

# **EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 8 May 2001  
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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## EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

### 14<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2001, Session 1

#### CONVENER

\*Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

#### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

#### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

\*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

\*Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

\*Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

\*Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)

\*attended

#### THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab)

#### WITNESSES

Gordon Casey (Manufacturing, Science, Finance Union)

Matt McLaughlin (Unison)

Gordon Rogers (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

Lillian Stubbs (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

Sheila Chatham (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

#### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

#### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Judith Evans

#### ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

#### LOCATION

The Hub



## Scottish Parliament

### Education, Culture and Sport Committee

*Tuesday 8 May 2001*

*(Afternoon)*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting in private at 13:52*]

13:58

*Meeting continued in public.*

### Special Educational Needs

**The Convener (Karen Gillon):** I open the public part of the meeting. Agenda item 3 is the committee debate on special educational needs. I am negotiating with the Executive to include in the motion the phrase:

"and calls upon the Executive to act upon the recommendations".

That would be useful, but I do not want there to be an amendment to the motion. We are working that out at the moment. Usually, committee motions simply note things, but it would be helpful if we could call on the Executive to act on the recommendations. If members are happy with the proposed wording, I will let them know by e-mail this week what is happening.

The deputy convener and I have discussed at some length the arrangements for the debate. We are happy to give up the opening slot to another member on the committee, if someone else would like to present the report. Either Cathy Peattie or I will sum up, if someone else will volunteer to lead off for the committee. The opening slot is 20 minutes.

**Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP):** Either Irene McGugan or I will open. We will discuss it and get back to you on that before the end of the week.

**The Convener:** Fine. It would be helpful to have some consensus on the debate.

**Michael Russell:** That arrangement will ensure that the committee is as near unanimous as we can get it. Perhaps the members who will open and close could consult each other so that they know who is saying what.

### Budget Process 2002-03

**The Convener:** Item 4 is the budget for 2002-03. I welcome Richard Simpson, who is the reporter from the Finance Committee. I ask Cathy Peattie to introduce the report that she has prepared.

**Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab):** My main concern is the lack of indicators. We can have the best policies in the world and positive intentions, but if indicators are not written into budget documents, it is difficult later to scrutinise what has been done and how things have been achieved. That is a very important issue. There is perhaps a need to learn from the process so that those drawing up the budget ensure that indicators are included. We should flag up that issue.

It is open to members to comment on my report. We should ask the minister to the committee. I would like to hear more about the budget in relation to the McCrone settlement. It is for the committee to decide whether to invite the minister to speak to us.

I am keen to examine how money has been identified for the cultural strategy. Also, where is the extra £1 million coming from for Scottish Opera? I would like to know more about what is meant by cultural champions and how that initiative will be administered.

On sport, again there is an issue in relation to policy objectives and indicators. I am sorry if I repeat that point, but I think that indicators are important, as I do not know how else we can measure success.

**Michael Russell:** I have one or two points that I would like Cathy Peattie to take on board. I agree that the minister should come to the committee.

Under "Education and Children", the paper refers to the differences in the figures from year to year—I think that all of us are struck by that. Although we asked that question last year, we did not receive a very satisfactory response and we need to explore the matter further.

In the section on funding, I am very surprised to read about the increase in the budget for Her Majesty's inspectors of schools. I would have thought that the changes to the status of HMI would have resulted in a decrease to that budget, or at least would have left it static. We need a further explanation of that.

Anybody would be concerned by the drop in pupil support in the budget line that deals with schools. If money is being taken from elsewhere or going elsewhere, that should be made much more clear in the documentation. I do not resent the fact that I am able to attack the Executive for

spending less per pupil in schools, but it seems a rather odd item to have in the budget.

Under the heading of "Culture", it occurs to me that, if the Executive is keen to pursue its national cultural strategy, it must begin to earmark funds for some of the objectives of that national cultural strategy. The budget does not indicate that that is the case, and the answers to some of the parliamentary questions of my colleague Irene McGugan seem to suggest that parts of the national cultural strategy are falling by the wayside.

We need to be much more clear about the relationship between a major policy document that lays out a strategy for the future and the spending lines that flow from it. There seems to be no relationship within the documentation. Dr Richard Simpson may have experience of this in other departments. I am deeply interested in where the extra money for Scottish Opera has come from. This committee has to return to that issue. We received a letter from the First Minister saying that Allan Wilson would talk to us about that and we need to arrange that meeting.

There is a continuing discussion about the possible merger of Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. There are concerns about such a merger and it would be useful if the committee could consider the matter before the merger takes place. However, the planned expenditure does not appear to bear any relationship to that debate. That is a worry and we need to examine that issue much more closely.

Issues relating to museum funding are also not fully transparent within the papers. We will need to see much more clear information on the change in the status of museums and the audit that is taking place.

**Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD):** In relation to sport, we need to get more detail on the fact that the budget is static, particularly with regard to the question that Cathy Peattie raises in the document about how inflation is taken into account. We also need to know more about how much money will be used to promote social inclusion and how that money will be separated from the rest of the budget. The problem with the way in which the information is presented throughout the budget document is that individual items are not broken down far enough.

