, merged. Given that IT was a crucial area with the introduction of the APS, why was it decided that the structure should change, with three, not four, individuals running it?

David Miller: First, it has to be said that the individual to whom you refer was not an expert in IT. He was generally responsible for the whole area that included IT. I do not think that he was a specialist.

We have two IT people: David Falconer, from the Scottish Examination Board and Colin Urie from SCOTVEC. They were highly confident. One was No 1 and the other was No 2.

Tommy Salvona had also indicated that he would quite like to retire. He did not wish to go on. I think that he was in his late 50s and wanted not to continue, but instead to move into the new system, which he would have been in only for a short period.

We judged it perfectly feasible to roll together the two positions, given that both the people I mentioned were in the same area, and that David Elliot had been a long-serving member of the Scottish Examination Board who knew his way about the system, and who relied on Colin Urie and David Falconer for the software, which worked.

Mr Monteith: Given that, in the past, those two gentlemen had someone above them in line management, that David Elliot had dealt with operations, and given the amount of extra work that would be generated by the new higher still system, did it not seem an odd decision to give David Elliot far more responsibility, even if he had technical advisers to deal with IT?

David Miller: At the time, it seemed the entirely appropriate thing to do. It was not driven just by cost savings—in case that was your next question.

Mr Monteith: It was.

In the evidence that we have received from a variety of sources, including David Elliot, it is clear that there was a great deal of pressure on staff, particularly at Dalkeith. It has been suggested to us in one of the papers that putting things right will require as many as 30 additional members of staff in the area of IT. That can be said with the benefit of hindsight, but it is not just a matter of bringing in one or two people, but as many as 30. Does that not suggest that, somewhere along the line, there was a clear underestimate of the work load generated by higher still and by the APS?

David Miller: I am unaware of the figure of 30 to which you refer. A paper suggested that we might need an additional 40 people, but I do not think that that will be the case. I think that the operational review will demonstrate that that is not necessary.

Mr Monteith: Could you tell us a little more about the paper that mentioned a figure of 40? Are you referring to an internal paper?

David Miller: It is an internal paper that I have not seen, but I am aware of the numbers contained in it.

Mr Monteith: Is it a recent paper?

David Miller: Yes. I should think that it dates from six to eight weeks ago.

Mr Monteith: Would we be able to obtain a copy of it?

David Miller: I am sure that you would, yes.

Michael Russell: Could I turn to the matter of the individual whom you are reluctant to name? You said that that person would be dealt with under the usual disciplinary procedures. Although those procedures may be usual, you are in a very unusual situation, as the organisation is being investigated by two committees.

David Miller: By five, actually.

Michael Russell: I was about to add the others, but if five is what you would like, five is what you will have. If there are five committees investigating the organisation, clearly the usual disciplinary procedures might be difficult to sustain in such circumstances. Have you thought of any other ways in which you might bring the truth to light, apart from disciplinary procedures?

David Miller: There is the internal review.

Michael Russell: So will there be no disciplinary action until the internal review is over?

David Miller: That is a matter for the chief executive to follow up, not for the chairman. I am not an executive. It is up to the chief executive to decide whether he wishes to pursue disciplinary action. No doubt he will tell me, but it is an academic question. The individual concerned is ill, anyway.

The Convener: That is a matter that can be pursued when the chief executive returns to the committee.

Cathy Peattie: I would like to come back to the staffing issue and perhaps take further evidence. Mr Miller, you are saying clearly that some person may be responsible. Does that tie in with newspaper reports that the SQA is a blame culture in which problems are always someone else's fault, and this guy is not here so it must be his fault? Is that how the organisation has been run? How do we start to unpick that?

David Miller: I do not think that it has been run that way at all, and I am not aware of a huge volume of press comment that suggests that that is the case. I do not think that it is a blame-culture organisation at all.

Cathy Peattie: Yet you are blaming one person.

David Miller: Well, somebody is responsible. You yourselves have asked whether there is somebody who is responsible. The answer is that, at some level, there has to be somebody who was aware of the problem in detail and did not pass it on.

Cathy Peattie: Are you saying that, in such a large organisation, one person is responsible for the mess that we are in now?

David Miller: The head of a department can take a great deal of responsibility.

Cathy Peattie: I think, convener, that it will be important for the committee to take evidence from other members of the department in question.

David Miller: I think that you have asked for the individual concerned to come and give evidence to you.

The Convener: Yes, we have.

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP): Mr Miller, you have said that you are a non-executive director of a number of organisations. What Cathy Peattie has just said suggests that, in the SQA, the whole project fell or proceeded on one person's shoulders. Given your experience of other organisations, do you think that that is the normal way for a large organisation to proceed? Were you aware that that was happening in the SQA and were you happy with it?

David Miller: There are undoubtedly parts of almost any organisation that have a disproportionate effect on the whole, and I think that that is the case in the SQA. I hesitate to mention that I am also a brewer as one of my other non-executive activities. If the transport manager messes up the delivery system, he causes a quite disproportionate amount of trouble to the organisation, compared with an administrator or someone in a more general role, even in the brewery itself.

Mr Stone: So if somebody may be responsible for such problems, are you suggesting that the board is blameless?

David Miller: I am not suggesting anything of the sort. The board is ultimately responsible for the SQA. However, as I stressed to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, we are not trying to excuse ourselves—what has happened is inexcusable. What we are trying to do is to explain how it happened, and that is all. I am not trying to dodge any column at all.

Mr Stone: Accordingly, will you be looking at yourselves fairly carefully?

David Miller: I have been looking at myself fairly carefully quite frequently and I have asked myself again and again how the situation developed. Ironically, I planned to retire in April last year, having done three and a half years with the SQA, six years with SCOTVEC and two years with the SEB. If I had done what my instincts first told me to do, I would have been commiserating with my successor now. I have asked myself again and again how this has happened and I do not wish to dodge any column at all.

Mr Monteith: I want to return to a subject that is related to the staff and the structure. When you

visited Dalkeith in August and found the exam certificates lying unposted, were you on your own or with other members of the board?

David Miller: As chairman, I went to thank the staff for the considerable efforts that they had made to put the situation right. As far as I was concerned, the situation had been brought down to extremely manageable, if not good, proportions, affecting 300 or so higher students.

Mr Monteith: You were shocked when you discovered the situation. The chief executive advised you of the numbers, which were declining. Did the fact that you had to make the journey from your home to Dalkeith, but that the chief executive was operating from Glasgow, contribute to the problem? Was the chief executive being misled?

David Miller: Because he was in Glasgow?

Mr Monteith: Due to the fact that he was in Glasgow.

David Miller: He had an office in Dalkeith. He had been in Dalkeith every day for the previous six weeks to ensure that he was satisfied in his mind that things were progressing properly.

Mr Monteith: Was he in Dalkeith to greet you when you arrived?

David Miller: No. Nor would I necessarily have expected him to be.

Mr Monteith: Have you any reason to believe that he would have known that the same certificates that you found unposted were there?

David Miller: No. Absolutely not.

The Convener: It has been suggested that the staff whom you met in Dalkeith had been working especially long hours and that senior staff had also been working long hours to resolve the situation. Is that the case and did that contribute to the situation? Were people so involved in trying to firefight that they could not see the bigger picture, which was the calamity that was to come?

David Miller: The long hours came about because people were trying to correct a situation that was already a problem. They were spending extremely long hours first on obtaining lost information, then processing it. That is a neat point. At the end of the process, their objectivity had disappeared. They were exhausted. They went well beyond the normal call of duty to try to solve the problem and they are deeply hurt that the organisation of which they are part is being heavily criticised, because that is happening in spite of their strenuous efforts. I have the greatest admiration for the effort that they put in. I went to Dalkeith that day to try to communicate that sentiment on behalf of the board. The problem occurred and they became exhausted, rather than they were exhausted and the problem occurred as

a result.

Michael Leech: I share that view.

Cathy Peattie: I know that we have given you a hard time; please forgive us. It is important that we consider how we can move forward and assure young people and parents that the same problems will not occur next year. I am interested in the SQA as an organisation. You said that one of the improvements that would be helpful would be to have someone from the Executive on the SQA board, although it is difficult to know how that person would know that they were being lied to, as you found. What changes would help the structure of your organisation and ensure that the non-executive members knew what was happening?

David Miller: If I were left to it, the one measure that I would put in place would be to have a committee to consider a method for examining the operations in detail. There would be great danger in doing that, because it would be another executive arm. It may be that the vice-chairman and I meeting regularly with the chief executive and the directors solely to review operations could short-circuit that, but that has not been discussed by the board at all. I say that off the top of my head.

Cathy Peattie: What would you say to the colleges, for instance, who say that although the SQA is a fairly active organisation, the current structure does not reflect their views and no one listens? The colleges have said that they hope that changes to the SQA will bring about a more open organisation with a stronger partnership with the stakeholders who are involved in Scottish education.

David Miller: I will ask Michael Leech to comment, because he was in the hottest of all seats.

Michael Leech: The college sector welcomed the recent setting up of a liaison group that is similar to the group that Paul Thomson mentioned, in which representatives of the college sector meet the SQA. It should be remembered that the Association of Scottish Colleges can make representations. Also, the Scottish Further Education Unit, of whose board I am chairman, contributes to the curriculum development agenda. We still have to implement a lot more of higher still.

I agree that the college sector welcomes the approaches that the SQA has made in recent months to open up contact. I know that the college sector wants to put its back into rebuilding. College staff fulfil the roles of principal assessors, markers, external verifiers and so on. There is a necessary interdependency to make the whole system work for employers, students and so on.

15:45

Cathy Peattie: Could the board system and the SQA as a whole be changed to better accommodate the stakeholders—the colleges and schools?

Michael Leech: There is an SVQ committee, which seems to be doing its work pretty well. The accreditation committee, which carries out a separate accreditation function, seems to be working smoothly. The college sector is keen for the pace of higher national certificate review and development to slacken a little and for the piloting process to proceed a little more slowly, but it recognises that a great deal is in place and is working well. Not all parts of the SQA have major problems.

Cathy Peattie: At the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee on Friday, representatives of the colleges felt that there was a lack of communication and clarity in the organisation. I asked them how that could be changed.

