EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 25 November 2009

Session 3

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CONTENTS

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EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
31st Meeting 2009, Session 3

CONVENER

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
*Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Hugh O’Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD)
Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)
Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Carolyn Brown (Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists)
Brian Cooklin (School Leaders Scotland)
Gordon Ford (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Bryan Kirkaldy (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Irene Matier (Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland)
Professor Pamela Munn (University of Edinburgh)
Margaret Penketh (Scottish Support for Learning Association)
Shona Pinkerton (National Autistic Society Scotland)
Jim Taylor (Scottish Society for Autism)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Nick Hawthorne

ASSISTANT CLERK

Emma Berry

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

Wednesday 25 November 2009

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:02*]

Autism in Education

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): Good morning and welcome to the 31st meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee in 2009. I remind everyone present that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be switched off for the duration of the meeting.

We have received apologies from Margaret Smith, who is unable to join us this morning.

The first item on the agenda is evidence taking on autism in education. The committee received a petition from Annette Masson that raised concerns about the need to review the Scottish Government's current assessment, diagnosis and appeals procedures for autistic spectrum disorder. On receipt of the petition, the committee decided that it was an important issue for us to consider and that we wanted to hear from key stakeholders. Today is our first evidence-taking session on the matters raised in the petition. Next week, we will hear from Adam Ingram, the Scottish minister with responsibility for these matters.

We have been joined by a number of witnesses today: Bryan Kirkaldy and Gordon Ford are representing the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland; Irene Matier is the president of the Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland; Carolyn Brown is from the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists; Professor Pamela Munn is from the University of Edinburgh; Shona Pinkerton is from the National Autistic Society Scotland; Brian Cooklin is from School Leaders Scotland; Jim Taylor is from the Scottish Society for Autism; and Margaret Penketh is the president of the Scottish Support for Learning Association.

It is not anticipated that you will make opening statements in the normal way, because we might be here all day. This is intended to be a reasonably informal evidence-taking session. People can chip in and respond to the questions that arise. Members will put some questions to you to start a discussion. I will kick off by asking for your views on the current process by which children and young people with autistic spectrum disorder have their condition assessed and diagnosed. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current system?

Shona Pinkerton (National Autistic Society Scotland): It is important to clarify what we mean by diagnosis and assessment. I certainly have the impression that diagnosis is happening earlier, but after diagnosis there has to be a fuller assessment of needs. The message that has come through strongly to me is that very often, when families get a diagnosis, they are not ready immediately to hear what that may mean. In addition, not all the processes are in place to support a fuller assessment of needs, including sensory and a range of other issues, to provide the right kind of support for the person with autism. It is crucial that diagnosis is followed at the earliest possible stage by a full assessment of needs and the support that is needed.

The Convener: You obviously think that the current assessment process is not all that it could be. What are the problems with it and what needs to be done to improve it?

Shona Pinkerton: I can speak from only a relatively narrow perspective, but I base what I am going to say on work that we have done over the past two years with about 100 families in three local authority areas, which has been supported by £150,000 of Government funding, for which we are extremely grateful.

We worked intensively with 60 families throughout Scotland, who had children from five to 16 years of age. In spite of their doing a great deal of research on the internet and feeling that they had a broad understanding of autism, they did not have the input to turn their theoretical understanding of autism into practical applications or an understanding of their own children's particular needs and the strategies that they could employ to make a difference to their lives.

A child is in school for a maximum of 27.5 hours a week and they are at home for at least 127.5 hours a week. We have to get from diagnosis to practical support to enable families to manage the young person with autism, because, ultimately, they have the lion's share of the time with that young person. The young person who walks through the door on a Monday morning is the young person who has been supported at home by a family who are doing their very best but who need individual support to think about their child in a much more holistic way.

We need to put the young person at the centre and think of education as part of what happens 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Carolyn Brown (Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists): Five years ago, the national reference group on autism produced best practice principles and issued them to all local authorities. The committee might want to have another look at them. I am unclear about what local authorities other than mine have done to put those principles into practice.

I agree that diagnosis and assessment need to be carried out with the basic intention of identifying the best forms of intervention and support for children and their families. To that end, the terms and principles of best practice are exemplified by multi-agency assessment and diagnosis, which involves education, health and other appropriate agencies. Sometimes, it tends to be led by health agencies, but I remind the committee that assessment and diagnosis of autism is largely based on observations of behaviour, so the multi-agency component of diagnosis is key to the identification of young people—and indeed adults, for that matter.

There are significant waiting lists for diagnosis, although the situation varies between local authorities. A number of them use multi-agency assessment and diagnosis, which has the potential to reduce waiting lists.

Brian Cooklin (School Leaders Scotland): I echo that, but I return to Shona Pinkerton's critical point that we should focus on the individual child. The diagnosis and assessment part is actually muddy water.

On diagnosis, autism is not a condition like diabetes, where a blood test can prove categorically that the condition exists. Instead, a range of behaviours is exhibited. We have developed our skills and our ability to recognise those behaviours and place them on the spectrum. For some people, it takes a long time to get a diagnosis. They can be out of school before the condition is diagnosed. However, when they are assessed, it is important to focus on what we will do to help them.

The assessment is not the same for every child. My organisation has evidence of assessments that led to a decision that the child should be in an autism unit that was attached to a mainstream school, but that did not work for the child and something else worked instead. We talk about the need for personalisation in Scottish education as a whole, and children with the condition really need that focus.

A more fundamental issue is that there is still a tremendous level of ignorance about autism, Asperger's syndrome and so on in society as a whole. I am not talking only about the profession. The point was made earlier that parents are sometimes shocked and do not necessarily want to be told or face up to the fact that their child has a developmental condition. There has been a publicity campaign about mental health issues, and we need to do something along the same lines to raise awareness of autism. Unless we do that, we will not address the issues for individual children.

10:15

Professor Pamela Munn (University of Edinburgh): I echo Carolyn Brown's points about the importance of multi-agency assessment. The committee will probably want to explore further the time that it takes for people to get a diagnosis. Brian Cooklin talked about the action that follows a diagnosis and the provision, or lack of it, of an individualised educational plan. Diagnoses and the development of plans are important, because resources follow a diagnosis under the terms of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. It is important to make that point.

In research on behaviour in schools in Scotland that has just been concluded, we asked primary and secondary teachers and headteachers about the range of strategies that they use to promote positive behaviour and deal with negative behaviour. They pursue a wide range of strategies, which I describe as using a multipronged approach.

It is worth the committee noting that about one in four primary teachers and headteachers say that they never use staged assessment and intervention, which is the general approach that is taken to identify people who have behavioural difficulties and then to think through the provision that is suited to their individual needs.