I do not know how the minister would respond to a point about the problem that I have previously mentioned of money being earmarked by the Executive for certain initiatives but not being available to be spent on those initiatives by the time that it reaches local authorities' grant-aided expenditure. I know that there are problems with

ring-fencing and so on, but I would like to know more about Government policy on such matters. I understand that the ministers are interested in outcomes and want to shift their emphasis towards looking for the results and targets that Cathy Peattie is talking about. That is a debate that will not be solved in our discussions immediately but needs to be kept firmly in mind.

**The Convener:** I ask Cathy Peattie to take those points on board. We will try to find a slot for a meeting with the minister prior to the delivery of our report to the Finance Committee. The timing will be tight, however.

## Scottish Qualifications Authority Trade Unions

**The Convener:** We will now take evidence from members of the trade unions that are involved with the Scottish Qualifications Authority. I invite Gordon Casey from the Manufacturing, Science, Finance union to introduce his colleagues.

**Gordon Casey (Manufacturing, Science, Finance Union):** On my right is Gordon Rogers, who works at the SQA offices in Glasgow and is the MSF senior representative. I am the MSF regional organiser dealing with the organisation. Lillian Stubbs is the senior representative at the SQA for the administrative, clerical, technical and supervisory staffs, or T&G ACTS. Matt McLaughlin is Unison's regional officer for the SQA and Sheila Chatham is Unison's senior representative at the organisation. That means that there are three SQA employees and two full-time officers who deal with the organisation. Gordon Rogers will now make an opening statement.

**Gordon Rogers (Scottish Qualifications Authority):** We thank the Education, Culture and Sport Committee for agreeing to meet the trade unions involved in the SQA. It is very much appreciated.

Our main reason for requesting the meeting is to provide an opportunity for the staff voice to be heard. Until now, the main SQA spokespeople have come from management and the organisation's official public relations consultants. Although we agree with much of what has been said, staff feel that their voice should be heard directly in the run-up to what will be a critical period for the organisation.

The SQA's staff are fully committed to delivering diet 2001. They are very much aware of their responsibility and the vital part that each and every one of them plays in contributing to a successful diet 2001. Given the battering that their morale and confidence have taken over the past year, it is a tribute to the staff that they continue to fulfil their duties and meet the demands of the job with such commitment. Furthermore, we acknowledge at the outset that the Scottish Executive has been fully supportive in providing the SQA with additional financial and human resources when requested.

That said, the staff have genuine concerns, which we intend to bring to the committee's attention. Members of the trade union groups are committed not only to a successful diet 2001, but to the longer term. Although we recognise the reasons for focusing on the delivery of this year's school examinations, we must also consider the SQA's wider role in supporting education and

training throughout Scotland. We believe that some of the decisions being taken now will have a long-term impact, which is why they must be carefully considered.

The size of the task facing the SQA after last summer's crisis was—and remains—immense. SQA staff were keen to play their part in the recovery process and the majority accepted that the restructuring and realignment of core and key processes were inevitable. Unfortunately, the main feeling among staff is that they have been at the receiving end of that process without having the opportunity to input to outcomes. That has had a stultifying effect on morale and has not helped to reduce the feelings of disengagement between staff and senior management which were already apparent in the run-up to last summer's events.

The recent appointment of general managers—or GMs—within the SQA is illustrative of the low ebb at which staff and management relations lie. The procedures and reasoning behind those appointments lack clarity and, to a certain extent, logic. The posts themselves are not problematic—they might very well be a key component of any new structure; it is the manner in which they have been filled.

We understand that an enhanced package, including a £10,000 bonus, was offered to attract the best candidates from outside the organisation who would bring flair, imagination and, most important, solutions to the problems besetting the SQA. That package was suggested without the unions' agreement, even though we had objected to bonuses for individuals. It should also be noted that when the unions asked what the criteria were for receiving the bonus, we were categorically told by a member of senior management that there were none yet, although we were led to believe that the bonus would be given for successful delivery of diet 2001.

14:15

The recruitment of highly qualified GMs has proved more difficult than management envisaged. That is probably understandable, given that there were no clear criteria for the bonus payment and that the SQA might not have appeared to be a good career move at the time. At no point were the unions involved in discussions relating to the appointment procedure. If we had been, we might have advised caution in proceeding with recruitment until such time as we could establish more clearly the roles of the GMs. There is no doubt that Mr Morton was under pressure from the media to fill what had been trailed as key posts to underpin a successful delivery of diet 2001.

What happened next lies at the crux of the problems in the SQA and will, the unions believe,

create long-term unrest in the organisation, and will hinder the full recovery of the SQA as the vibrant, successful and forward-looking organisation that it should be. Two of the GM posts in human resources and information technology went to internal members of staff—members of the management team that led the SQA into diet 2000.

There is a lack of clarity around those appointments. The SQA has an agreed procedure with the unions for recruitment and appointment, but that was not followed in this case. While we acknowledge that there may be emergency situations when agreements need to be suspended by mutual consent, as was the case for the purpose of appointing school account managers quickly after Mr Morton started in his post, in this case there appears to be no merit in making two internal appointments of senior members of staff, given that key figures in the respective areas where the promotions have taken place are already in place. Both areas, IT in particular, were subject to close scrutiny and criticism in the reports of the inquiries that were carried out after last summer.