Finally, Mr Miller, you spoke about other developments and about people coming from overseas to find out what the SQA was doing. Have there been so many developments that you have taken your eyes off the core work of the SQA?

David Miller: No. We have insisted that the international group be separate and fund itself from the income that it receives. It has nothing to do with the day-to-day running of the SQA, although it has helped to man the helpdesk recently and to that extent the international work has also suffered. The international group has to be self-supporting financially and to make a return. The group is run by four people who are dedicated to it alone. The board has always insisted that there should be no collision between the work of the international group and that of the rest of the SQA in terms of staff availability or anything else.

There is a strong belief in the SQA that international work raises Scotland's profile in any number of places. One cannot help remembering how many Japanese spinning machines there were in Paisley technical college and elsewhere, which inclined people to think about Japanese—

Cathy Peattie: But we are interested in Scottish education.

David Miller: I am suggesting that Scottish education is not other than advanced by having an international unit that has no collision point with the normal running of the SQA and that operates on a self-standing and self-financed basis.

The Convener: I said earlier that we would return to the issue of communications. You raised that issue again when you said that people from the international unit were used on the helpdesk

following 10 August. How was information given to parents, pupils and schools when exam results were not issued on time or were incorrect?

David Miller: The staff behaved fantastically well. They were asked to man a place that took something like 3,000 calls on one day. We had drafted into the helpdesk some people who had received training, but as they had been trained at quite short notice, there were supervisors working between them to help them when they came to a difficult problem. The staff behaved extraordinarily well and I take my hat off to them. It is not easy for a 20-year-old to answer a telephone call from an extremely and understandably irate parent, and the staff dealt with the situation very well indeed.

The Convener: That said, MSPs received a number of complaints about the information that was being given over the phone. Parents received responses such as, "It's the post's fault. Your envelopes are still in the sorting office." I am sure that you were not advising the staff to make such responses.

David Miller: No.

The Convener: How much time was spent preparing people for that job and how was the training carried out?

David Miller: Don Giles, who is sitting behind me, tells me that 48 people worked on the helpdesk. With a helpdesk staffed by 48 young people from a broad spread who were working from a computer base that might or might not contain correct information, inappropriate answers would undoubtedly have been given. However, on the whole, their efforts were very well directed.

Nicola Sturgeon: Do you accept that a great deal of wrong information was being given on the hotline that day and that, more often than not, people were being given inaccurate examination results?

David Miller: Yes, although that was because of the computer system. You should not blame the helpdesk; it is only as good as the information that it gets.

Nicola Sturgeon: I am not blaming the helpdesk.

David Miller: Fine.

The Convener: With hindsight, would not it have been better to tell people at that stage that there was a problem and to give out no results rather than wrong results?

David Miller: That is a difficult question to answer. Frequently, the helpdesk was giving out corrected results; however, I do not know what percentage of the results that were being given out were wrong. My impression was that the helpdesk staff were giving out corrected results. Candidates

were being upgraded because marks had been lost and so on. I do not think that we could have done things differently.

Fiona McLeod: On the subject of the helpdesk, we are talking about a crisis at that stage. I remember that, last week, the committee discussed a letter from the Scottish Executive that asked whether the SQA was happy with the helpdesk, because the Executive doubted whether it would be able to cope with what was coming. Was the board reassured that the helpdesk was fine? You have just said that 20-year-olds were being put on a helpdesk to cope with a major crisis in Scottish education.

David Miller: I understand that, but can you give me another suggestion on what else we could have done? We had brought in staff from outside. I do not think that we could have trained them in time.

Fiona McLeod: I think that the Scottish Executive made a suggestion to you.

David Miller: It suggested that we should put on more lines, which we could not physically do. However, we were able to put on more lines as a result—thank goodness—of that intervention.

Johann Lamont: Do you agree that part of the real damage to the SQA happened when it started to give out wrong information and, as a result, compounded an existing problem? Was no one in a position to realise that it would have been better for the helpdesk staff to say that they could not provide any further information? You have said that you are not sure what percentage of the information was accurate. Who was in a position to decide that the damage to the SQA was being seriously compounded by the fact that people did not believe one word that was coming out from the organisation?

David Miller: The Executive was in that position, but perhaps Paul Thomson should comment on that question, as he was a recipient of the results. Paul, how was your school affected by the helpdesk?

Paul Thomson: My school was not affected greatly by the troubles; nearly all my pupils received accurate results the first time round and we experienced few difficulties. I am not sure whether that was typical; the pattern was not the same across the country. Some schools experienced more difficulties than others. I can comment only as a user.

The board is not involved in any decisions about aspects of the helpline, which is an operational matter. I am sure it was frustrating for individuals to ask questions and find that they could not get a definitive answer. All I can say is that I issued a letter to parents explaining where I thought the

schools stood, and telling pupils and parents what I thought was the best course of action, which was to talk to us, rather than turn to the helplines. The link between the school and the SQA is stronger than the link that is made when individual pupils or parents make a telephone call. We dealt with the matter centrally, but our difficulties were on a small scale.

Nicola Sturgeon: On the reassurances that were given to pupils, perhaps you can explain the statement that was made at that time—by either the SQA or the Scottish Executive—that no result would be revised downwards. I do not understand that.

David Miller: It was because data were missing.

Nicola Sturgeon: What if the data that were missing had then been entered and had worsened the result?

David Miller: I defer to the professional.

Paul Thomson: As I understand it, that would be a mathematical impossibility; I cannot think of any example to the contrary. If a pupil has failed a unit, they cannot achieve the overall award. If a positive unit outcome was missing, and the data were entered, the candidate would get the overall award, which would not have been shown on the first certificate. If part of the external exam marking was missing—one of the papers, perhaps—all that could have happened to the candidate's mark had the problem been rectified was that it would have gone up. If data were missing at any of those points, a revised result could have only a positive impact on the overall outcome for the candidate.

Nicola Sturgeon: So why did it happen? In the case of standard grades in physical education, results were revised downwards.

Paul Thomson: You would have to ask an official about that. I am not privy to such information.

David Miller: On a one-day-a-week basis, I may be wrong—Don Giles will correct me if I am—my understanding is that some of the marks were averaged and that if another mark came in at a much lower level, it took down the average. Is that correct?

Nicola Sturgeon: If that did happen, how could you make a statement that it would never happen?

David Miller: Did we make such a statement?

The Convener: My understanding was that that statement was made in relation to highers and higher still. We realised later that the situation was also affecting standard grade candidates. At that stage it was realised that some grades might be affected adversely and, as Nicola Sturgeon said, that was what happened with standard grade PE.

I am more than happy to take away that question and to try to resolve it. I am sure that Nicola can ask the question again when the SQA officials give evidence.

We have time for two more questions.

Mr Macintosh: I am conscious that we are running out of time. The evidence from the Scottish Parent Teacher Council mentions the difference in cultures between the Scottish Examination Board and SCOTVEC. The submission includes a note from a commentator, who says:

"Personally, I have no faith in SQA . . . especially those with a Scotvec background. . . . Scotvec personnel presided over a system of certification which was riddled with inconsistencies . . . lack of rigour".

Will you comment on the general allegation that the SQA is an amalgamation of two bodies that never worked?

I am also interested in what happened in previous years. Did the SQA exist in a culture of always going to the edge? In other words, did you perhaps not pick up on the dangers this year because every year the organisation dealt with a huge amount of information and came close to not delivering? Was it thought that the SQA would get away with it this year because that was what had happened in previous years, or were this year's events on a scale that was completely unheard of before?

David Miller: Paul Thomson has been involved in the SEB for a long time.

Paul Thomson: Previously, I was a member of the SEB board. By the very nature of examinations, papers must be marked, assessments must be collated, a meeting must be held to determine cut-off scores and to award grades, and certificates must be printed and issued to the candidates—all in a short time scale. That was the nature of the business of the SEB, then the SQA. Unless we decided to change radically the nature of the examination system, the SQA would have no control over those demands.

At board level, we were aware that much more would be demanded of the system this year. That is why so many questions were asked from 1997 onwards—not just in the past year, or from Easter onwards. Questions have been asked from the beginning about the pressures on the organisation and whether it could cope.

There was no alternative, given the assurances that we had received, but to let the system run. Once the decision had been taken to implement from 1999 onwards, clearly it was up to the SQA to deliver to candidates. I have always found that the culture of the SEB and the SQA was to put the interests of the candidates first and foremost,

beyond those of the organisation. It was up to the organisation to deliver in the interests of the candidates, collectively and individually.

16:00

Michael Russell: At the finance, planning and general purposes committee in August, it was noted that the additional expenditure incurred to date as a result of diet 2000 was more than £600,000, and was likely to increase as other costs were identified. What do you anticipate the outturn and expenditure to be, over and above what you expected? According to documentation, including software documentation, you are having difficulty getting money in from organisations, and were having such difficulties even before diet 2000. We now have documented evidence of organisations that were reluctant to pay you, so what is the financial prognosis for the next year?

David Miller: In straightforward terms, the SQA is nowhere near being a bankrupt organisation; apart from anything else, we own Hanover House. The organisation is not bankrupt; it may have cash-flow difficulties for the reasons that you explained, but we did not have such difficulties the last time I asked, which was about a week ago.

Michael Russell: I never suggested that the SQA was a bankrupt organisation. That was a rather curious choice of words.

David Miller: It is one of the many damaging statements that have appeared in the press.

Michael Russell: It is not a statement that I have made here, but it is curious that you should say that in an answer. Given your cash-flow difficulties, what is your prognosis for the coming year, and where will you have to secure money from to continue in operation in the way that you describe?

David Miller: If we have a cash-flow problem we can only go to the Scottish Executive and ask for money.

Michael Russell: Do you anticipate having to do that during the coming year?

David Miller: I imagine that there will be a moment when we will get very close to it, if not over it.

Michael Russell: Your finance, planning and general purposes committee minute says that it is your intention to approach the Scottish Executive. Can you confirm that that is your intention?

David Miller: Yes, absolutely—on that and a number of other matters.

The Convener: I thank members of the board for attending today's meeting and answering our questions. Our questioning is always thorough, as

the matter is very important. We will be continuing the inquiry for some time and I am sure that you will take an interest in all our deliberations.