The contrast with secondary teachers is quite striking. Only 5 per cent of secondary headteachers and 12 per cent of secondary teachers say that they never use staged intervention. The differences between primary and secondary schools are quite interesting, and it is probably worth digging into them a bit deeper.

My final point is that we are talking about a spectrum of behaviour, so one size does not fit all. What is right for one child who has autistic spectrum disorder will not be right for another. I am really emphasising the personalisation issue.

The Convener: Thank you. Before I allow Bryan Kirkaldy to come in, do you have any idea why primary and secondary schools take different approaches to staged intervention? Is there something that prevents or inhibits primary school teachers and headteachers from using that methodology? Is it about lack of confidence? Do teaching staff need personal development to give them the confidence to use staged intervention?

Professor Munn: There are two possible answers. First, the use of staged intervention varies across the country. Secondly, by their nature, primary schools are optimistic places, and primary teachers and headteachers are predisposed to think that children will grow out of things and develop. Sometimes—this is just my personal opinion; it is not based on research evidence—they might wait a bit too long before encouraging a multi-agency assessment of a child.

Brian Cooklin: I want to answer your question, convener, because other factors affect the situation. First, secondary schools have dedicated support for learning departments and behaviour support staff, but primary schools do not.

Secondly, there has been a focus on reducing exclusions and tackling behaviour in secondary schools, because the problem has been perceived as greater than in primary schools. A lot of work has been done to train staff and give people opportunities. For example, last year, good materials on autism came into schools as part of continuing professional development support for staff, so that they could look at strategies and be aware of needs. Much more investment has been made in time and resource in the secondary sector than in the primary sector.

However, I agree with Professor Munn's view that the issue is partly the predisposition and nature of primary schools. They do not expect to encounter such behaviours, and they expect the positive.

The Convener: I will allow Bryan Kirkaldy in in a moment, because I know that he has some points to make, but I also want to ask whether primary schools do not take intervention steps early because, once a diagnosis is made, resources must be committed, so the longer that a diagnosis is put off, the less money has to be spent. Is that the case, or am I being a little bit too cynical?

Bryan Kirkaldy (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): It is possible that you are being a little bit too cynical. I will come back to the question about staged intervention and the extent to which staff might recognise the phrase. The terminology is an issue. I argue that a number of our primary colleagues use staged intervention but do not label it as such, because recognition of the use of the getting it right for every child framework is still emerging.

I will say something about the strategic perspective in a local authority context. From what I have gathered from my colleagues in ADES, my comments reflect the national picture. We want strategies for education services to be nested within bigger, multi-agency strategies within local authorities in which health and social work colleagues are key partners. I will say a bit about what an education service strategy might look like and then move on to the multi-agency aspect.

There has been a marked rise in the incidence of autism and autistic spectrum disorder. The spectrum is wide. At one extreme, it presents in children who are a little bit shy and awkward and have difficulties with aspects of communication, who are managed day to day in a mainstream class with little additional support. At the far end of the spectrum, we have the most extreme challenging behaviour and difficult-to-manage youngsters in our system. We speak of there being a category, but it is an extremely wide spectrum.

The reason why we have a marked increase in incidence is that society and professional circles have become increasingly better at identifying the population and acknowledging that it exists. The marked increase in incidence is a positive reflection of that greater sensitivity, but it means that, strategically, we must expect that every school, and potentially every class, in a local authority will have children on the autistic spectrum. We must have an approach to awareness raising for all staff throughout local authorities. We must also have a graduated system of more specialised responses according to the degree of the child's needs and the extent of staged intervention.

From what I have gathered from my colleagues in ADES, that is the current picture in Scotland. We all work within what I describe as a strategy for inclusion, which is not autism specific but is for children with additional support needs, which includes children on the autistic spectrum. It is about building schools' capacity—in terms of the curriculum, the attitudes and skills of staff, and the relationship with parents—to be inclusive. That is a social model of disability. It is about removing barriers and increasing accessibility. It is systemic.

The curriculum for excellence is a key element in that as we go forward. We want to have a realistic account of each youngster's additional support needs as an individual; to have a response that is graduated according to the extent of those needs; and the school and class teacher to be at the centre of that response. That is where the phraseology of staged intervention applies under the GIRFEC framework. However, that response must be integral not only to each school and class but to all our support services—the psychological service, the learning support service and the behaviour support service. Sometimes, a local authority will have a specific team for autism support. My authority, Fife Council, has a specialised autism support team, which works to build capacity in the other specialised teams and in schools in techniques and methods that work for children on the autistic spectrum.

The wider multi-agency context is important because, as Carolyn Brown mentioned, as a result of the marked increase in incidence, waiting lists have developed in acute services in the national health service in particular which, to be frank, have involved unacceptable time delays. We are talking about delays of months or sometimes longer. The development of integrated pathways for diagnosis and assessment between education services and the NHS is a way of cutting into that. I recommend that as a development for all local authorities and NHS boards to consider. We have certainly found that it has reduced waiting times significantly.

The Convener: Carolyn, I am interested to find out a bit more about how we ensure that the different agencies work together. I know from my caseload and from parents who have contacted me that the issue is not that the school does not recognise that their child has an issue—the parents often recognise that the child needs help, as does the primary school—but the waiting time to get to psychological services, particularly in Lanarkshire, which prevents a diagnosis being made. The school and the parents can therefore be ready and awaiting the diagnosis, which psychological services will eventually make, but the difficulty is getting into the system. I will let Carolyn Brown back in, then Irene Matier will say something.

Carolyn Brown: On diagnosis and access to resources, we must be clear that youngsters' plans and the provision of resources and additional support in schools are not dependent on a diagnosis. If in any local authority they are dependent on a diagnosis, that is a mistake. Plenty of local authorities will assess, irrespective of the diagnosis, what educational resources are required. To an extent, that mitigates any difficulties with waiting lists, but it obviously does not alleviate the difficulties for parents, or the upset that they might feel, in having to wait. Diagnosis is therefore still an issue, but we need to be clear that resources need not be dependent on a diagnosis.

The Convener: Do we have enough trained psychologists to be able to do the work, or is that an issue?

Carolyn Brown: It depends how local authorities structure themselves. I work for Fife, too, and we try to structure ourselves so that, in education anyway, we are a responsive agency. Our psychological services have on-going links with schools, so that we know what the issues are on a weekly basis. There are therefore no waiting lists for access to an educational psychologist.