In the view of our members, the manner of those appointments lacks legitimacy, and their enactment has served only to weaken further the credibility of the senior management team in the SQA. By proceeding to appoint in what is clearly a depressed market for the posts concerned, we feel that the long-term prospects for the SQA have been damaged in return for little appreciable gain. The appointments confirm for many staff the fact that decision making at the highest level is still disturbingly detached from the reality of what they see around them.

A poll of our members showed that no one was in favour of rewarding the general managers or any other single individual with a bonus for what will be a collaborative effort on the part of the whole staff. It is that sort of decision making that concerns the trade unions and the majority of staff.

Committee members have the trade union paper in front of them. It was written in the middle of March, and contains a snapshot of members' concerns at the time. At meetings that were held last week to gauge members' views before we came before this committee, the trade union representatives were told that feelings were pretty much the same, with genuine concerns about the SQA's preparedness for diet 2001.

It should also be noted that the GM appointments were announced after the trade union paper was written. The announcement served only to demoralise and disillusion members and staff further.

In conclusion, I repeat that, despite the

difficulties that I have just mentioned, the staff at the SQA remain 100 per cent committed to achieving a successful diet 2001. Last year, Deloitte & Touche singled out the staff for particular praise for their efforts. Those efforts prevented the situation from being even worse than it was. If history does not repeat itself this year, it will be down to the dedication and commitment of the staff as a whole rather than the appointment of any individual.

**The Convener:** I thank you, Gordon, for your statement, and also wish to put on record the thanks and support of the Education, Culture and Sport Committee to you and to the other staff at the SQA. We recognise the immense pressure that the staff are currently under, and acknowledge the valuable role that you will play in the successful delivery of diet 2001. Clearly, a team effort will be involved, from everyone in the SQA and throughout Scottish education, when diet 2001 is delivered successfully.

I share your concerns about the bonus structure payments. I have already taken the matter up with the chief executive of the SQA, and I await his response. If I do not have that before next week, I can assure you that I will raise the matter with him in committee.

I now invite other committee members to ask their initial questions. We begin with Cathy Peattie.

**Cathy Peattie:** I reiterate that the committee found that the staff in the SQA worked very hard last year and were under tremendous pressure. That is why we were keen to have trade unions before us today, so that we could get some answers to the questions before us. Gordon Rogers talked about communication, which we raised last year as an area of concern. From what you said, Gordon, there seems still to be a lack of communication between staff on the floor and senior managers. Can you say more about that?

**Gordon Rogers:** Communication remains a problem in the organisation. A general communications manager has recently been appointed, but it is too early to measure their effect or to know how they will operate.

The majority of staff feel that decisions that have been made at a high level are not being properly communicated to them. Moreover, when they find out what has been decided, the reasoning behind the decision often escapes them, as they have not been privy to every discussion and conversation that has led to that decision. The unions have not always been included in those discussions either, and we have not always had the opportunity to speak to staff and clarify issues.

**Cathy Peattie:** The fact was highlighted last year that communication was not as effective as it should be. Are you saying that that is still an



issue?

**Gordon Rogers** *indicated agreement.*

**Gordon Casey:** The senior management held an away day in a hotel in Falkirk several months ago. They felt that communicating the current state of affairs to the staff en masse, in one session and at an away day would be an appropriate starting point. That was good as a starting point, but senior management do not seem to have followed it up, as decisions are still made without the staff being aware of their impact until they feel it.

Since we submitted our paper to the committee and told the senior management that we were coming here, there has been an increase in their communication with the unions and, through us, the staff. There has been a bit of activity since we made it clear that we were appearing before the committee and since we drafted our submission.

**Cathy Peattie:** Communication is a two-way process, however, and it needs to evolve as such. Has there been any communication between the trade unions and the Executive? You said that your paper has been made widely available.

**Gordon Casey:** We felt that protocol dictated that we come to the committee first. The minister has made it clear that, if we want to speak to him, he will be happy to discuss our concerns in detail. We wanted to give you the opportunity to hear our concerns first. We are pleased that the minister has taken a hands-on approach and we welcome the fact that he has made it clear that the door is open for us to communicate with him whenever we feel that that is necessary. Nevertheless, we felt that the committee should be our first port of call, following Mr Morton's earlier appearance before it.

**Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab):** What communication arrangements exist between the unions and the management? What is not happening that you would like to happen?

**Gordon Casey:** We hold a monthly joint negotiating committee with senior management, which is working nicely. We have some fairly heated discussions—sometimes the outcome is fruitful, sometimes it is not. In addition, last week we met the chairman and chief executive for a special meeting ahead of our presenting our paper to the committee. Following that meeting, the three SQA union representatives here were invited to sit on the senior management working groups that have been set up to tackle key difficulties in the organisation.

Since we drew up our paper and told senior management that we were coming to the committee, there has been a change in approach. However, eight, nine or 10 months were wasted before that, during which we were not involved.

Following the appointment of the new head of communications, we expect communication to be improved. The fact that we have started to raise our voices in the Parliament has stimulated the management to involve us more proactively.

**Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Would I be right in saying that one of the general manager posts that have been filled concerns communications?

**Gordon Casey:** No. The head of communications is at a managerial level below that of the general managers. The head of HR will be responsible for that person, but I understand that that is only a small part of the HR function.