I welcome our next set of witnesses, who are members of the Scottish Parent Teachers Council. We have met Judith Gillespie before. I am sure that Eleanor Coner will introduce herself and tell us what role she plays in the organisation.

Eleanor Coner (Scottish Parent Teacher Council): I have been convener for a year, so I am still learning the ropes.

The Convener: Members have received copies of your written submission. Do you wish to make any further comments?

Judith Gillespie (Scottish Parent Teacher Council): We put our submission together to meet the committee's deadline of 22 September. If I were writing it now, I would emphasise more the issue of internal assessment, about which we probably did not say enough.

There are two areas of concern. One is missing data, which has been discussed at length. A separate issue is that of satisfaction with the grades, which relates to marking. It has not been proven whether there is a problem with the marking. From anecdotal evidence, we know that many schools are saying that these are the best results that they have ever had. Parents are most concerned about the grades, rather than the issue of missing data.

The Convener: As you say, the question of marking is still being looked into. A number of statements have led people to believe that it has already been decided, which might have been unhelpful. I appreciate your comments on that.

Mr Macintosh: I welcome your submission, which was very interesting and provides a good summary of the historical development of this situation. At the beginning, you describe some specific but typical complaints. My problem is that I find your submission quite subjective; you do not name individuals or give numbers. Although I get an idea of the problem and the sort of questions that people are asking, I do not get a sense of how many parents, teachers and pupils are raising these issues with you. How widespread is the problem?

Judith Gillespie: We make a point of not naming individuals. As you will have noted, our submission starts by making a point about confidentiality. We have been approached by a number of individuals who have evidence that they would like to give but are concerned about being identified because of their position or job. It is important to take that on board. That is how those people feel, regardless of whether they are right to do so.

We explored with people how they wished us to include them, and most people asked not to be identified. That is why the information is described as specific but typical. The school in question gave us a clear breakdown, and the evidence that it supplied tallied with evidence that we were getting from other people.

We are not getting vast numbers of people writing to us. That is to be expected, as people write to where it seems most sensible to write; parents are therefore contacting schools, local authorities and MSPs, and schools are contacting education committees.

The Convener: Before I let Ken Macintosh ask any supplementary questions, I think that this would be an appropriate time to comment on the paragraph in your submission that talked about people being able to give evidence of what they have experienced without having their names disclosed. I think that I e-mailed you back saying that the committee felt that that would be appropriate.

It is worth making public at this stage the fact that the committee appreciates that some people may have reservations about making statements because of their position in an organisation or in their place of work. We would respect people's request to keep their evidence confidential if they felt that that was the only way in which they could give evidence. That offer is open to anyone who feels in any way threatened by the thought of making their statements public. I hope that anyone who wants to will feel free to contact the committee.

Mr Macintosh: The points are related; even if we do not give the names of the individuals concerned—which is fine—I would like to get an idea of the number of people about whom we are talking. Judith Gillespie talks about specific problems, and we can all recognise them from reports. But the word “typical” troubles me. We have just heard from Paul Thomson, who told us that his school had very few problems. He was not sure whether that was typical.

Judith Gillespie: I accept that. The problems are typical of the problems experienced by those who experienced problems. However, I take on board totally the fact that some schools experienced no problems—subsequent exploration of the matter has established that. The problems of the school in question are typical of the problems that people experienced; they are not typical throughout the whole of Scotland. The school represents the problems of those who experienced problems. Obviously, different schools will have experienced different things, typically. For example, the late arrival of the various forms that had to be filled in was fairly uniform across Scotland. The school that we use

as an example encapsulated the range of problems that schools experienced.

Mr Macintosh: As I say, I am trying to get an idea of the scale. The submission contains a sensible remark about the fact that everybody is claiming in retrospect that they knew all about the problems. However, you did a survey before the exam results came out. Could you expand on the results of that survey? It seems quite detailed, and has numbers of schools that replied and so on. The problems seem to have been implementation management problems, yet your paper is a list of policy issues. The issues that are identified are to do with getting papers out in time and ensuring that there are enough markers.

Judith Gillespie: We put in the evidence that we thought we could put in. We cannot answer for SQA. We submitted the survey because we had done the survey and considered that it was evidence. We cannot talk for every parent in Scotland because we are not every parent in Scotland. We examined the area on which we had information.

While this committee has been investigating what went wrong, we have been investigating why it went wrong. That is why I said that, were I writing the paper today, I would have written more extensively about internal assessment, as that is the “why” that we are examining, in many respects. We cannot answer the question of what went wrong. We can give you some evidence, but compared with the parents you will talk to directly, we are not well placed to give you further evidence. I am not being defensive; I am telling you that we have put in the evidence what we can put in. We would not pretend to be experts in areas in which we are not experts.

16:15

Mr Macintosh: Obviously, I accept that. However, we hoped that your organisation would give typical evidence and be able to quantify how typical that evidence was.

Judith Gillespie: I hope that I have characterised what I meant by “typical”. I meant that the evidence was typical of those who had problems. I did not mean that it was typical of the 396 secondary schools in Scotland. I apologise if I did not define the word “typical” enough.

Mr Macintosh: I want to follow up on the awareness of problems. One paragraph of your evidence begins:

“There are a great number of people who, with the wisdom of hindsight are saying that they knew, back in April, that the exams would lead to this kind of fiasco.”

Many people are saying that—if it was so obvious that things were going wrong, why did neither the

board nor the Executive pick it up? We are trying to work out why the systems were not in place and who was at fault.

You then point the finger at Her Majesty's inspectorate of schools, which the committee will talk to later. You say:

"We have tried to pin these people down to ask whom they told of their concerns. It would seem that they were widely voiced at meetings attended by SQA, HMI and local authority education officials."

The trouble is with the words, "It would seem". That is a bit like the board that we discussed a moment ago. Everybody says that they raised the issues, but nobody is pointing to papers or giving the exact number of times that they asked questions. Was the SPTC present at those meetings?

Judith Gillespie: SPTC members were present at those meetings.

Mr Macintosh: Can you give us a scale?

Judith Gillespie: I am sorry. You ask about an issue on which people want concrete evidence later, but on which people did not collect such evidence at the time, because they were not aware that the issue was significant. All that I can say is that we asked SPTC members those questions, because many people were asking us questions—the organisation includes teachers and even head teachers, as well as parents. We said, "Okay, everyone is saying that the problems were obvious. What did you do about them? Where did you speak about them?" The evidence that came back was that the issue was extensively discussed in those meetings.

We do not have the minutes of those meetings, but I suspect that the higher still development unit might have notes of them. However, I have paralleled the views of the people to whom I spoke, who said that they were voicing the complaints at those meetings, with the HMI report that was given to the higher still liaison group. Uncharacteristically for any HMI report—I think that Ian Jenkins will appreciate how uncharacteristic it was—the report rated 90 per cent of schools that were implementing higher still as good or very good. That is an exceptionally high rating for an HMI report. Therefore, on the one hand people said that they were busily complaining about the problems, and on the other hand, the HMI implementation report was saying that everything was hunky-dory in 90 per cent of schools. That was reported at a liaison committee meeting at which a caveat was minuted from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and the union, saying that the HMI findings did not agree with their surveys.

As I said, I can give no more evidence than that. I cannot give numbers. I am very sorry, but I would

be foolish even to pretend that I could do that.

Mr Macintosh: We know that the SQA should have picked up on what was going wrong. You think that HMI should have picked it up, because in your opinion, it was clearly told.

Judith Gillespie: HMI was clearly told about the concerns at meetings, because people on our board were at the meetings and told HMI themselves. We asked who was present at the meetings, because we wanted to know which routes back existed for the information. One of the routes back was the SQA, which we discounted, because if the SQA was already engaged in a cover-up, one would not expect the information to go back through it. However, HMI and education officials from the authorities were also present.

The reason for picking up on HMI is that it was undertaking a review of the implementation of higher still. According to our members, the concerns were being voiced at meetings, yet HMI reported that everything was good or very good in 90 per cent of cases. As I said, if one puts on top of that the caveat from the ADES and the teachers union, which said that HMI's view did not coincide with their evidence, it is clear that there were different views about how well the programme was being implemented.

We merely present that to you—we can do no more than that. We have been able to draw the evidence together because we have those different perspectives.

Ian Jenkins: Kenneth Macintosh was talking about what was typical and not typical. On your specific but typical complaints from schools, many came before the crisis became obvious. Would you say something about the higher still development unit and the inspectorate's role before SQA became involved? What was the impact on SQA? I am pronouncing it "squah" because I am adopting the patois and register of the person I am speaking to.

The Convener: Members are easily confused.

Judith Gillespie: I am sorry—I did not realise that "squah" was the vernacular. I will try to remember to say the letters SQA.

I am not absolutely certain what Mr Jenkins is getting at. It is true that there were many different authority sources and that keeping track of that was confusing for schools. Those authorities were paralleled by a multiplicity of authority sources in terms of the committees that were set up to oversee the implementation of higher still. Schools were getting some materials from the higher still development unit and they were getting some materials from the SQA. A whole range of bodies was monitoring the process and they were reporting back to a whole range of different

committees.

Therefore, a vast amount of information was flying around. Schools would be looking for missing data and they would be getting information from the SQA. For example, the SQA might tell the schools that it had changed the pass marks for the units. There would therefore be a whole area of confusion, with different messages coming from different organisations at that time.

Ian Jenkins: It appears that, even as we speak, similar things are happening, with units being changed and assessments reconsidered. Teachers are worried that a pattern is emerging that will mean that the SQA will again be put under late pressure.

Judith Gillespie: I would like to illustrate this point with one particular piece of information that I have pulled together. I will focus on unit assessments. Last week, John Elvidge said in this committee that the change in higher still had led to an increase from 3 million to 4 million in the number of bits of data required. He seemed to imply that that was not an especially significant increase. Obviously, if we had inflation at 33 per cent, we would regard that as very significant. A point that Mr Elvidge made in passing was that the reason the increase was not significant was that higher still made up only a small part of the SQA's work. I suggest that another way of putting that is to say that the increase in information required by higher still—which was indeed only a small part of what the SQA did—was so massive that that tiny proportion of the SQA's work managed to contribute to a global increase of one third in the data that it had to process. It is important to appreciate the magnitude of what we are talking about.