Because autism is a multi-agency issue, those of us in education can only get into dialogue with our health and social work colleagues. As Bryan Kirkaldy said, we are trying, under the likes of the getting it right for every child agenda, to integrate our pathways for assessment and diagnosis. We have had some success in that. An assessment and diagnosis pilot project has had an impact on waiting lists, which have reduced by about 50 per cent. We can therefore point to examples of successful integration.

Irene Matier (Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland): It is important that we realise that we cannot generalise across the board, because there are differences between authorities, children, schools and so forth. However, as far as primary schools and the pre-fives are concerned, early diagnosis is essential. For the transition stage from pre-five to primary, if we know that a child has difficulties that have already been diagnosed and addressed, and that resources are being put in to help the child and the family, the primary school can take that on and the child's experience of school can start in a positive way.

10:30

If there has been no diagnosis and no psychological services involvement until the child comes into primary school, it can take years before a diagnosis, and any follow-on resources, are given. That is not to say that the child would not be supported—there has been a lot of CPD in schools, and teachers are getting much better at managing the situation.

I was interested in the point about staged intervention. Although schools are perhaps not using that terminology, they must be doing something along the lines of staged intervention, because otherwise they would be completely failing the children concerned.

Although diagnosis is important, CPD is even more important for teachers, so that they can address the difficulties and fully understand what autism is all about.

There are huge waiting lists. In many local authority areas, the reality is that it can take six months to a year to see a speech and language therapist, and in some parts of the country it can take more than a year to see a psychologist. However, as I said, it is difficult to generalise; it depends where people come from.

Jim Taylor (Scottish Society for Autism): The good news is that, over the past five or 10 years, we have had earlier, quicker and more accurate diagnosis and recognition. Good practice dictates that diagnosis and recognition rates should not seen in a vacuum, however—diagnosis should be co-ordinated with the school and the various agencies involved. Irene Matier's description of the young person whose condition is recognised early on and who makes their way through school is more common than we sometimes give credit for. However, sadly, organisations such as Shona

Pinkerton’s and ours are probably spending more time catching up with 14 or 15-year olds who are slipping through the net.

When a young person with an autism spectrum disorder has been diagnosed and assessed, it is recognised that they are capable of learning, and that they might learn in a different style. I have had the advantage and privilege of spending a lot of time in schools in different local authorities, and there are many examples of outstanding practice, where individual teachers and headteachers have identified the condition, obtained the diagnosis, assessed the child’s learning style and delivered accordingly. The most frustrating thing is that we are now probably closer to knowing what works. It is a matter of pulling the bits of the jigsaw puzzle together.

There is sometimes a problem of attitude and of getting to the right teacher at the right time. I strongly believe that, when we pull all the bits of the jigsaw together, things can work well. I have seen young people with significant difficulties making their way through education and having a positive experience. However, I have also seen young people of possibly greater ability not getting such a good experience, because of the way in which the jigsaw has been put in place.

If the diagnosis and the recognition and acceptance of different learning styles are taken on board, it is not so much a question of the diagnosis leading to resources, because sometimes the diagnosis can lead to teachers, schools and support agencies looking at autism in a different way and making things work. We know what can work, and we know what the potential barriers are. To take a classic example, it is a challenge for a teacher who has two or three kids with autism in a class of 25 to develop a different style when presenting their lessons to those children compared with the style that they use for the rest of the class. The barriers are both at the strategic level and at the classroom level.

Gordon Ford (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): I will echo some of what Jim Taylor has just said. There are examples of excellent practice across the country. I am not saying that Fife and West Lothian are the only shining examples. My experience is that our recognition of the condition and our allocation of resources reflect the fact that we are not only getting earlier diagnosis—the numbers are increasing—but responding to that. I would be very surprised if there were any local authorities that did not have a continuum of support, by providing in-service training for teachers.

Under the concordat and the single outcome agreements, we have community planning partnerships, and I would be disappointed if partners such as those in the health service were not working with education departments and addressing social policy. In my authority, that is working well.

On the subject of earlier diagnosis, during my time as director of education and cultural services in West Lothian we have opened a further three units, as we refer to them—they are part of mainstream provision, but they provide specialist support for children with mild to moderate conditions on the autistic spectrum. We plan to open another unit in the next financial year, resources permitting.

There has been a positive response, and I have seen a fantastic increase in the support that has been given to youngsters with autism since I was a headteacher 10 or 12 years ago. We want to support and encourage such attitudes throughout the country. If there are areas of best practice, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education, the Social Work Inspection Agency and the health service will no doubt be able to identify them. That is how we should take things further.

Professor Munn: I return to the point that headteachers and primary school teachers might not recognise the term “staged intervention”. In the research, they were asked a specific question about

> “Staged assessment and intervention model, (e.g. school and multi-agency joint assessment and planning teams)”.

I want to be clear that, in my view, the research clearly spelled out what staged intervention means.

I know that we will come on to issues around exclusion. A very small number of children with autistic spectrum disorder are excluded from school—only 59, according to the relevant statistical bulletin, although it is 59 too many. At the primary level, that is a rate of 26 per thousand. The overall rate of children excluded from primary school is 15 per thousand.

I accept everything that has been said about pockets of good practice, which I think is absolutely true. People are doing their best. However, I do not want us to ignore the fact that there might be something at the primary school level that we should be looking into.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): That is a good point to pick up, as I was going to ask what the Government should take action on. The witnesses from the Scottish Society for Autism or the National Autistic Society might know about this, but there do not appear to be figures on regional variation. How long does it take to get a diagnosis in different parts of Scotland? Are national or regional figures available?

Diagnosis was a crucial issue for many years. Judging from the discussion, either we are making progress, or diagnosis has become slightly less important. There still seems to be a gap between the need for additional support for learning, which does not depend on diagnosis—the support should be there, and diagnosis is irrelevant—and what is happening in practice. The scale of resources varies according to whether someone has a diagnosis, particularly in the area of out-of-school care. Can you provide us with the correct picture to put to the Government, so that we can ask the minister what the Government's role should be?

Jim Taylor: I do not have figures, but I can comment on what has changed. Ten years ago, there was a huge focus on getting the diagnosis. Now, things are a bit more integrated and people are focusing more on assessment for learning. Young children, their families and teachers are involved and, when the diagnosis process works well, they see it potentially leading to a more refined individualised educational plan.

I have no idea about waiting lists. It very much depends on which part of the country people are in. I am old enough to remember people talking about two or three-year waiting lists and their desire to go down south for diagnosis, but that is very much in the past. Over the past four or five years, the focus has been on diagnosis together with assessment, which has brought more meaning. As I tried to say earlier, the issue is one of integrating diagnosis and assessment to make a plan for the young person.