**Mr Monteith:** So the head of communications does not have the bonus that you mentioned.

**Gordon Casey:** Not as far as we know.

**Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** You have expressed a lot of dissatisfaction about the manner in which the appointments were made, the lack of trade union involvement and the fact that long-term problems may arise as a result of internal promotions. In addition to the better communication that is now allegedly to take place, what could be done to offset the damage that may already have been caused by the decisions that have been taken and by the things that have been put in place that it is now too late to change?

**Gordon Casey:** The problems arose because the appointments departed from agreed procedure. We have an agreement that allows MSF, ACTS and Unison to negotiate for all staff who are employed by the SQA. Those GMs are employed by the SQA. We therefore have the bargaining rights—the salaries and any perks and bonuses of the posts should have been discussed and agreed with us. The senior management have departed from that procedure in filling the posts. We want an assurance from Mr Morton that that will not happen again, that all posts will be filled through the proper procedure and that salaries will be agreed with the appropriate union. The problems are fairly easy to fix if there is a commitment to do so.

**Irene McGugan:** Are you saying that you have not had that commitment from Mr Morton?

**Gordon Casey:** Not yet—but we have asked for it.

**The Convener:** Do those at the top of the management structure fully understand the business in which you are involved and the role that individual staff members play in making the structure work, or are things a bit fragmented?

**Lillian Stubbs (Scottish Qualifications Authority):** Management have made some attempts to talk to staff, but the attempts have not

been consistent. There are many fragmented departments and the information gained in each one is not coming together and being channelled up the way.

**Gordon Rogers:** Staff have a general view that senior management may not entirely understand the full process of what is involved in the SQA. The SQA is bigger than certification. Certification is clearly an important part of the SQA's function and it gets a lot of attention at a particular time of the year, but there is a whole year leading up to that and there are other functions that do not come into the area of national qualification certification. There is certainly a feeling that senior management need to get to grips a lot more with the functions of the SQA as they are actually carried out, rather than as they may appear in some manual or committee paper.

**The Convener:** You said that you had met—last week or the week before—the management, chief executive and chairman. Did they indicate any way forward? Did they have any ideas about how to improve the situation? Have they any positive plans?

**Gordon Casey:** Their main initiative was to invite the three lay representatives who are here today to sit on the working parties with management to assure us that they would improve communications. I understand that a briefing of the overall situation has gone to staff in the past couple of days, over the holiday weekend. Management said that they recognised the validity of some of the points in our paper and they gave us a commitment that they would try to address them. I get the impression that that has not been their priority. They have perhaps been dealing with the politicians, the structure and the bigger, wider issues. Our concerns were not high up their list—until we started to push them a bit higher up. Now that our concerns are nearer the top of the agenda, I think that there is a commitment to deal with them. Only time will tell how successfully that is done.

**Michael Russell:** I want to ask about terms and conditions for staff. How wide is the range of salaries and payments within the organisation? What is the salary of a general manager and how does it compare with salaries for other posts in the organisation?

**Gordon Rogers:** There is quite a range of salaries. At one end of the spectrum, there are the salaries of clerical staff and tea ladies. The general manager posts were trailed as being £50,000 plus a £10,000 bonus—a £60,000 package. That is a quantum jump from the level below it, which would be the head of unit, and below that, grade 8s and so forth. The further up one gets, the higher the jump becomes.

**Michael Russell:** What are the overtime arrangements for various grades of staff?

14:30

**Gordon Rogers:** Overtime—or payment for overtime, because staff work all sorts of hours without necessarily being paid for it—is available to staff up to what we call grade 5. That would be described in local government terms as administrative officer—AP4, I think.

**Michael Russell:** There is a tension in the organisation—which your paper points to—between those who are at one end of the organisation and those who are at the other. Somewhere in the middle is a body of staff who are working very hard and often doing extra hours without being paid overtime, but who discover by accident that the new general managers will get a substantial bonus package. That must have been quite a shock to people. How did it come out?

**Gordon Casey:** I think that there was an announcement by Bill Morton that that was his main strategy. We fully agreed with the strategy of appointing general managers and had no problem with the salary band at which those appointments were pitched. We still have no problem with that. What we have a problem with is the fact that there is an additional element of bonus, related to this year's performance. We feel that, if this year's performance is successful enough to yield a bonus for half a dozen people, there should be a bonus for the rest of the staff. It is the way in which that bonus has been tagged on as a reward that we are a bit resentful about. We do not have a problem with the salary level. If we thought that the SQA could bring in six people who could help to turn the organisation around as quickly as this year, we would be happy for it to pay double that.

**Michael Russell:** Perhaps not double that.

**Gordon Casey:** Well, some of the people will be our members, so we do not want to—

**Michael Russell:** Unless you are cut out of the discussions, as you have been until now.

The reality is that those bonus payments seem to have been quite unexpected. In parliamentary answers—which you may have seen—the Executive says that it has not been consulted about the payments. You were not consulted about them. Who made the decision—the board of the SQA?

**Gordon Casey:** We can only assume so. Our first complaint was that what happened was a departure from the normal procedure. The package has not been discussed with us, so we assume that the chief executive has used his authority.