It quickly became apparent that the unit assessments were not working as intended. The intention was that youngsters would take a unit and then sit an assessment, but it became apparent that youngsters could not do that because, by the time they were required to take the first unit assessment, they had not moved from the general standard of standard grade to the general standard of higher.

At a meeting of the higher still liaison group in February, that was discussed at considerable length. A number of options were considered for resolving the problem. One suggested solution was that all the unit assessments could be sat at the very end of the course, immediately prior to the external assessment. That would mean—and members should remember the point about the increase in the amount of data required—that data would not be fed in gradually over the year but would be end-loaded.

At that higher still liaison committee meeting in

February, there was discussion of the position of the schools and the pupils. There was a problem that youngsters were failing too many unit assessments and were allowed to do only one resit.

In the suggested solution that I mentioned, no consideration was given to the impact of the delay, and the consequent end-loading of data, on the SQA. That did not enter into the discussion. The focus was entirely on the pupils and teachers and on resolving the problem—which was clearly a big one—that the units were operating as a barrier to the course, rather than as merely monitoring the course.

There was no consideration of the effect of the end-loading of the information on the SQA. The point has been well made by others that because of the process, there was no date by which everything was late. It is important to recognise the implications of the process for subsequent years.

Ian Jenkins: In view of the time that you took for that, I will not ask another question. That was great—thank you.

Nicola Sturgeon: You raise a number of points that are a good analysis of the issues that were cropping up throughout the year. This might be quite a big question, but to what extent might each of the issues that you have raised—the complexity of higher still, the refusal to listen and the implementation—have had an effect on the specific problems that occurred within the SQA this year?

Judith Gillespie: Those issues mean that what happened was almost inevitable. The point that I have just mentioned—that nobody considered the consequences of the decision—was the kind of thing that happened all the time. One reason for that was that the decision-making process was so dispersed. There was a powerful ethos to get the thing up and running. Douglas Osler said briefly last week that the reason for getting the system up and running was to address the needs of youngsters for whom taking a higher in one year was not appropriate. That is true, but the whole thing did not have to be up and running in order to address their needs. There was a denial, if you like, that there was a problem. The approach was, "We will sort it. We will sort it."

I know from my limited data entry experience that unless data entry is automatic and straightforward, there will be mistakes. This was clearly not automatic and straightforward. In view of the sheer complexity of the process, right down to the person pushing the buttons, somebody was going to make mistakes. It is easy to make mistakes when entering data. Unless there is a bleep system so that people cannot possibly enter

the wrong thing in the wrong box, they will get themselves into a sort of trance and just carry on putting the data in.

Nicola Sturgeon: You mentioned disparate decision making, which strikes me as being at the heart of a lot of this matter. We have heard, in specific and general terms, many accounts of concerns having been raised throughout the year and communicated to various bodies. However, it is difficult to track how those concerns have been dealt with and what action has been taken as a result of them. That is partly because of the disparate decision making. Do you have a view on who, if anybody, at any stage this year, could have taken a grip and helped to avoid some of the problems that arose later on?

16:30

Judith Gillespie: In so far as this programme was HMI's design and its baby to put in place, and also given the fact that it quickly became so complex that many people failed to grasp some of the complexities of the operation, the only people who were in any kind of position to take a grip were HMI and perhaps Ron Tuck himself, the designer of higher still who had moved to the SQA.

I am sure that there are other people who would say, "Yes, we fully understood," but I attended the higher still liaison group, where new complexities and tangential consequences kept coming forward and we thought, "Where did that one arrive from?" I read minutes, I follow information and I read consultation papers, but suddenly out of the blue something would come in from the side and we would say, "When was that decision taken?" The sheer complexity was enormous.

There was a huge will just to get the higher still programme in place. That is evidenced by our attempt in 1998 to suggest that it should be phased in. I draw the distinction that was made between piloting and phasing. We were looking at phasing, not piloting. There is a well-known saying in education that pilots always work because they get loads of money chucked at them. There is a problem with pilots, because they always work. If I may take you back to 1998, we were heading for the non-implementation of higher still, because the EIS was threatening a total boycott of implementation. It looked as if we were heading towards a brick wall. It was at that point that we felt that the phasing approach was the most sensible one, but it went nowhere.

Nicola Sturgeon: Where was that discussed, and with whom?

Judith Gillespie: It was in yet another committee, called the higher still implementation group, which should not be confused with the

higher still liaison group. The higher still implementation group essentially took over once higher still moved from the development phase to the implementation phase. My understanding was that the original idea was that there would be one committee, but that one committee multiplied quickly, and we had working parties, focus groups and all the rest of it springing up all over the place.

In theory, the higher still implementation group was the body that was responsible for changes to, and decisions that were taken on, higher still. We were so concerned that we addressed the matter on two fronts. First, we wrote a letter to the higher still implementation group, of which Alison Kirby was then a member. Unfortunately, she was unable to attend a meeting, and the minutes show that her letter was read out but was not discussed.

Secondly, we addressed the matter through the education department, from which we got far more useful information. We were told that the decision had already been taken not to phase in, so we asked the department when and why it had been taken. It is not that the department did not phase in the system; it did, but the phasing was completely the reverse. It was phased with the higher first. Everybody who has done an intermediate stage this year has done it voluntarily. The rationale was that there was no curriculum content change. Subsequent events show that that was rubbish, because eight subjects were allowed to be delayed, including, as I said in my evidence, two of the five most commonly taken subjects, which are English and chemistry.

Johann Lamont: A paragraph at the beginning of page 2 of your submission concludes with a comment on SCOTVEC, and relates to what Ken Macintosh said earlier about the SCOTVEC background. It struck me as a hugely subjective comment to appear in your report. Do you regard the view expressed in that paragraph as typical of that held by the schools with which you have contact? Does your organisation subscribe to that view, and on the basis of what evidence does it do so?

Judith Gillespie: That is a widely held view. I could not quantify it, but it comes from schools up and down the country and from people I have spoken to. Other correspondents have confirmed that. It is important to emphasise that we are talking about schools. If you had asked further education colleges, you would have got a different perspective.

One of the problems that I identified was that it was the marrying of further education needs and school needs that was part of the tension. Schools lacked confidence in SCOTVEC, which arose partly out of many schools' experiences with introducing the technical and vocational education

initiative, which took SCOTVEC modules into schools for the first time. That is a classic case in which a pilot worked, and the extended programme did not. Many schools were struggling with the SCOTVEC modules. They arrived, but the schools had no experience of them. They could not cope with them, and many youngsters did them badly and had a poor experience. From the early, bad implementation of that programme there arose huge suspicion of SCOTVEC modules. I can only report that that criticism was widely held when my youngsters were at school.

Johann Lamont: It is quite a leap from that position to say that the organisation was “infected”—I think that that was the word used—because people with a SCOTVEC background are involved.

I asked whether you held that view. It is one thing to say that that view is typically held, but do you consider it to be a reasonable view for people to hold? Do you have evidence to support the position that it is reasonable to say that people who were involved in SCOTVEC and who moved into another organisation brought flawed practices with them? Is there evidence to support that view, rather than looking for reasons? If you had a bad experience with SCOTVEC, it would be logical for you to think that people who were involved with SCOTVEC would necessarily cause problems for a different organisation.

Judith Gillespie: The reason why we put that view in quotation marks is that we wished it to stand as a comment by an individual. I appreciate your problem in going through our evidence. You are pointing out flaws already, and we should not have used the word “typical”, for which I apologise.

Perhaps we should have made it clear—I thought that we did—that that was the view of a person who wrote to us. It is clear that you are suggesting that we should not have included it in our submission as it was a subjective view.

Johann Lamont: I am suggesting that it would be helpful to know what weight you give that damning statement of a determined, specific view, other than including it in your submission. Does your organisation agree with that view? Has it tried to draw together evidence to support it? Otherwise, you could have plucked any view that someone holds strongly and presented it. There must be a reason why you expressed that particularly unfortunate view.

Judith Gillespie: That view reflects what a wide range of people have said to us and reflects views that we have received in other letters. I cannot add more than that. If you feel that that view is wrongly placed in our evidence, I accept that criticism. In assembling the evidence, we put forward our perspective, if you like. Where we can give

concrete evidence, we will back it up.

Johann Lamont: That is what I am trying to establish. What weight do you give that view?

Judith Gillespie: The view is widely expressed—I can say no more than that. It is a common view and is the only perspective that has been reported to us. We have not had the perspective the other way round. More than that I cannot say.

Michael Russell: There are two things about your evidence that I find particularly strong. One is the climate in which complaints and difficulties were raised—it is mentioned throughout your document, particularly under the heading, “‘Refusal to listen’ attitude”. I will ask you about that in a second.

In what you say today and in your paper, you outline the complexity of the committees and bodies that exist. In front of us are minutes from just some of them, such as the higher still liaison group, the implementation committee and all the subject committees. You were present for the evidence from the SQA and heard about its range of committees.

Do you agree that that complexity was a factor in getting us where we are now? What needs to be done from now on to simplify structures and committees and to get a grip on them?

Judith Gillespie: The various committees that have been set up by the Executive must be brought together into one, so that only one group of people is involved. Quite often, they are the same people from the same organisation sitting on different committees. There is no doubt that that side of things must be simplified. I am only partially aware of the multiplicity of the SQA's committees, but I suggest that the structure should be reviewed and simplified. The links between the SQA and the HMI committees must be made clear.

Michael Russell: What link is there, or was there, on the higher still liaison committee, of which you are a member?

Judith Gillespie: The link was mostly through individuals.

Michael Russell: Did individuals from the SQA come to sit on that committee as full members?

Judith Gillespie: Yes.

Michael Russell: Did they bring to that committee any concerns about implementation of the computer systems? Were you aware of that developing issue?

Judith Gillespie: I do not remember technical hardware or software problems being raised at the liaison group. I seem to remember that the

problem was described more in terms of processing and the volume of data that schools were receiving. There was obviously a certain amount of discussion about how schools were coping and connecting with the SQA, but the setting up of the computer system itself was never mentioned.