Bryan Kirkaldy: I add that it is important for us as a local authority to emphasise the empowerment of front-line staff. That is what I meant earlier by building capacity. We do that through awareness-raising training for all staff in relation to autistic spectrum disorders; through publishing policy guidelines on how we expect schools and classes to be autistic friendly so that barriers are taken down; and through coaching and supporting staff when we have a youngster on the autistic spectrum in a class.

All that happens independently of diagnosis. Diagnosis has a particular role to play in considering medical routes forward and giving parents information about the nature of their child's condition from a medical point of view, but we are looking all the time to empower our front-line teachers and support staff to respond immediately, to assess, and to intervene to support the child. If another child on the autistic spectrum turns up in their class the following year, we would expect the teacher and the support assistant to be ready to respond, and capable of doing so, without reference to external support.

That is not to deny the importance of diagnosis, which needs to happen, but we want to make our people immediately responsive.

Margaret Penketh (Scottish Support for Learning Association): My association has discussed diagnosis with quite a few of the teachers whom it represents throughout Scotland, and it seems that, in some local authorities, different teams do diagnosis using different tools with different amounts of understanding. Teachers are worried about that. We would prefer diagnosis to be left to educational psychologists, who should know what they are talking about.

Another point that has come up in our discussions is that some local authorities do not have an autism adviser or leader, so no one is fighting on the matter in those authorities. That could be quite dangerous as well, and it is contrary to the advice from HMIE.

There is also a buildings issue. There are buildings around us that are not suitable for autistic children, but into which autistic children are still being placed. That has to be considered as well.

Professor Munn: Bryan Kirkaldy's point about empowering front-line staff is important. The committee might want to find out about the number of training events for teachers that have taken place to raise awareness of autism, and also the amount of training for support staff, because teaching assistants often work closely with individual children, so their training is an important issue.

The Convener: I will let Gordon Ford in, then Margaret Penketh can have the final word on the topic. We will then move on.

Gordon Ford: I agree that it would be interesting to find out what CPD opportunities exist throughout the country, but it is also pretty important that people who come out of our teacher education institutions understand the whole learning agenda, including autism. There is concern that the amount of time that young teachers spend in universities as part of their training is insufficient to provide the grounding that they need when they go into schools. It is important that they learn on the job, and we fully support that, but they need to gain some understanding and some background when they are at college. I wonder whether the universities spend enough time providing that.

Margaret Penketh: I reiterate Pamela Munn's point about the training of support staff in schools. We could not exist without those staff, but quite a few of them are paid peanuts. There is an issue about raising their profile.

The Convener: That takes us on nicely to Liz Smith's line of questioning.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I want to focus on training. In our discussion, we have heard some interesting points about support staff and whether there is a need to take some of the professional development much further down to training colleges. I would be interested to hear your views on where we should go on that.

If we are saying that there is a need to develop that within the training colleges, we need to have fairly serious discussions with the General Teaching Council for Scotland about it. I know that it will say in response that teacher training is a major issue and that we are about to have a review because of the curriculum for excellence. However, now is a good time to be feeding into the discussions. I am interested to know whether you feel that we are making better progress in raising awareness of the problem and how to deal with it among the cohort of young teachers that is coming into the profession, or whether a lot more has to be done at the early stage of teacher training.

10:45

Shona Pinkerton: For information, two years ago Jim Taylor and I worked with the GTC to identify the expectations that people have of teachers who work with young people with autism. I do not know where that piece of work has gone, but three of us completed it two years ago, alongside others who were working separately on deafblind education and education for those with visual and hearing impairments. There is therefore a piece of work sitting with the GTC that is based on our expectations of teachers who work with young people with autism.

I know that a great deal of work has been done on autism awareness. Following many years of working in a residential school for children with autism, I became headteacher of a day special school in Edinburgh that had many young people with autism. There is major challenge in moving from a day of awareness training to making more in-depth continuous professional development training work in practice. Twelve to 14 years ago in Edinburgh, we invested in a full-time senior teacher who worked directly to help staff translate the in-service training day into something meaningful in the classroom.

In a sense, we are paying lip service if we say that teachers have an awareness of autism. It is a complex disorder that is specific to the individual on the day, and every day can be different—the learning context will make things different. There are so many variables that they cannot be covered in a day of awareness training or even a year of training at the University of Strathclyde. Such training does not give us the answers—I would love to have the answers to lots of issues that we face day in and day out.

Gordon Ford: My association is delighted with the quality of the probationers who are coming into councils. I want to make that quite clear; I do not know whether my colleagues who are in the field want to comment on that.

The nature of the profession is very complex, and a fundamental part of teacher training should be that teachers get an understanding of the complex learning needs of the children that they are about to face. When they hit the ground, they have got to do so running.

Brian Cooklin: I echo Gordon Ford’s point. For a number of years, people in schools have noticed an improvement in the probationer training and initial teacher training that our universities deliver. That is very welcome.

We also have to be rational, however. This might be the sixth time that I have given evidence to a parliamentary committee, and I frequently have to make the point that things are patchy across the country. I also have to make the point that we need to get real about what is achievable in initial teacher training. To go back to Bryan Kirkaldy’s point, there is a fundamental need to establish for all teachers a clear understanding of the principles of inclusion. It should not matter what a child’s condition is or what their development needs are—the teacher they are standing in front of should have that basic awareness.

That is also wrapped up in the bullying issue, which we have not got on to yet, but which is a major concern. We seem to swing back and forth as to what type of bullying is top of the hit parade and what sort of bullying we should focus on. Regardless of that, however, we should focus on bullying—full stop. The danger is that we imagine that everything can be included in teacher training, but it is unrealistic to think that we can give everything fair weight. We must get real, because we do not operate in a vacuum. We are in a very difficult financial situation; there have been severe cutbacks in intakes for faculties of education, and it looks like that will only get much worse. If we take away the resource and the expertise that are already there—the people who are, as we have said, preparing our new teachers extremely well—the faculties will be unable to make new teachers aware of very much, never mind make them aware of autism. That is the reality of the situation, and it would be foolish of us to talk about what is a very serious issue without recognising the lack of resource that may be available to tackle it.

Bryan Kirkaldy: I will make two points. First, I echo what Gordon Ford said about our experience of probationers. Young people have been coming into the profession over the past two or three years expecting to take an inclusive approach and to personalise the curriculum. Fundamentally, we want people with very good skills and attitudes, and I think that we are seeing more and more of those skills and attitudes in new entrants to the profession. That is heartening, because we get the foundation for inclusion from that. We then need to ensure that people have sufficient access to the more specialised knowledge that is relevant to autistic spectrum disorders.