**Michael Russell:** How many staff work for the organisation?

**Gordon Casey:** About 600.

**Michael Russell:** With an organisation such as the SQA, which has been under tremendous pressure, one strategy you might use is to say, "We should be bringing members of the staff not just on to some of the working parties but into the board structure, so that they are present in the decision-making process." Have you had discussions about that?

**Gordon Casey:** It has not been on our agenda. We are not keen on participation at board level. We are much happier with agreed protocol, procedures and agreements, which we can review annually. Our experience has been that we sometimes end up having a speaking member on the board who sits there and loses every vote five to one.

**Michael Russell:** I have been in that position in this committee.

You are talking about involving members in the working groups—that is a step forward and should have happened a long time ago. This committee might not be guiltless, because we did not invite you to give evidence during the inquiry—that is something that we might reflect on. Surely the way in which the organisation can benefit from bringing people in at every level should be thought about.

**Gordon Casey:** Interaction with the board is much better than participation on it. I understand that the board is publicly appointed, but we prefer the negotiating forum. Perhaps that is because of what we are used to, but we are happier if we have an agreed procedure and the boards stick to it. We had a meeting with the chairman of the board last week and were impressed with his attitude and performance and with the time and effort that he is putting in. We have no criticism of that effort or of what the SQA is trying to do. Our criticisms are outlined in the paper.

**Michael Russell:** The people who work in the SQA are very much at the sharp end, especially as the schools move into gear now that your preparatory work has been done. What are your feelings about what will take place this summer? Now that you have seen the system working, how do you think things are going and where are the dangers at the moment?

**Gordon Rogers:** As we said in our paper, there is no doubt that progress has been made since last year. The information that is available now has come in before the equivalent information came in last year. To that extent there have been improvements. As our paper says, staff will be going flat out to do everything possible to ensure that diet 2001 is successful. I am not sure what

you are looking for beyond that.

**Michael Russell:** The facts as you know them.

**Gordon Rogers:** We are putting in place a series of measures that will address some of the shortcomings from last year. The key thing for me to say is that the staff are fully committed. They will be doing everything in their power to ensure a successful diet 2001.

**Sheila Chatham (Scottish Qualifications Authority):** I reaffirm that the staff are fully committed and that they are willing to take part in any improvements and changes to the way that the work is done in order to ensure successful delivery. Staff are seeing the benefit of a number of changes that have already taken place, particularly in my own area of work at Dalkeith. They hope to continue to receive those benefits.

**The Convener:** As the year has progressed, have you been offered any on-going staff development training to help you to deliver diet 2001?

**Sheila Chatham:** Staff development training has been limited. The focus is on trying to get through the diet using the skills and expertise that already exist. The human resources unit has given us a commitment that it will try to progress that from here on in. To date there has not been a great deal of staff development training.

**The Convener:** We seem to have moved on to questions about terms and conditions and employment issues. I have a question on bonuses. You mentioned in your paper that there do not seem to be any criteria for bonuses. Have the trade unions asked for criteria for bonus payments? If so, what response have you had?

**Matt McLaughlin (Unison):** The trade union side has asked about that on a number of occasions going back as far as October of last year, which was when the general manager posts were first announced and we expressed our disappointment about the whole bonus idea. We have been told consistently that no bonus structure exists. As late as last week, the chief executive indicated that, although he had proposals outlining the criteria, those proposals would not be available to us at that time.

**The Convener:** That is something that we can take up next week.

**Ian Jenkins:** Is pressure put on people to work overtime, whether they want to or not and whether they are paid for it or not? Does that kind of underlying pressure exist? How will overtime impact on the bulge of work that there will be at the end of May when the unit results come in?

**Gordon Rogers:** The only reply that I can give is to refer to what we said in our paper. Individuals

reported to us that they felt some pressure to work overtime, possibly a bit more than they would have liked. We have tried to indicate that we are looking at the long term and not just at the impact that the summer months will have. Once we get past the summer, we will see what the attitude of the staff is and what their view of management is. We do not have concerns about people not working overtime or not doing what is necessary to get the certification completed successfully.

**Ian Jenkins:** Do you feel that more staff or resources are needed? Are there particular pressure points or things that could be done now to make the situation easier?

**Matt McLaughlin:** I do not think that throwing staff at the problem is the answer. Many of the people who are employed in the SQA, although they appear to be on fairly low-order or middle-order clerical and administration duties, are highly skilled at what they do, particularly at inputting data and at managing and controlling data. Just taking people off the street and throwing them at the problem is not necessarily the answer. The extra people need to be trained and supported in the structures.

In the long term, issues may arise about how we use staff as the year unfolds, but at the moment there are enough staff in the SQA with the right skills and, provided that they are supported properly, I am hopeful that the delivery of the exam diet this year will be an improvement on what happened last year.

**Ian Jenkins:** You mentioned in your paper the commitment of the SQA to a winter diet. Could you comment on that? To an outsider, it might seem that that would add to a burden that is already stretching resources.

**Gordon Rogers:** The commitment to a winter diet should have been delayed for another year. A limited number of subjects is involved in the winter diet, but the staff have reported that it will stretch their resources and their ability to provide the necessary outputs at that time.