Michael Russell: I would like to turn to another topic. At the bottom of page 5 of your submission, you state:

"One reason why pronouncements of problems are not heard is because there is a tendency in HMI to regard any problems as arising from flawed practice on the part of teachers rather than as the result of flaws in the system."

That chimes with many of the things that have been said in this committee and elsewhere over a long period about the devaluing of teachers and the fact that failing teachers, rather than failing systems, are put at the centre of the debate. Do you think that the experience of the past few months can turn that around, or do you think that there will still be a tendency to blame schools and teachers rather than educational managers and others?

Judith Gillespie: I hope that there will be a more equal balance. I would not suggest that the problems that teachers raise are always legitimate, but they are sometimes legitimate. In fact, with quite a degree of foresight, we met Peter Peacock in early June and pointed out to him that our experience of education is that even when everybody is saying the same thing there is a kind of denial that they have any right on their side. That seems to be part of the culture. I accept that everybody gets lots of conflicting evidence, but there are points at which everybody is in total agreement, and it is important for those at the centre to tune in to the fact that we are getting the same message all the time from different sources.

Some of the questions that have been raised have been consistent and persistent. For example, English teachers have never changed their story; they have always said the same thing from the very beginning. Having sat on many of the higher still development groups, I have to admit that I have never understood why the teachers' point was not accepted, because they said it every time.

Michael Russell: Do you think that there is an element of what we have experienced with the SQA on all the committees—that members were tuned out to the complaints and told themselves, "The teachers were bound to complain anyway and we know what we're doing, so let's keep going"?

Judith Gillespie: One of the difficulties of serving on such committees is that, as a committee member, one gets ground down by the rebuttal of points. Anyone who has ever served on

any of those committees has some level of complicity in what eventually goes wrong. People are turning round and asking, "Why didn't you make that point at the time?" However, people make those points over and over again, but reach a point at which their points are not accepted and they give up.

That is probably a feature of developing such programmes, where so many people and so many committees are involved. Only a few people have enough knowledge and understanding to steer the thing through. As things get more complicated, people like myself on the many committees end up focusing on one particular point and cannot deal with the full complexity of the situation. In some ways, it is a structural problem which, hopefully, will be addressed after this inquiry. I hope that people will consider simplifying that side of the structure as well.

16:45

Cathy Jamieson: You refer to the role of politicians on page 6 of your submission. You comment:

"There was never any ministerial presence at any of the Higher Still Development, Implementation and Liaison Committees attended by SPTC representatives until"

very recently. You also comment that

"given the other commitments on Ministers' time . . . it would be very hard for any Minister to be fully aware and informed about Higher Still."

Is that because of the complexities of the structure, or because information simply was not being passed on accurately? Is the minister's commitment to get involved in further meetings a welcome development? That is the inference that I take from your report.

Judith Gillespie: I suspect that it is partly a matter of complexity. If the minister had been fully briefed on higher still, he would not have had time to do any of the other things that he was required to do. It would have needed, more or less, to have been a full-time job. All ministers have other areas to take into account.

As far as ministerial responsibility is concerned, policy is presumably set for there to be an improved programme for post-16 education. The policy would be for that to be an inclusive programme that would allow as many people as possible to succeed, leaving it up to HMI and others to work out the details.

No one who was ever involved in any of these matters actually expected a minister to turn up. That is the point that I was trying to make. It was perfectly reasonable for ministers not to have any hands-on knowledge. It is of course hugely pleasing that the minister has now attended two

meetings, partly because he has heard directly what people are saying.

To return to the previous point about complaints constantly being raised in committees, it was not thought that they were being passed on. I do not think that our issue about phasing went anywhere: I am convinced that it was totally dealt with by reading the letter in the implementation group, and through the correspondence that I received back from David Stewart. That was the end of it. I would never suspect that the matter of phasing was taken any higher, with it being pointed out that there was quite a strong lobby for a different form of phasing.

Cathy Jamieson: So you are suggesting that, in some senses, there were blockages in the system by some people, and—

Judith Gillespie: There were blockages, but blockages are to be expected. It is the nature of politics. I would imagine that many members round this table were not completely familiar with higher still until this inquiry, despite the fact that the Education, Culture and Sport Committee has existed for the whole time higher still was being implemented. If we had discussed higher still last March or February, many members, even on this committee, would have been remarkably unaware of the details of what was going on. That is the nature of politics and of politicians in detailed development.

The Convener: I do not think that we will push that point much further.

Mr Monteith: I would challenge your assertion that a minister's being kept briefed about higher still would take up all his or her time. It does not seem to make sense. Given the points that you argued earlier, about the consistent availability of schools and teachers organisations, about the fact that they raised problems and about the consistency of political challenges, not least by Nicola Sturgeon, often in the newspapers—and not least the fact that *The Herald* ran not just articles but editorials about the constant problems not of SQA delivery, but of higher still—one would surely expect a minister to be briefed.

Judith Gillespie: Sorry—we are talking about a different phase of development.

Mr Monteith: I am talking about the development phase. *The Herald* was carrying editorials on higher still from way back in March.

Judith Gillespie: I am sorry, but that is not what I was talking about; I would not say that that was the development phase. I was referring to the actual development, which goes back to 1994. You are talking about when people began to be aware of problems. That changes the situation enormously. My point was about what the

expected role would have been if things had not gone wrong. That is what I was writing about. I was not saying, "Well things did go wrong, therefore the minister obviously has a different role." He has had a different role because he responded to a letter that I wrote on 25 August and has chaired two meetings at which quite a lot of discussion has taken place precisely about anticipating improvements for the current year and avoiding similar mishaps. The minister has responded actively.

Mr Monteith: I drew my comments from the press reports that I saw. I understood that that was what Cathy Jamieson was commenting on. Is the inference that your press comments were not about the recent introduction of higher still but about the development stage before that?

Judith Gillespie: Sorry. If you mean the press comments where I said that I thought he should stay—

Mr Monteith: No, I meant your comment that his absence had been a difficulty.

Judith Gillespie: In the press?

Mr Monteith: Yes, the *Edinburgh Evening News* carried comments a couple of days ago where you mentioned that he had not been able to attend meetings of the liaison group but that you looked forward to the fact that he was going to chair the meetings that you have just mentioned.

Judith Gillespie: I am sorry. The *Edinburgh Evening News* must have misreported what I said. Until the meetings now, there was never any intention of there being a meeting. I hope that you will allow that as a likely event.

Mr Monteith: It is an occasional event.

Judith Gillespie: There was never any possibility that the minister would attend. That is the basis of what I said. I hope that I implied that there was no expectation. It is a remarkable move that he is now and it is very welcome.

The Convener: Do you wish to pursue that point, Brian?

Mr Monteith: No, I think we have clarified the difference between what was in the press reports and what was in the evidence.

Right at the beginning, you talked about your concern about marking and made it clear that you did not think that a conclusive view could be taken. A couple of weeks ago, you made comments about the percentage of appeals that were emergency appeals by those sitting higher exams who needed their marks for university or higher education entry, which seemed to imply that the large number of appeals and the similar or only slightly higher percentage of appeals being upheld would suggest that there were problems with

marking. Do you care to comment on that?

Judith Gillespie: It is precisely that. It raises a question about the marking, but as I said it is a problem that is not proven. All I was trying to do earlier was to say that it is quite different from the missing data. The figures behind the appeals, which show that the number of appeals granted this year is up by the same factor as the number of appeals, leads people legitimately to ask questions. Whether those questions can also legitimately be answered is unclear.

Mr Monteith: Since the fiasco—since 10 August—many other people have said that marking was a problem. Were you aware in your role with the SPTC of other schools having problems? Did any parent teacher associations raise concerns about marking in previous years?

Judith Gillespie: The school we cited talked about problems in previous years. That is one of the things that it is important to examine. Until it is known whether there were problems in previous years—which has never been explored in the same kind of way—we cannot know how much the size of the problems has changed. One school claims that it has a problem with a particular subject, but that could be an aberration. On the whole, people seem to have been content with the results that they received in the past. However, they have been content partly because, if people build up faith and trust in an institution, they have a strong belief that what that institution does is correct. Because of the process of concordance, whereby appeals were built into the system in advance of the results being issued, in many schools the number of appeals had dwindled to very few and the results that were issued were regarded as very reliable.

It is also the case that nobody ever appeals an A. In that situation people do not say that they have done better than they expected—they just say thank you very much and go away. People did not investigate this issue in the past and we cannot obtain comparable information for previous years unless we dig it up. I do not know whether we can dig it up, because I suspect that much of what is happening now may be evidence of general dissatisfaction.

Nicola Sturgeon: I want to return briefly to the role of the minister and the liaison group. I accept that there was no expectation that he would attend meetings of the group, but things went so badly wrong that he did. Given that concerns about higher still were being expressed some months ago and that there were warnings about the nature of what went wrong, if not the nature of it, do you think with hindsight that it would have been helpful for there to have been political input into the committee? Might the minister then have heard concerns, which—you seemed to imply—he was

not hearing from officials?

Judith Gillespie: I suspect strongly that it would not have made any difference. We are dealing here with a train that was running out of control. I took the February meeting of the liaison group, at which the problems of managing and handling the internal assessment really surfaced, as a massive warning. I remember sitting at the meeting—and this was not minuted, because I did not say it—and thinking that there was something seriously wrong. At that point it was quite clear to me that the units were not working and that they were not fulfilling the function for which they were designed—to monitor a youngster's progress through the course.

The system was neatly designed, so that if someone did not get unit 1 they might be dropped down from higher to intermediate level. If pupils were unable to take a unit assessment at the end of the first unit, that could not happen. In February I saw that as creating huge problems. When it was suggested that all the unit assessments should be done at the end of the course, I remember being characteristically blunt and saying that I thought that that was a ridiculous solution. However, I do not think that anything could have been done at that point to avert what happened.

Nicola Sturgeon: These are fundamental criticisms.

Judith Gillespie: I know.

Nicola Sturgeon: We can argue about whether anything could have been done at that stage, but do you think that politicians were aware how fundamental some of the concerns were?

Judith Gillespie: No. To understand why the difficulties to which I referred were significant, one had to be very well versed in the programme of higher still, with all its complexities.

Nicola Sturgeon: Which you do not think the Minister for Children and Education was.