Secondly, I draw a parallel with dyslexia, in relation to which we are much further down the road. The incidence of dyslexia grew markedly in the 1990s, to the point at which we now expect it to be about one in 10. In the early 1990s, it would have been common for local authorities to have had only two or three specialised staff capable of assessing dyslexia. For example, in Fife, which had a population of 45,000 children, one person was responsible for assessing youngsters for dyslexia with specialised information and communication technology software. Now, we have 100 learning support staff whom we consider to be experts with full capacity in relation to dyslexia across the primary sector. We therefore built capacity progressively in relation to dyslexia.

Our strategy for autistic spectrum disorders is exactly the same. We want to build capacity in all mainstream staff at a level that is appropriate to their skills and knowledge, but we also want to build capacity in our support staff—those who work in learning support, behaviour support and psychological services—so that capacity builds progressively. We must do that to keep pace with the greater sensitivity to the phenomenon.

Jim Taylor: I echo that point. My personal perspective is that we seem to be creating a new generation of young teachers who buy into things such as inclusion, differentiation and individualisation. People see the curriculum for excellence as a major instrument in working towards those approaches and in looking at the difficulties that some young people have in getting access to such support. That is the bit that is working. Bryan Kirkaldy referred to teachers' attitudes, and that is where change is happening.

Elizabeth Smith: I thank the witnesses for making those points. I take Brian Cooklin's point that we are in a difficult situation with budgets and that we must be realistic about our opportunities. Just to clarify, is it preferable for whole staff groups, departments or other parts of the school, which might include some support staff as well as those who are in the classroom on the front line, to have in-service training? Would that be a better approach, given the good practice that Gordon Ford and Bryan Kirkaldy described? Is it better to concentrate our limited resources in local authorities to provide that support within schools as they operate and not do terribly much about what happens in teacher training?

Gordon Ford: There has to be a balance. The local authority has the responsibility. In West Lothian, we operate a senior officers review group, which is multi-agency and, in my opinion, very successful. That group will recognise that there have been training issues. Where a case has taken a long time to reach the group and there is clearly a major issue, the group will flag that up. It is our responsibility to respond to that. That is now built into our probationer programme, which is an introduction to the whole world of challenging learning needs.

My earlier comments were based on anecdotal evidence from young teachers who have just joined us and who have expressed a bit of concern that they were not fully prepared for some of the things that they were about to face. I am fully aware that there is only so much that can be done in a four-year course, which was Brian Cooklin's point. If you take the resource away from the colleges and universities, you put even greater pressure on the preparation of young people. There will be a balance. There will be whatever is presented to the GTC—I was not aware of that—for inclusion in the teacher training programme and what local authorities should be committed to provide internally. I accept that it is a local authority responsibility.

Carolyn Brown: I agree. In teacher training, all that is being looked for is a basic level of awareness. Even from the practical point of view of absorption of skills, that is a reasonable level to pitch training at. On local authorities supporting staff, we are aiming to develop skills, which training does not always do—we have to bear that in mind. Just because someone has been on a training course, that does not necessarily make them an expert. We need to align the training with attitudes and skill development. I recommend that committee members think about local authorities' CPD strategies. It is about targeting scarce resources. Resources are best targeted where they will be best used. Local authorities require a CPD strategy to make the best use of resources.

I draw members' attention to "The Autism Toolbox: An Autism Resource for Scottish Schools", which was published recently by the Scottish Government. It is an excellent resource that could be used in that way. At the moment, only one copy is available in every school in Scotland. There might be an argument for a reprint and for further examination of how it could be used. A lot of work has already been done. The toolbox is very accessible. As a psychologist, I would have an interest in supporting schools with that.

Margaret Penketh: I was thinking about the student side of things, as another hat that I wear is that I work in the faculty of education at the

University of Strathclyde—interestingly enough, I work beside the team who wrote “The Autism Toolbox”. I was thinking of one way that we might be able to solve wee problems. Currently, when the students are put out on placement, we do not think actively about what experiences they have had of working with children with additional support needs or autistic children. Perhaps, as a university, we could think about having placements in a school where we know that there are children on the autistic spectrum.

Irene Matier: This is probably a wee bit of a reality check, again. Students are coming out of university with an awareness of autism. They have had the lectures and they know what autism is all about. I do not think that any teachers where I work have not been on some kind of course or have not had some kind of in-service training on autism. However, a teacher can have an autistic child in their class one year who copes and integrates well, so that they feel that they know what they are doing, and another child the very next year who does not have the same profile and is hugely disruptive in a class that includes four or five children with other kinds of learning needs. Despite huge amounts of in-service support, that is the reality on the ground.

We have talked about support assistants, who are few and far between; in a large school, there may be three or four of them. Because of cuts, local authorities have had to look seriously at the number of support assistants who are in place. Support assistants are there for individuals in classes—if an individual does not have a support assistant, the teacher and the rest of the class will struggle, no matter how much in-service training or support has been provided. That may sound negative, but it is a reality that we need to remember.

11:00

Elizabeth Smith: Would you like to comment further on “The Autism Toolbox”, on which we have received fairly good reports?

Shona Pinkerton: It is a wonderful resource, but it is only as good as the capacity, time and resources that are put into making best use of what is in it.

Margaret Penketh: We must ensure that the toolbox is used and read. I am sure that it has not even been looked at in some of the schools that have received it—it has been left on a shelf. Utilisation is important.

Professor Munn: The committee needs evidence on the take-up and use of the toolbox. Everyone agrees that it is a good resource, but schools receive a lot of material in the post and it could be lying somewhere and not being used. I emphasise the point that was made about support staff. In research that we have recently completed into behaviour in schools, only 35 per cent of primary and 21 per cent of secondary support staff agreed that there was adequate training to deal with behavioural difficulties. Often those people have most contact with children on the autistic spectrum. I would not like us to lose sight of that point.

Claire Baker: We had some questions about support, but those were covered to some extent when we talked about teachers’ CPD opportunities. Irene Matier made the point that teachers deal with a range of children and that they can feel confident in one year but face different challenges in another. We have discussed the role of support assistants and whether teachers have the proper level of support. Do you want to raise any other issues relating to the support that is available to teachers and headteachers? Following on from Pamela Munn’s comments, what training should be provided to support staff? Is the support that they receive adequate to enable them to meet the educational needs of children with autism?

Gordon Ford: Irene Matier introduced the concept of reality checks; it falls to me to expand on that. Local authorities are preparing budgets not only for 2010-11 but for 2011-12 and 2012-13. We do not know what the real conditions in 2011-12 and 2012-13 will be, but we anticipate fairly severe cuts. There is no doubt but that such cuts will impact on support. I am not talking about the teaching workforce—if we have classes, we need teachers. However, the level of support that is currently available may not be the level of support that is on the ground in two and three years’ time. That will be regrettable.