**Matt McLaughlin:** This goes back to communication. The senior management of the SQA has said to us, "We need to deliver this winter diet. Further education colleges are hopeful that we can do it and need us to do it for their end of the business and education." That is fine. Management has also said, "We think that we can do it. We have contingency plans in place, which will unfold and allow us to do it." Again, that is fine, but it goes back to the issue of communication—letting the staff know who will be expected to work on and deliver the diet and letting them understand why they are doing it and how it will be done, so that they can move forward to the winter diet and its successful delivery with confidence.

The trade union side has not been convinced that the contingencies are in place or that the resources will stretch that far, but we have consistently asked the management to explain it to us and to convince us on it so that we can move forward together.

**The Convener:** How is communication between the different departments and sections and the further education sector and the schools sector—that is, between the various horizontal levels?

**Lillian Stubbs:** It is quite fragmented. The focus has very much been on diet 2001, to the expense of other areas, such as higher national certificates and diplomas and Scottish vocational qualifications. A lot of staff in those areas are concerned about the future, because many centres are either going to other awarding bodies or are becoming disenchanted with the service that they are getting.

**Cathy Peattie:** I am uneasy, because we heard before about a lack of communication between sites. Have communications improved between the Dalkeith and Glasgow offices? The problem is not just about east and west; it is about different cultures, approaches and history. Has the situation moved on?

**Gordon Rogers:** Pre-diet 2000, the whole of data input was moved through to Dalkeith. Now, part of it has been moved back to Glasgow. That will probably help this year, although it suggests more fragmentation. On staff communication between Glasgow and Dalkeith, part of the problem is that the set-up is no longer as handy as being able to nip downstairs to ask somebody something. We are having to communicate over the phone or by e-mail.

One area in which there have been shortcomings—it might serve as a useful example—is the database for employment of markers. The personnel who have responsibility for working with the markers—making sure that there are enough markers in each subject area, for example—are in Glasgow, but the appointments take place in Dalkeith. Those two groups of people must talk to each other effectively to ensure that the markers are in place. That is not helped by the fact that the database on markers is not available to the key personnel in Glasgow, who need information such as how many markers there are in their subject areas. A joint effort is necessary for such an operation. There have been difficulties in communications.

14:45

**Cathy Peattie:** If the database is not available to them, how do they operate?

**Gordon Rogers:** In the past month or so, we

have asked for those data to be made available to us, preferably on a database that we can access at our screens. That has not happened. I think, however, that a spreadsheet has been circulated that shows appointments. There is a paper edition of the database, as it were, but it is not as effective as being able to access the database to see how many markers are in a subject area.

**The Convener:** Why cannot that be done?

**Gordon Rogers:** I do not know. We have asked for it, but we have not got it.

**The Convener:** Is there a computer problem? Is there a technology problem? Is it just a simple problem of stubbornness?

**Gordon Rogers:** I am not an information technology expert, so I cannot comment on that, but we have asked for the database.

**Ian Jenkins:** I will ask a wee question about the background. I mentioned the period at the end of May during which unit results will be received in big numbers. Do you agree that the sheer volume of the material that you must handle is part of the problem? Do you also agree that, once this year's diet is out of the way, it would be to everyone's benefit if there were a reduction in the number and bulk of data transfers in schools and in the SQA? Do you accept that the bulk is, was and will be part of the problem?

**Gordon Casey:** With the population that we have, children will always want to study, people will sit exams and there will always be a certain volume of work, which—I hope—will continue. Otherwise, there would be no need for the SQA. Controlling the bulk in a flow that is more manageable for staff, rather than having it all come in at once, might be something to consider for the future. However, we want to encourage people to sit as many exams as possible.

**Ian Jenkins:** Should there be as many units per exam as there are?

**Gordon Casey:** We need to control the flow and bulk of what arrives on somebody's desk at any one time.

**Michael Russell:** What was the attitude of the trade unions towards the merger of the Scottish Examination Board and the Scottish Vocational Education Council when that took place?

**Gordon Casey:** Neither of the officers who are here dealt with those organisations. We have been appointed to deal with the SQA only in the past year, so we were not involved in the merger. However, staff who were working in the SEB and SCOTVEC might give a clue.

**Lillian Stubbs:** There was consultation with the unions throughout the merger process. Even then, there might have been issues on which the

management went ahead with a certain course of action despite the unions having expressed concern. That has carried on into recent times.

**Michael Russell:** I asked about the merger because it relates to Cathy Peattie's point about lack of communication. The committee's SQA inquiry, on which a number of the members who are here sat, saw that there had been a real problem with merging two different cultures and that those cultures had never fully come together. The problem was not simply about being in Dalkeith or Glasgow; it was about different expectations and different ways of working.

There must have been different trade union agreements that were brought together for the SQA at the point of merger. How well did the SEB and SCOTVEC come together? Do the joins show? Is the difficulty still there? Do the unions have a role to play in trying to build a whole organisation out of disparate parts?

**Gordon Casey:** We will certainly have a role to play. If the SQA is ever to be fully integrated as one organisation, it will be with the help and co-operation of the staff. As their representatives, we will have to assist in bringing that about. General managers were appointed so that there would be a more integrated approach—rather than people being responsible only for their own little fiefdoms and nothing else and never coming out of that. The idea was that GMs would have a collective overview that would merge the organisations. In the past year, I have heard comments that the two organisations have not knitted together, but these are still early days. The organisation is not yet three years old.