Judith Gillespie: I doubt whether he was fully tuned into the precise role that everything would play. He would have been given a reasonably good description of how things worked, but one begins seriously to understand the roles played by the individual components of the programme only when one has been involved in its development. For example, to answer a question that you raised earlier, the reason for never putting down a result with higher still is that the units in no way contribute to the final result. It is a technical point, but unless one asks the question, no one will provide the answer.

17:00

Nicola Sturgeon: I understand what you are

saying, but surely the minister or his advisers, such as Douglas Osler, must have had that intimate knowledge of how the system was working and where it appeared to have broken down. As far as you know, was that communicated to the minister? We are talking not about technicalities but about concerns about a fundamental breakdown of the system. Did those concerns ever reach ministerial ears?

Judith Gillespie: I would be surprised if they did. At the meeting in February, the HMI report that said that the implementation of higher still was going so well that HMI rated it as good or very good in 90 per cent of schools was presented. On the other hand, at the same meeting, clear evidence was provided that the unit assessments were not working as they were intended to work—there were far more failures, many people were taking resits, and the SQA was having to adjust the pass marks, which would have complications for data recording as, after the pass marks were adjusted, someone who had failed might pass and the data entry would have to be changed.

Nicola Sturgeon: Finally, was that fundamental difference of opinion between HMI and ADES left unresolved?

Judith Gillespie: As far as I am aware, yes. There was no resolution. There were two groups of people, one of which basically said that it did not believe the information that it had been given. We addressed the issue of unit assessments again at the meeting in May. We considered whether we could look at people who were taking higher still courses in a year slightly differently from people who were taking them in colleges over an extended length of time, for whom the units were more important as free-standing units.

There were clearly very different messages. With hindsight, it is clear which lot of messages should have been listened to. The really significant number is not the 3 per cent who did not receive their complete results but the 20 per cent who it seemed at the beginning of July would not receive their results. The only reason the proportion who did not receive their results was reduced from 20 per cent to 3 per cent was that the process was put into intensive care. Even before I heard the figure today, it struck me that the position at the beginning of July was the real fall-out position. From my participation in the development and in the meeting in February, I feel strongly that the problems that schools experienced with unit assessment were an important contributory factor.

The Convener: We do not have much time. As we will have an opportunity to question HMI and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland further at a later date, we will not pursue this matter now. I know that Ian Jenkins wished to ask a question on the future of the organisation,

but we have to move on.

I thank the witnesses for answering our questions this afternoon.

Judith Gillespie: Thank you.

The Convener: I am aware of other people at the committee not being able to move.

Michael Russell: It is now 5.05 pm. Last time, we had half an hour with key witnesses and then had to tell them that we would bring them back. I seriously suggest that it is not really sensible to take witnesses, who have waited a long time, for slightly more than 25 minutes with committee members who have not moved for the past three hours—apart from me; I had to put money in a parking meter. Furthermore, we should consider the timetabling of witnesses as we will need to examine them for longer than we expected.

The Convener: I am in the committee's hands. My feeling is that we will need at least an hour to take evidence from the SSBA. It might take less, but it is up to the committee to decide whether we continue the meeting—obviously as long as SSBA members agree.

Ian Jenkins: It would be discourteous not to take them now.

The Convener: We will push on. However, I recognise Mike Russell's point that we are taking much longer with witnesses. We will review the programme for future meetings and try to ensure that we do not overrun as we have today. Are members agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Michael Russell: We should break for five minutes, if only for the official report and the microphone operators, who have not moved in three and a half hours.

The Convener: I am more than happy to do so; we will adjourn for five minutes. I apologise to the members of the SSBA for the break.

17:06

Meeting adjourned.

17:15

On resuming—

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for allowing the committee a few minutes to collect our thoughts.

I welcome the members of the Scottish School Boards Association to the meeting. I will ask Mrs Hill to introduce the rest of the team before opening it up to questions from the committee.

Ann Hill: Thank you, convener. On my far right is Jeff Taylor, who represents East Ayrshire on the executive board and who is also our treasurer. Alan Smith, on my immediate right, represents Renfrewshire and is the president of the Scottish School Boards Association. On my left is Iain Findlay, who represents Aberdeenshire and who is our vice president.

The Convener: Is there anything that you wish to add to your submission before we ask questions?

Ann Hill: No.

The Convener: Let us push on.

The first question was going to be asked by Fiona McLeod, but she is not here. The question revolved around the statements in your submission on when you first raised matters of concern, who you raised them with and how you felt that was addressed. Perhaps you can work backwards and give us some information on that.

Ann Hill: Issues concerning the transfer of electronic data between schools and the SQA were raised as far back as last October. By March, there was significant concern that matters were not improving. We asked one school to write down its problems, because it was the school—Banchory Academy—that had the most problems and explained them best. When I received that fax and a copy of the e-mail—between Banchory Academy and the SQA—that accompanied it, I telephoned Ron Tuck to find out where to go for guidance and advice. He put me in touch with David Elliot in the Glasgow office and Bill Arundel, who was at that time in the Dalkeith office. I faxed copies of the e-mail and the notes straight to them. After that, I spoke once to David Elliot—Bill Arundel was the main person. Over the next two or three weeks, Bill Arundel tried to reassure me that things were all right. The difficulties were in the infant stages. I was told that the SQA was still trying to produce the software and that it would be all right on the night.

However, by April—some two or three weeks later—I was still not getting the answers that I was looking for. I was doubtful because the schools were still telling me that there were problems. We decided to write to the SQA officially, so that Ron Tuck would get the message in writing. Because there was considerable concern, we also sent a copy of that letter to the minister, to flag up the matter with him, as we often do. There is no sign in the files that we ever got a written answer but, because the issue had been raised with the SQA and with Ron Tuck, we made the assumption that, as we were being told time and again, things were all right.

We kept in touch with schools. Schools told us that things were improving and that the problems

that we foresaw at the beginning, concerning the registration of pupils, were being resolved, so that everyone who was registered could sit the correct exam and that enough papers would be printed to ensure that the situation would not arise in which only three children were allowed to sit an exam instead of 23.

The Convener: You said that you had raised the question of the software. Last week, it was mentioned that the terms “software” and “data processing” were used interchangeably. What was the concern that you raised? Was it about software not being in place and not being programmed, or was it about the fact that data were not being processed correctly?

Ann Hill: There seemed to be an incompatibility. The data that schools were sending to the SQA were corrupted by the time they got there, so that when they came back to the schools for checking the schools could see that there was obviously something wrong. I am not at all au fait with IT, software, hardware and all the rest of it, but it was obvious that there was something far wrong. The concern was that children might not be allowed to sit an exam because they were not registered.

The Convener: Do you have examples of how that was coming through?

Ann Hill: The Banchory statement is probably the best example. The fourth paragraph says:

“Moreover, candidates who are entered for Higher Still Units as opposed to full courses all also entered correctly. The print out we have received has been checked so far only for Standard Grade pupils. We have found errors in every single subject most noticeably in Maths—80 not accounted for, English 25 missing and other subjects in smaller numbers . . . I heard anecdotal evidence of a girl in another school being listed for 17 Highers in 16 of which the school does not present candidates.”

That is the kind of evidence that led us to worry that children would not be registered.

The Convener: You said that you had copied to the minister the letter expressing your concern. I know that on a television programme, which most of us saw, the minister said that he was not aware of that letter. Is there any way that that letter could not in fact have gone out, or were you used to not being replied to?

Alan Smith (Scottish School Boards Association): We retrieved from our files a copy of the letter, and a copy was then sent to the minister. That raised some doubt in Edinburgh, as the letterhead had changed when I took over as president and the letter was printed out on the new stationery. There has still not been any notification that the Executive has found the original correspondence, but it raised a query because of the letterhead on the copy that was sent when I was president. I was not president at the time that

the original letter was issued, so I responded by asking whether it was being suggested that we had manufactured this letter to support a statement that had been made. We were told that that was not the implication, but that the department could not find the original. That led me to ask whether we were in the habit of not getting replies, but I do not think that that is the case. It may be that the letter was sent and was lost. Because it was such a brief note, it may have been overlooked.

Ann Hill: We wrote to the Scottish Executive that day on two subjects: transfer of data and the Scottish Council for Research in Education. We received a letter thanking us for our correspondence to the minister and indicating that a fuller reply would be sent in due course—the standard response. We have since received a letter about the SCRE, but we have never received a letter about transfer of data.

Mr Monteith: You say that you wrote about two subjects. Did you send two separate letters?

Ann Hill: Yes.

Mr Monteith: That is what I thought.

Mr Macintosh: But they were not in two separate envelopes.

Mrs Hill: They were in the same envelope because we were trying to save money.

Nicola Sturgeon: The written submission that the SSBA has provided is very helpful and contains a great deal of backed-up evidence of concerns being communicated to the SQA and, to a lesser extent, to the Scottish Executive. Mrs Hill, you describe a frustrating process in which you constantly raised issues and did not always get answers. The difficulty that I have is that you were also a member of the SQA board. As we discussed earlier, at the same time as you were communicating your concerns and not getting the answers that you were seeking, you were approving—at least implicitly—minutes that did not mention these issues. Did that not alert you to a problem within the SQA that you should have followed up more vigorously than you did?

Ann Hill: Yes. Right until the start of the summer holidays we continued to raise issues—not at board level, because I was not present at most meetings, but at officer level. I was always told, just as the chairman of the SQA told the committee today, that things were all right. I am a parent serving on a board. Hindsight is a wonderful thing—

Nicola Sturgeon: It is not as if these problems were being raised at the board and people were being told that things were okay. The minutes do not suggest that there was discussion of most of these issues.

Ann Hill: They do not.

Cathy Peattie: Is that the norm?

Ann Hill: As I have not been to many of the board meetings, I cannot tell you. Obviously, some things are missing from the minutes. Minutes never mention everything that was said at a meeting.

Cathy Peattie: No, but they contain the key elements of the meeting and indicate the agreements and discussion that have taken place.

Ann Hill: From reading the minutes, I do not know how much more was said about other areas of concern that do not appear in the minutes.

Nicola Sturgeon: Did you ever ring up Ron Tuck and say, "I have evidence of X, Y and Z from schools. I have the minutes of the board's meetings in front of me, but those issues are not being discussed. Why not?" If you did, what was the answer?