Everyone who is working in the profession at the moment enthuses about the improvements in our service that support assistants have brought. It was suggested that they are not as well paid as they should be; I do not dispute that for a minute. However, they have freed up teachers to focus on what they came into the profession to do—to work with children. I do not accept that support assistants are the ones who will have to deal with behaviour. That will still be the teacher’s responsibility but, if the support assistants are removed, the teacher will face a greater challenge. Our young people will have to be exceptionally fit to cope with some of the demands that they might face in two and three years.

Shona Pinkerton: What we are thinking about is how we support young people in a mainstream setting or in a unit. The concept that we are debating at this point is placing young people within their authorities but, to take it to the stage beyond that, local authorities also have young people supported in placements outwith their authority area, with Jim Taylor or me, for example. I am very aware that particularly complex young people often come to us far too late, which means that we have to deal with many behaviours that have become entrenched and have spiralled to a level that we would not wish for any young person. I am concerned even about what currently happens with the processes that we go through and why it sometimes takes too long for a young person to come to another form of provision, given the impact on the young person, their siblings, the partnerships, the parents—often there are separations. I am also concerned that the economic climate might mean that, over the next few years, local authority schools will have to work with young people who present even greater challenges than those that schools currently face.

We need to get back to putting the young person at the centre. We also have to think about health professionals such as clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists. We need a national strategy that puts the young person at the centre and places all the agencies under a statutory duty to provide cost-effective services at the right time, rather than providing too little too late and achieving very poor outcomes. The population of such young people is not necessarily large. I would like there to be balance. There is a lot of good practice, but many young people face huge challenges in understanding the world in which they live. We have a duty to meet the needs of all those young people.

Claire Baker: Shona Pinkerton's comments are interesting. If we are facing tighter finances over the next few years and the number of support assistants in the classroom is going to fall, has any thought been given to, or planning done for, other possible solutions? We cannot just go back to the previous situation, and we recognise that advances have been made in supporting these young people. If local authorities' funding is constrained, they might have to change how they deliver services. What kind of planning has been done on making efficiency savings in the area while still delivering a good and improved service for the young people? What other options do we have? Shona Pinkerton suggested a statutory duty as a possible way of securing that; what other thoughts have people had about how we might address the changing situation?

Brian Cooklin: To answer the original question, I do not think that the support is there—certainly not throughout the country—and I do not think that it has been there for some time. The current situation is not a recent occurrence. Average-sized secondary schools of 1,200 pupils will vary hugely from one extreme to the other. For example, such a school in one local authority might have no support assistants, but there might be 33 support assistants in a similar school in another authority. That is the spectrum, and it makes a huge difference to how children are treated and supported, as well as to the staff.

The autism toolkit, which is an excellent CPD resource for schools, is increasingly being used only by support for learning staff and by some support assistants because it is hands-on, or they are trying to use it in that way. Increasingly, that narrower focus will mean that fewer staff will have that kind of involvement. Unless they have a support assistant in the class and have to find strategies to deal with the children in front of them, teachers will not get that opportunity. That is where we will see the biggest impact. It is an extremely difficult situation to have to contend with.

While we are doing the reality check to which Irene Matier referred, we must bear it in mind that the class teacher must keep in mind the situations of all the children in front of them. For example, they can have a child who is on the autistic spectrum and children with attention deficit and hyperactive disorders, children with other learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, and a list of children who, for example, have a medical condition and must get out to the toilet and the ones who must never go to the toilet because the teacher will never see them again. The teacher therefore has all that going on in the group in front of them. The support assistant makes an enormous difference to a class teacher in those situations, as a back-up as much as anything else, but particularly because they are another human being in that dynamic human situation.

To return to the issue of the quality of probationers, I will refer anecdotally to an example in my own school. An outstanding probationer developed an excellent working relationship with a child with Asperger's syndrome and used sport to give the child confidence. The child has blossomed and has been outstanding. We have not touched on the importance of sport, music, drama and art in giving hope and confidence to many children who suffer from autism. All of that is an important support in itself.

Bryan Kirkaldy: To respond to Claire Baker's question, we are always looking to be efficient in how we deliver support. What I said earlier about building front-line capacity is all about that. If we take an holistic approach, we have more chance of coping with budget reductions.

It is interesting to think about how statutory duties apply. When councils are under financial pressure to make reductions, we will be very conscious of where we have a statutory duty. Statutory duties have different levels of specificity; those that refer to the size of classes, for example, are very specific. We have a statutory duty already through the Education (Assisted Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 in relation to meeting children's needs, which applies to children on the autistic spectrum as well as to all other children with additional support needs. We take that duty very seriously. However, it does not offer a specific way of measuring the level of support staff that any school or local authority will have. There is therefore a risk that, when local authorities are under budgetary pressure, the level of support may be reduced. That is inevitable, because there will be no statutory balance to check that. That should be a concern for each local authority and for the Scottish Government.

Claire Baker: I want to widen the discussion out to whether you feel that there is sufficient support for children and families. Shona Pinkerton talked about the high separation rates for families who have children with autism. What kind of support is there from the public and voluntary sectors? Are there sufficient levels of support for families? I am also interested in whether there is sufficient support to ensure that parents are empowered to make decisions around their child's education or to contribute to such decisions.

11:15

Carolyn Brown: It is probably fair to say that there are significant gaps in support for families. We sometimes discuss that with social work colleagues and voluntary agencies. We welcome the support that voluntary agencies currently provide. There is an awareness that a number of families experience major pressure because of the difficulties in managing their children at home. Education can provide support to some extent through being sympathetic to and supportive of parents and their children.

I want to make a broader point about support, which is a complex issue for local authorities. There are many strands to the concept of support. I direct committee members' attention to my submission, in which I identify support in its broadest terms. I will come back to the point about children and families, but support is a much bigger question for local authorities. It is about identifying youngsters on the spectrum in the first place so that planning can happen. It is also about the other things that we have talked about, such as having efficient training approaches; having a perspective within local authorities on inclusion and on how to build capacity in schools; and skilling staff to take that approach.

Parental and family support for children at home and at school is imbedded in a bigger structure that is provided by local authorities. We must always think of the bigger picture when we are talking about support for families and children.

Local authorities need to provide a continuum of support, so that the different needs of youngsters on the spectrum are matched. Any move to make statutory provision specifically for autism would be problematic in addressing the needs of all youngsters in schools. It could divert resources away from other youngsters, which would raise a number of issues for local authorities.