**Michael Russell:** I presume that the unions had members in both predecessor organisations. Is that true?

**Gordon Casey:** Sure.

**Michael Russell:** In those circumstances, there is a role for the unions to play in trying to knit the people together. How do you go about doing that?

**Gordon Casey:** A cultural change is needed, which is not going to happen overnight. Part of the difficulty is that the authority cannot get on with its main agenda of bringing the predecessor organisations together because of the big expectation of success, which is high on the agenda this year. The focus on getting diet 2001 right has sidetracked everyone from knitting the organisation together.

**Michael Russell:** The committee has said that the examination system will not work properly until the organisation is knitted together.

**Gordon Casey:** We had access to documents and were able to read them, but we were not involved in committee inquiries, nor were we

involved in the inquiry that Deloitte & Touche carried out or in any of the other reports.

**Michael Russell:** To what extent did the consultants speak to union members in the SQA?

**Gordon Casey:** It is difficult to say because they did not ask whether staff were in the union. The consultants simply interviewed people. Given that perhaps just more than half the staff are members of one of the three unions, there is about a 50:50 chance that the people that they spoke to were in a union. There was no union involvement either collectively or in the form of individual representations.

**Michael Russell:** There was no union involvement?

**Lillian Stubbs:** Our union sent a submission to one of the committees, to which we got no response.

**Michael Russell:** Did not Deloitte & Touche and the other consultants who came in subsequently seek the unions' views on the matter? We would regret that, because to have done so would have made the situation better.

**Gordon Casey:** We have a lot to offer the SQA. Much depends on the staff's good will and co-operation. The best way to get that is to organise them into trade unions, which can give staff proper legal advice and representation. We would always advocate that, and that is particularly the case when an organisation faces such difficulties.

**Irene McGugan:** I want to underline all that has been said recently. It seems that your workers, who have been under pressure this year to clear up the year 2000 situation, will be under pressure for some time. The past year has impacted on the development of question papers—which will be ready for this year, but are perhaps now behind schedule for 2002-03. The winter diet will add additional pressure. There is also the issue about educational colleges and SVQs.

Pressure to catch up and to deal with all the issues is having an impact on the SQA's ability to address the communication and staff development and training issues that have been outlined and identified. For those things to happen, time and space are needed. However, time and space look unlikely to be available in the immediate future because of the pressure to deal with the immediate exam diet. How would you respond to that?

**Gordon Casey:** The organisation will continue to be under great stress and pressure and in the public focus for the next two or three years. We hope that, as the organisation's performance improves, it will be less in the public focus.

The staff are keen to get on with the job this

year. They are keen to get through it and to work with senior management to try to merge the two organisations into one successful organisation. They would encourage everyone who is sitting exams to get on with them and do as well as they can. The staff will then process that information as successfully as they can. The staff do not expect a let up or break in the pressure. However, they expect the pressure to be managed, controlled and dealt with properly. We see ourselves as being the very people to do that on the organisation's behalf.

**Matt McLaughlin:** Irene McGugan's comments are well noted, but it is important to realise that the SQA's management team is putting together an action plan. Those people are pulling together and they have asked us to sit in on and be involved in business strategy forums and meetings. Those are steps in the right direction.

As trade unions, we will enter into that process with a clear agenda that says that we are looking to merge the organisations and go forward together. By communicating that, I hope that we will help start the knitting process and the management of change. If change is managed and communicated better, staff should also help to sort out the current fragmented feeling.

**The Convener:** Mobile phones seem to be interfering with the sound system. If anybody has a mobile phone switched on, please turn it off.

I want to ask about agency staff. I understand the need to train people to do specific jobs. The input of data is probably one of the most important parts of the system. We have seen what might happen at the other end if data input goes wrong. People need to be highly skilled and highly trained to input data. If agency staff are being used a lot, perhaps they are not being trained to the level that is required before they move to another job. Are there many agency staff in the SQA?

**Gordon Casey:** We recently asked the human resources department for staffing figures for full-time, part-time and agency staff, but they struggled to give us exact figures. They are unsure about how many people work in the organisation on a part-time or agency basis. Such is the diverse nature of the different departments that no one—not even human resources—has their finger on how many people are employed from agencies.

**The Convener:** That seems to be a problem. People need to be trained. That puts pressure on those who are training. People then move on to do something else. Perhaps we need to tie that up.

**Gordon Casey:** It is a problem. Another problem involves people being moved from the job that they do all year round to assist with the flood of information that comes in and the flood of data that must be processed. There is a problem in

people working outwith their normal brief and perhaps having to explain to others how a job works when they are in that job only for the short term.

**The Convener:** Do you know how many vacancies there are within the organisation?

**Gordon Casey:** The last vacancies figure that I wrote down was 38, but I think that there has been an update on that.

**Lillian Stubbs:** There are 43 vacancies in the SQA, including four general manager posts.

**The Convener:** Do you know the current level of staff sickness?

**Lillian Stubbs:** The latest figure that we have for sickness absence between April 2000 and March 2001 is 4.64 per cent.