Ann Hill: The answer was that they would be discussed at the next board meeting or in house. As I said earlier, I have never seen the minutes of meetings of the liaison group between Scottish Executive officials and officials of the board. As a board member, that worries me. Half the things that I have heard today I have never heard before. I will take that as an injunction to do better.

Cathy Jamieson: I believe that, subsequent to your exchange of correspondence with the Scottish Executive, you received an invitation from David Miller to discuss with the SQA some of the problems. I know that on 24 May you wrote back to him indicating that you were still getting feedback from schools and that they were concerned about the system. You said that you would take up the invitation to meet the SQA, but not at that point. You suggested waiting until the current round of exams was complete and certificates had been awarded. If you were so concerned about the fact that many people were telling you that there was a real problem, why did you think that it was okay to wait until later? Why did you not do more about it at that stage?

Ann Hill: I did not take up the invitation, but that does not mean that I did not keep in touch. I was told by officials in the SQA that they were addressing the problems. I did not see any point in going in to see problems that the SQA was trying to correct. I thought that it was more important that we go afterwards. Little did I think that we were going to have such a disaster.

Cathy Jamieson: None the less, you seem to have made press comments at that time. That is referred to in the letter.

Ann Hill: I was also talking to the SQA.

Cathy Jamieson: But even though you are a board member, you did not take the opportunity to sit down with the chair of the board, discuss the situation in more detail and see what action was being taken. Was there a reason why you did not do that?

Ann Hill: It was probably because, at that point, the SSBA had an awful lot of other things on, including a big international conference.

Cathy Jamieson: So it was not a priority for the SSBA at that time?

Ann Hill: No. Not at that time. Certainly not for me.

Michael Russell: The letter from the chairman of the SQA is dated 5 April but you did not reply until 24 May. Why did it take you almost seven weeks to reply?

Ann Hill: Perhaps the front page of *The Herald* on 8 April would answer that question.

Michael Russell: So you were distracted?

The Convener: Can we be clear what Ann Hill is saying? We do not all have newspapers in front of us.

17:30

Alan Smith: After the initial correspondence with the SQA, a fairly serious difficulty arose in the SSBA, which led to Mrs Hill's suspension and subsequent reinstatement. Following that, an independent inquiry was implemented. As Ann Hill said, we had a lot to deal with internally and that might account for the delay in the response to the letter from the SQA.

The Convener: That is fine. It is important for the *Official Report* that we have that clarified.

Michael Russell: Before 5 April, or after 24 May, whom did you speak to in the SQA? You have a letter to Ron Tuck and you were obviously in touch with the chairman. Did you speak to David Elliot or Jack Greig?

Ann Hill: I spoke to David Elliot, but I have never spoken to Jack Greig. I had only three contacts at the SQA: Ron Tuck, David Elliot and Bill Arundel. I had very little correspondence with Ron Tuck because he put me on to two people who—as far as I was aware—dealt with the system.

Michael Russell: I want to deal with David Elliot and Bill Arundel. One of the letters that you copied to us has a hand-written note at the bottom and was faxed to Bill Arundel. I refer to the short note—there is a longer one later on—on Banchory Academy. Did you speak to Bill Arundel about that complaint?

Ann Hill: Yes. That is why the letter was faxed to Bill Arundel.

Michael Russell: Did he ring you?

Ann Hill: Yes.

Michael Russell: The complaint is specific. It says that the Phoenix system does not work and that the data are corrupted; it says that people are not prepared to carry on under the circumstances. What did Bill Arundel say to you that reassured you about that?

Ann Hill: He said that those problems would be corrected by the software production. He said that he would find out what was wrong and get back to me. I cannot remember exactly what I said, but it was certainly enough to make me comfortable in the belief that Bill Arundel would do something about it.

Michael Russell: What could he have done about it? You have other letters with you that list many problems. What did you think Bill Arundel was doing?

Ann Hill: I thought he was checking—bringing the situation to the attention of the relevant people, who would probably be his departmental managers, since he is not hierarchy. Remember that all this happened just before the SSBA's problems. I assumed that the problems would be taken to the next SQA board meeting.

Michael Russell: When was the last time you attended an SQA board meeting?

Ann Hill: August.

Michael Russell: August 2000?

Ann Hill: Yes.

Michael Russell: And before that?

Ann Hill: A year past March.

Michael Russell: Since a year past March, when higher still implementation was being discussed by the board, until August, a huge crisis took place. At any time during that period, did you think that you could not remain part of the situation because it had become so bad?

Ann Hill: No. Although I was not at the board meetings, I was at finance, planning and general purposes committee meetings; I raised the issue there in March and in August. I have read through the minutes and am not convinced that we were being told the whole story.

Michael Russell: I want to get to the bottom of the dichotomy of the way that you have been presented on the issue. On the one hand, you have been presented as Cassandra, who was not listened to. For example, there were the articles in *The Herald* in March and the complaints you made

that resulted in letters from David Miller. On the other hand, we seem to be discovering that you were a Cassandra who was reassured by the organisation that everything was fine. In retrospect, who were you really? Should you have pressed the matter harder and been listened to; or was it proper for you to accept the reassurances, even though we now know that they were not worth anything?

Ann Hill: It is difficult to use hindsight on this matter. Even after everything that I have heard about July and August, I do not think that I would have done anything different, because I believed what I was being told. I believed the SQA when I was told that things were all right.

Michael Russell: So your position is no different from that of Mr Miller, from whom we heard earlier, and the other board members.

Ann Hill: No.

Michael Russell: You went through the process and then discovered that you had not been told the truth and that there was an awful problem. You offered your resignation at certain times during the year because you could not attend meetings. Were you paying proper attention to the situation, as one of the people who was charged with responsibility?

Ann Hill: Probably not. As a parent who was affected this year, I wish that I had done more.

Michael Russell: Okay. Thank you.

Ann Hill: I just do not know what I could have done.

The Convener: I appreciate that some of the questions seem to be straying into your role as board member of the SQA, but there is an overlap and it is difficult to separate matters. However, I remind members that we are speaking to the witnesses as SSBA members. Please keep that in mind when asking further questions.

Mr Monteith: Were you aware of the scale of the impending problem before it broke, in terms of the number of students affected and the number of problems with certificates?

Ann Hill: The SSBA was not aware of the problem until it hit the press.

Mr Monteith: Would it be fair to say that the association became aware of the possibility of problems on the weekend of 2 August when the press reports in the Sunday papers came out? From my recollection, the first reports suggested that 400 students were affected; by Monday, the *Daily Mail* reported that the number was 1,000 and by the following day the number had risen to 1,400.

Alan Smith: Yes. That was when we became

aware of the problems. Ann Hill had been keeping us advised of the correspondence between us and the SQA, but we were completely unaware of the situation. We had listened to Ron Tuck's reassurances—in the written media, radio and television—that there might be some problem and that there might be some incomplete certificates, but no one was aware at any time of the scale of the problem that faced us.

We found out only when we told the SQA of our concerns about higher still and of the fact that schools had flagged up problems regarding the input of information. An example of such a problem would be the coded information that was used for music. Teachers spent a long time processing the codes for individual instruments, only to discover that the transmission codes—one code in particular—had been changed. My school received that information from other schools, not from the SQA. A lot of wasted effort and time had gone into that work.

On higher still, some of the packages had not been put together; the SQA had to wait until October before it could do anything, then it used the Strathclyde educational establishment management information system to send the information. Schools were told to hold on to the information, as the SQA could not deal with it and while a whole batch of information was dealt with, the majority was lost.

My school prepared 87 pages of information and sent them to the SQA, but not all that information was used. As a further example, information on graphic communications was not used. The results for graphic communications have been received only recently. That is the scale of the problem that we discovered, but we were not aware at all of the significance of that information.

Ann Hill: I will add a little information to that.

The SSBA held an executive board meeting on 1 July, before any of this information became known. Members will see from the information in front of them that, because of our concerns, it was decided at that meeting to invite Ron Tuck, or someone else from the SQA, to attend the next executive board meeting in September to explain to us that everything was okay and to consider what we had learned from this year and what we would change next year. We wrote to the SQA on 6 July and the invitation was accepted on 13 July. Dr Dennis Gunning came to the executive board meeting on 2 September. We were continually asking.

Mr Monteith: Thank you for your answer, Mr Smith. I appreciate the fact that you were referring to the board.

I will cross-reference those issues with you, Mrs Hill, wearing your other hat. Is it the case that you

were not aware of the scale of the problem until that same weekend and that you were not privy to the information we heard today from David Miller that the figure of 20,000 affected candidates was going down to 1,400?

Ann Hill: I might have been, but I was on holiday.

When I came back from holiday, mail was waiting for me. I got two letters from the SQA chairman, one of which said that there was a problem but that the figures were coming down. The second letter said, "I'm going to press tomorrow. There are 1,500—or just over 1,000—affected candidates."

Mr Monteith: I think it was 1,400 candidates.

My other questions are on entirely different subjects.

The Convener: Do any other members have questions at this point, as I was going to move on? I will come back to Brian Monteith.

Fiona McLeod: I want to pursue the points about responsiveness. We heard that, for a variety of reasons, Mrs Hill was not able to attend meetings as an SQA board member. However, I presume that the SSBA took a lot of faith from having an SQA board member in its organisation. Was the SSBA concerned that the organisation was out of the SQA's loop, especially given the number of concerns that were being received from school boards?

Alan Smith: No, because we were reassured to a certain extent by the information that we received through the minutes that Ann Hill received and through Ann telling us about her telephone conversations. The concerns that we were hearing from some schools led us to invite someone from the SQA to come along to the SSBA, so that we could discuss those concerns. We were overtaken by events—between the invitation being issued and accepted and someone from the SQA attending the meeting, the problem had exploded in everyone's faces.

Fiona McLeod: How did your organisation, as the school board association, respond to the concerns of the school boards that contacted you? You said that you were reassured to a certain extent. Were you able, in turn, to reassure your school boards when they raised concerns with you?

Alan Smith: We passed on the information that had been given to us, that "things should be okay". We told school boards that an SQA representative would attend a meeting on 2 September and that that person would answer fully their concerns. That turned out to be too little, too late.