A national strategy for autism and support for young people and families would be helpful. We have talked about differences between local authorities. It would be helpful if we had a national strategy that identified the dimensions in which local authorities could best function, using principles of best practice. It might also help if there were greater similarities in best practice across local authorities.

Professor Munn: In 2006, the Government commissioned some research, which was carried out by one of my colleagues at the University of Edinburgh, Sheila Riddell, on the future delivery of advice and information, which are part of the support spectrum that Carolyn Brown talked about, across additional support needs—it is not specifically about autistic spectrum. I have a copy of that research, which I can make available to the clerk if that would be helpful.

Two general points came out of the research. Bear in mind that we are talking about what happens across the range of additional support needs, not just autistic spectrum. The first point was that parents reported that they struggled to get their needs as parents met. Secondly, they valued highly the national helpline, Enquire, which is run by Children in Scotland, which you perhaps know about. If you do not know about it, it is important that you are made aware of it.

The third point—I realise that I said that there were only two points—is that some of the parents who were involved in the research would have welcomed the development of an advocacy service for them. Remember, we are talking about the whole of additional support needs, not just autistic spectrum.

If you go down the line of making provision for one particular additional support need, you will open up issues about others. That is obviously something to bear in mind.

Shona Pinkerton: When HMIE presented its report on autism in 2006, one of its recommendations was that, to ensure that education authorities develop appropriate strategies, they should hold complete information on the number of pupils with autism. In the past two years, we have worked quite intensively with three local authorities. Our purpose was to provide a year-long support package to 20 families in each authority. We consulted the authorities in advance and agreed that, in the first instance, they would offer all families of children in the five-to-16 age group with autism spectrum disorder the opportunity to go to the first full day's training on behaviour. In each authority, many more families took part in the one day of training than we were able to provide with whole-year support, which involved members of staff from Daldorch House school going into the family home and transferring their theoretical learning into practical application. Throughout the year, more and more families came back and said that many people that they knew had not been invited to the first workshop, which showed me that those local authorities still do not have a comprehensive picture of who has autism spectrum disorder in the five-to-16 age group. It appears that the 2006 recommendation on developing a strategy is still to be fully addressed.

The support that the family programme gave highlighted the enormous strains that family life can present. We measured coping skills in families, and we measured their stress levels at three points during the year. Families started with exceptionally high stress levels, but within six months they had reduced hugely significantly—that is not a terribly psychological term. There were dramatic reductions in six months, yet the intervention was not an enormous one. It was one whole day of training, but within that a considerable amount of time was allowed for people to talk to each other. Sometimes, the important thing is not solving the problem but sharing it and knowing that other people are in a similar situation.

Throughout the six months, we had an extremely flexible staff team; sometimes they worked in outlying areas at 9 o'clock at night, because that is when the youngster was in bed and the mum and dad felt that they had an hour to work together and think about the issues. We had to be flexible in order to meet the families' needs. In our discussions with local authorities at the end of the project, there was recognition that the traditional working hours within education and social work are very different from the hours that my staff team worked during the year in order to meet the families' needs.

The heart of the matter is about the whole child within a whole family and the very early stages of life. The programme made a huge difference. I hate it when we talk money, but the cost was £2,000 per family per year—that is five nights' respite, and they had a year's support. They have a tool pack that we developed, which they can continue to use year in, year out, but they will need topped up. Ultimately, they said that what they would really have liked at the end was networks for families, sometimes just to share their concerns and issues. Such networks might move things forward to some extent, but the important thing is often just for people to get together. That does not need to cost a lot and it is not rocket science.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): I want to follow on from Shona Pinkerton's points about parental support. Are parents aware of the other respite models that are out there? Are they presented with one model that gives them a week every three months, or do they know that they can get little and often, which might be best for the family? You mentioned that the siblings are often forgotten. I do not know whether teachers in the classroom can spy when there are problems with the behaviour of the brothers or sisters of children with autism and when such children need extra support in the classroom.

Has enough work been done to help parents network? When I visited 49 Ardfin Road in Prestwick, Aberlour Child Care Trust told me that sometimes the best form of respite is for parents to have a cup of tea when they come to collect their children and to chat with other parents who are picking up their kids at the same time. Such parents can talk to one another about development, in a way that they cannot to parents who do not have children who suffer from autistic spectrum disorder, and help one another out. Is there enough support to help parents to formalise networks? Are parents aware that they could request different respite models?

Shona Pinkerton: You are looking at me, but I do not know the answer.

Bryan Kirkaldy: I will respond. Parent networks are really important. The experience of Fife Action on Autism and similar groups is that local networks established by parents are an effective way of providing support parent to parent. We actively support that development. We have a long-term relationship with such groups and have involved them on the inside in our policy and strategy development, so that parents are active partners at Fife level.

The other issue that you raise is equally important. We must not have only one response to family support—to provide residential respite, which is expensive and is not always what families want. With our colleagues in social work, we are thinking much more of a continuum. At the lowest level, that might involve parent-to-parent support, but it would also extend to more intensive measures. Ultimately, those might include residential respite, but there might be a range of family-to-family supports in between.

Jim Taylor: There are models around the country—Shona Pinkerton has described one of them. Bryan Kirkaldy was right to make the point that falling back on residential respite is often a catch-up response to supports not being in place.

There is a hidden element. A huge number of parents get a huge amount of support from teachers and schools, but that is often tested by families at the edge. Some parents do not get access to support, as they do not feel capable of taking part in parents groups and are less comfortable about arriving at school half an hour early. That probably happens more than we would like to recognise. If you visit some schools around the country, you will see how much time teachers spend with parents, who may arrive half an hour or 45 minutes before school ends. The answer to your question is that support can be provided—the models are in place—and is making a huge difference to families. The issue is catching those families that are too broken to get it or for whom it comes too late.

Aileen Campbell: It was mentioned that children and young people are referred too late to both the Scottish Society for Autism and the National Autistic Society Scotland. Why is that happening? Is there a cost issue for local authorities, or are there other issues that mean that you do not get to see children soon enough?

Jim Taylor: There are probably a number of factors. I would like to think that we are talking about families and young people at the far edge of challenge, for whom systems and supports have been tried but who require a more specialised, detailed input at certain stages of their lives. That requires a different approach. Generally, when we are approached by an authority, our first response is to ask what the authority is doing and how we can help with that; I am sure that the National Autistic Society Scotland takes the same approach. However, the population that comes to us consists of young people with a different set of experiences behind them.