**The Convener:** In your experience, is that high, low or average?

**Gordon Casey:** I would say that that is above average. Local authorities average around 2.5 per cent to 3.5 per cent. When they were involved in the tendering process, they had to be below 3 per cent to get a successful tender. I think the figure is about 1 per cent above the average. That is not too dramatic, given the way in which the organisation has been performing.

**The Convener:** Do you have any indication of how much absence is stress-related?

**Gordon Casey:** The percentage that is declared as stress-related is 1.47 per cent. That is a very small amount, but people are not always willing to admit to stress.

**The Convener:** There seems to be a lot of pressure from the newspapers. The pressure from the public, politicians and managers is pretty immense. If staff pick up the newspapers every day and read that the SQA is about to fail again, that probably puts a lot of pressure on them. I am interested in that.

**Gordon Casey:** That is a big difficulty. We understand the public's interest and we are not quibbling with the media for reporting difficulties. However, the constant predictions of doom and that the organisation will fail increase the pressure on staff. I hope that there will be other matters on the agenda this afternoon that might take the spotlight away from the SQA and which will give staff the opportunity to focus on this year's diet. Students should be encouraged to do their best so that the staff can be left alone with some peace to do their best.

**Ian Jenkins:** I have a final question. Perhaps this matter is dealt with in your paper, in a sense. Generally speaking, do you think that things are moving in the right direction? Are the prospects for

a good diet positive, even if it is not absolutely guaranteed?

**Gordon Casey:** We see it as positive that there will be an improvement on last year's performance. We will not know how much of an improvement it will be until the exercise is gone through and we see how it turns out.

**Ian Jenkins:** Is there anything that the Executive or the committee can do that has not been offered or done?

**Gordon Casey:** The fact that we have come to the committee has brought us some success, because the response of the senior management has been much more positive and inclusive. They are starting to involve us more; therefore, our visit to the Parliament was a success before we even got here. We encourage the committee to maintain its dialogue with Mr Morton, which will ensure that he maintains his dialogue with us.

15:00

**Mr Monteith:** In your submission, you mention the possibility of staff being pulled from their job to work on the school desk system. You say that

"this is having a very adverse effect on morale, as it increases uncertainty and anxiety".

Could you expand on that problem and suggest what might be done about it?

**Gordon Casey:** The SQA carries out a performance appraisal, and every year staff are assessed on their performance over the previous year. Somebody who takes on a job for which they are qualified and who carries that job out for nine or 10 months is judged on their performance. However, the appraisal is based on their overall performance during the year, even if the person is put into an unfamiliar position for part of the year. Pressure is created when somebody who is made to work outside their department is judged on that work, because their career prospects might depend on how they perform in that unfamiliar role.

Pressure is also created when somebody must work on the hotlines and deal with many irate people. As politicians who have to hold regular surgeries, members will appreciate how difficult that can be. Doing that once or twice a week is fine, but if somebody is doing that 9 to 5, five days a week, that causes stress and pressure.

**Sheila Chatham:** At the moment, the management are considering ways in which they might relieve that pressure—for example, by using outside agencies to man the telephone desks. The fact that the SQA has been forewarned that there might be problems means that the mistakes that were made last year should not be made this year. We should be in a better position to field questions

from people if we need to.

**Cathy Peattie:** One of the issues last year was the fact that the people on the helpdesks did not have the appropriate information in front of them. They did not know what results had and had not reached schools. Are you concerned that the same situation could be created through the use of agency staff? A helpline is meaningless if people do not get help or the information that they seek. I would be concerned if the people staffing the helpline did not know the system or what the organisation was doing.

**Sheila Chatham:** Perhaps I did not explain the situation clearly. The intention is that initial inquiries will come through a call centre, before being passed on to somebody who will know the answers. A system of recording the history of calls is being considered, so that all the information will be available at one time.

**Mr McAveety:** Ian Jenkins touched on the additional support and resources that are being provided by the Executive, and you said that coming to the Parliament had facilitated a more open approach from the senior management. Similarly, the dialogue that you should have with the minister would provide a useful opportunity to identify ways in which relations between management, trade unions and staff could be more effective.

From what I have heard today, and from your submission, I sense that communication has improved only latterly. Is there any remaining deficiency that we should be aware of, which we and the ministers could perhaps assist with or deal with?

**Gordon Casey:** We would welcome a meeting with the minister, now that we have met the committee. However, there is no quick fix. The inclusion of two union representatives on the working groups that are dealing with the critical difficulties is probably the best contribution that we can make. It would be helpful if we could have a general discussion with the minister about the current position, because things have moved on. However, day-to-day communication with senior management about what is happening in the organisation is probably the best contribution that the unions can make.

**The Convener:** Thank you for coming to the committee. I reiterate Gordon Rogers's comment, that the priority in the next few weeks is for the young people to get on with their exams and to do the best that they can. Once they have sat their exams, it will be for us and the SQA's staff to do all that we can to deliver a successful diet 2001.

We hope to visit Dalkeith and Glasgow on 22 and 29 May. Those dates are not yet confirmed, but witnesses should inform the members of the

unions that they represent that we hope to visit both sites and to speak to staff. We want to support staff in the invaluable role that they are playing in delivering diet 2001.

**Gordon Casey:** Thank you for inviting us.

*Meeting closed at 15:05.*



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