Cathy Peattie: We want to move forward and

achieve an SQA that responds to the organisations that are represented on it. You were in the position of having a member who also sat on the SQA board. We have heard that, on numerous occasions, the minutes of meetings did not tell people anything, because issues were discussed that were not included in the minutes. How can an organisation such as yours be represented in the SQA? What changes can be made to the SQA to make it more responsive?

17:45

Alan Smith: Rather than having one member, perhaps we could be represented by a member and a depute, so that someone else could attend meetings. Rather than just recording the decisions that have been taken, perhaps the minutes of an organisation such as the SQA could be transcribed. Obviously, in this case, a brief minute is not sufficient to give full answers to people and organisations. There should be fuller minute taking and a swifter response to communications.

Cathy Peattie: We know that there has been no real response to your communications.

Alan Smith: No.

Ann Hill: At the most recent board meeting, with my SSBA hat on, I asked the SQA board for the sake of parents to clear up all the outstanding problems quickly, and to ensure that appeals were handled properly. Somebody else talked about exam results not being lowered; I am one of the fortunate mothers whose daughter received an A pass, but I wonder whether she should have been given it. There is uncertainty. It is even more important that everybody should work in partnership to ensure that diet 2001 does not suffer as the exams have suffered this year. That is the SSBA's appeal to the SQA.

Cathy Peattie: Do you think that the present board could do that?

Ann Hill: I think so, but I do not know. If I said yes, that would mean that I believe everything that I have been told so far. There is so much doubt in my mind that I do not know whether the board could do that.

Mr Monteith: I would like to clarify something that has been raised by Cathy Peattie's question. Am I right in thinking that Mrs Hill is on the SQA board as Mrs Ann Hill and that she is invited to be a member because of the experience of the SSBA on which she can draw? I understand Mr Smith's point of view that it would be useful if his organisation were represented by a member and a depute. However, the SSBA is not represented on the board, just as the SPTC is not represented on the higher still liaison group—Judith Gillespie is on that group because of her own experience.

Ann Hill: That is right. As I said to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, I would like there to be more teachers on the SQA board, but I would also like there to be more parents on it.

Mr Stone: I know that this is a little unfair on you, because you are on your own and are here in a different capacity today, but I wish to press you on what the board of the SQA might do. Is that in order, convener?

The Convener: Ask your question, and then we will decide.

Mr Stone: Could you not concede that at least there should be a change in the management style and approach? Everything that I have heard today smacks of complacency—I feel that I have to use that word. I do not blame you individually, but collectively I find it pretty breathtaking.

Ann Hill: I could not agree more. There needs to be a serious examination of the SQA management strategy. We need to consider how the minutes are recorded. We need total openness.

Mr Stone: That is a very honest answer.

Michael Russell: In answer to Cathy Peattie, you said that you thought that the board could take the organisation forward. Now, in response to Jamie Stone, you say that you found it pretty pathetic. Is it your position that you think that a pretty pathetic group of people should take the organisation forward, or is there an inconsistency that you would like to explain?

Ann Hill: No. I said that I thought that it needed to be reviewed. I am not confident because as it is set up at present, the board lacks teachers and parents. We need a review of the whole system. There needs to be more openness, for everybody and not just for the SSBA. I would like the board to take the organisation forward. The will is there to do that.

The Convener: I think that we are being a little unfair in asking Mrs Hill to comment on the board.

Nicola Sturgeon: I do not mean to be difficult or to be hard on you, Ann; I just want some clarity. Either you are saying that you would like the board as currently constituted to take the organisation forward, or—and this is what you appeared to say to Cathy Peattie—you are saying that some changes in the board are absolutely necessary in order for it to do its job.

Ann Hill: Let me try to clear this up for members. I think that the board members, as they are at the moment, are the people to take forward the review. Following that review—and not only the internal review of the organisation but the review of the board, its procedures and the way

that it sets policy—we all need to have a good honest look at the members of the board and ask whether we are the right people to do this work.

Cathy Peattie: Are you the right people to review your own performance?

Mr Monteith: There is a sense of anger within the board.

Alan Smith: I would like to step back a bit and speak as a parent—and although I always hesitate to use the phrase, I am just a dad. I would like the make-up of the board, and of the group that carries out the review, to have more teachers and parents who are not afraid to ask the hard questions and who are not there to engender favouritism from politicians who might be making appointments to boards. It is time that someone got in there with a big stick and stirred it up.

Someone has to ask the hard questions about what is happening with the board and what is happening with the SQA. We had the SEB and we had SCOTVEC. The SCOTVEC computers were incompatible with the new systems, so we have lost a lot of information for modules. Our children's module results will not appear until after Christmas, once we have dealt with the standard grade results. As a dad, I am not happy. I think that there are quite a few mums and dads who would want to ask hard questions in any review of any board and its make-up. I do not think that making political appointments is the way to go about setting up such an important organisation.

Mr Stone: I have been very quiet today, convener, but I would like to get one thing absolutely out in the open. I understand the witnesses' position apropos the board. Does the credibility of next year's exams depend on this?

Ann Hill: The credibility of next year's exams depends on a whole range of things—including the membership of the board, the reviews and the evidence that you are taking today. We all have a part to play.

The Convener: I would like to move on to discuss marking. It was reported in the media that you had said that there was a question mark hanging over not only the marking of the papers of those who received incorrect results but the whole marking process. However, I see in this month's edition of *Grapevine* that you say that teachers who are also markers for the exam system are having their credibility questioned. You say that that is "unfair". That probably relates to the statement that was made earlier by the SPTC. What is your view on the marking?

Ann Hill: I do not think that there is enough evidence about the marking. We will need to wait for the review. The point being made in *Grapevine* was that markers are generally teachers who are

there not for the money, and not for any other reason, but to gain the experience that they can then pass on to the next year's cohort of children. The press have been somewhat guilty in calling into question the ability of the markers, and those are the people whom I am trying to protect.

The Convener: When I read it, it sounded as if you were calling their ability into question, but we accept—as we did earlier—that the press have not necessarily reported on the issue as clearly as we might have wished. Do you feel that that area requires further investigation?

Ann Hill: Yes, particularly when it comes to the appeals for this year. It is a case of ensuring that we have enough teachers and markers, of sufficient quality, to deal with the appeals. There is the added problem of how we replace those teachers if we take them out of school to deal with the appeals. Do we have enough specialist teachers to put back into schools?

Michael Russell: I have a question for Mr Smith. I presume that, as president of the organisation, you are responsible for the publication, *Grapevine*. Do you not think that there is a problem with the fact that your chief executive is a member of the board of the SQA, yet in the September 2000 issue, there is a piece that advises parents on how to sue the SQA? I am not disputing that that should be done and I think that it is a matter of concern for many parents. However, at this time, would not it be better for your organisation not to have its chief executive as a board member of the SQA?

Alan Smith: That may well be. As we pointed out earlier, Mrs Hill offered to resign from the board of the SQA before this happened. We are not recommending that parents sue the SQA. We are simply reporting information that Cameron Fyfe had already put in the public domain, suggesting that that might be a course of action for parents who are still dissatisfied with the outcome.

Michael Russell: I understand that and I realise that it is a genuine issue. However, the second paragraph reads:

"In the first instance you would require to prove negligence on the part of the Scottish Qualifications Authority which should not be difficult."

Your chief executive is a member of the board of the SQA. Would not it be better for your members to be absolutely clear? I am sure that Mrs Hill, being a reasonable person, would recognise that point, should her board say that it would be better to sever that link. Would the board consider that?

Alan Smith: The board would consider that.

Mr Monteith: Have you had any indication from parents or boards that, if confidence is not restored in the SQA, they may seek to change

from Scottish examinations to general certificates of secondary education and A-levels?

Alan Smith: A head teacher in Dumfries and Galloway, who is a member of the SPTC, has suggested that. I saw a report saying that he would be recommending that, although it would be a decision for the authority. I wondered whether that was a personal opinion or the opinion of the SPTC. I would not support that view, because I believe firmly in Scottish education. The other night, I was at a meeting of parents in my area and I told them that I believe in Scottish education and that the problem can be resolved so as to restore everyone's faith in the education system in Scotland. However, there is still a long way to go.

Iain Findlay (Scottish School Boards Association): Recently, I have been in contact with many head teachers in my area and they seem to be content to wait until the end of the year to find out whether things prove to be all right. They do not want to rush into English A-levels.

The main focus of my contact was internal assessment. Those people wanted to keep it as it is for the time being, or perhaps to go in the direction that was suggested in yesterday's *Scotland on Sunday*, of putting internal assessment entirely in the hands of the teachers, with more emphasis on diagnostic feedback to pupils and their parents.

The Convener: When you referred to a head teacher in Dumfries, did you mean Colin Mitchell?

Ann Hill: Absolutely not. The head teacher in question is Charles McAteer, the rector of Dumfries Academy. It was not the head teacher of Dumfries High School.

The Convener: I thought that it was important to be clear on that.

Alan Smith: Before you close, I have one final point. With regard to the appeals process, it has been brought to my attention in my school that the number of appeals has doubled compared with previous years. I have some areas of concern, particularly on the PE exams. We had three pupils for whom the teachers predicted As, but we have had no success with their appeals. That may well be because the marking for that subject is so complex. It could be that the wrong mark has been taken, rather than that mark being made up to a percentage that would suggest a pass. I therefore feel that the appeals process this year must be seriously considered.

Each school was given one contact person to send information to. In my school, the information was being sent to that person, faxes were sent and telephone messages were left, only for the teacher responsible for the appeals process to be told on contacting someone else at the SQA,

"Sorry, but that individual has given up the ghost and gone back to her area. She is no longer dealing with appeals." That information was not communicated to the school. We had to find it out by a circuitous route, which is most unsatisfactory.

We were also told that, if a pupil has a B minus pass and we think that it should have been a B plus, we should not bother to appeal, because a B is a B. That is also unsatisfactory.

The Convener: I am sure that we shall take forward those comments and seek some resolution of them. I thank all witnesses for attending the committee today and answering our questions.

There is one final matter for committee members. Do members agree to start Wednesday's meeting at 9.30 am in private, and to go into public session around 10 am?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Meeting closed at 18:01.

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