11:30

During the summer, West Lothian Council invited me to a meeting to talk about the number of young people who are being sent out of authority to different places. I thought that the e-mail had come to me by mistake, but I am delighted to say that it had not. One of the things that that group identified was the number of young people who had to be schooled or supported outwith their authority. The biggest factor was not the failure to develop family support but the lack of recognition of how important it is at an earlier stage. Family support is a big issue.

I have a bit of a problem with respite. If what we usually call respite could be looked at in terms of providing support for the young person to develop independent skills, it would be considerably more effective than just giving the family a break in the traditional way. However, that must be integrated into the broader picture.

Shona Pinkerton: Young people often come to us in a vulnerable state because it can take families a long time to make the decision to come to us. Families will try and try to make things work and to maintain the family as a unit—they are willing to give it their very best shot. Then there will come a point when they decide that the young person needs more structure and routine in a specialised environment, and a level of support that can be provided around the clock. Families can sometimes get to quite a dangerous stage before they feel that they can let go. Even then, it can be a very long time before they come to us. We have plenty of examples of it being two to three years from when the family says that it desperately needs help to when a placement is available. Of course, the local authority has to go through a process, but we certainly have examples of young people coming to us very late. There have been cases such as that in which a young person was brandishing a knife, with or without intent, and the family was trapped in the toilet with the door locked. That is an extreme example, but such a situation can go on for a time before a placement is available.

We want young people to come to Daldorch only once all the steps and stages have been tried. As part of what we provide at Daldorch, we work with our outreach department to deliver training to staff. We can deliver bespoke training for a specific situation, we can do an individual assessment of a situation, and we can go back every month and work in a consultancy role, although we do not do that very often. We usually get a call for help saying, “Do it for us.” In many cases, our outreach team has to travel 50 miles each way to provide that direct support, and that costs £0.5 million a year.

The skills and knowledge that we have gained—often the hard way—could be put to much better use if little bits of money were spent earlier to empower more staff to work more effectively through the challenges and know that they can be successful. A young person could then remain in their own environment because the people around them would have learned and built up their confidence and expertise. I know that that is happening, but it could be happening more. Too often we are asked to take on the challenge and do it for people rather than asked to help them to work through the scenario themselves.

Aileen Campbell: I have a brief question, although it might take us away from the point. What networks are in place, either in schools or in your organisations, to help brothers and sisters?

Irene Matier: It is good practice for siblings that require assistance to get it within the school. I hope that most schools nowadays have counselling services, peer group help sessions or buddy systems. A whole load of such things are going on in individual schools.

The reality is that many siblings of autistic children are somewhere on the spectrum themselves. There can be a network of family members in a school all of whom have some kind of difficulty related to autism, and it is common for support for such families to be provided within the school.

Shona Pinkerton: I imagine that both the autism organisations that are represented here today run siblings groups at times. Just as the NASS runs social groups, it runs groups for siblings, but that work is based on whatever charitable funding the organisation has at a given time. We can top things up, but we cannot be the people who provide the basic work.

One of the difficult things for siblings is the isolation. It can be difficult for them to get to Brownies or their gym class at the right time because of the difficulty of managing the young person with autism and getting them into the car or whatever. It might be difficult for siblings to bring a friend home because the young person with autism prefers to strip their clothes off when they walk through the door. Such things are big issues for many siblings.

The Convener: Christina McKelvie's will be the last question in this section because we still have another section to cover.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): I have two quick questions, convener. Thank you for allowing that.

When a child is diagnosed or identified, parts of the system seem to slow up. I have a couple of constituency cases where the system seems to slow up when the case gets to the health board or when it gets somewhere else. Does anybody have any ideas on that?

My other quick question is on the back of that. I have noticed that the quality of information and the detail in co-ordinated support plans vary wildly. Is there any method of monitoring the standard of those plans?

Gordon Ford: I can reassure you about the procedure in my council. The senior officers review group that makes decisions on placements, and particularly on external placements, does not have a budget, so it is not governed by that. I am the one who worries about the budget. The fact is that it can cost £250,000 to place one young person externally. That is the cost of 15 support assistants. I have to think about that, but such considerations do not govern the review group, which makes the decision based on the needs of the child.

You might want to ask about the position in your area. If the review group there has a budget, that will become a serious issue for its members. Where does the cost of the placement come in their list of criteria? It might be quite high. When we ask professionals to make a judgment on a child's needs, it is important that it is not governed somewhere along the line by the budget, and that the budget is someone else's challenge.

Bryan Kirkaldy: The idea of care pathways between the NHS and local authorities was mentioned earlier. That has reduced waiting times because it allows information to be shared more readily at an earlier stage in the assessment and diagnosis process, ideally at the community and school level. Rather than depending on acute clinics, which see the child and family out of context, we bring the response to the local level, where we have, perhaps, school-related doctors and paediatricians working with psychologists, school staff and parents to build up a picture and make both an assessment and a diagnosis in the same process. That approach reduces waiting times.

The Convener: The final subject that we want to cover is behaviour, which was touched on earlier. I will allow Kenneth Gibson to lead on this area.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Professor Munn referred earlier to the level of exclusions and said that they were 26 per 1,000 for children with ASD as opposed to 15 per 1,000 in the background population. How do the witnesses feel about existing mechanisms for resolving disputes and appealing school exclusions?

Brian Cooklin: I feel obliged to respond first, because I probably exclude more people than others around the table and I probably have most experience of appeals.

It is a question of the individual case. I can think of only one case in 13 years as a headteacher where I excluded a child who was not at the time diagnosed as being on the spectrum, but was diagnosed with dyspraxia after he left the school. The debate at the appeal was whether we were sympathetic or empathetic enough to his condition and whether we should have resorted to exclusion in those circumstances. We have to make a judgment.

I also feel obliged to reply to Christina McKelvie's point about co-ordinated support plans. There are different ways of operating across the country. It is difficult to maintain consistency. In my experience, a lot of time and effort goes into the co-ordinated support plan and into addressing the behaviour and supporting the child in order to prevent exclusion. My experience is that exclusion is not the first, but the last resort. However, we must also consider the welfare of the other children in the class if the teacher is contending with repeated disruptive behaviour. Staged intervention to which we referred earlier, is significant, as are the strategies for promoting positive behaviour. We hope that there will be fewer and fewer exclusions in total, as well as fewer exclusions of children who are on the spectrum.

Appeal procedures happen differently in different authorities. Much depends on the members of the appeal panel and their experience of situations involving children on the autistic spectrum and of chairing an appeal hearing of that sort, and how mindful they are of the feelings of the people round the table and the support that they require for what can be quite an intimidating situation. In my experience, they go to great lengths to support the families, but it must be very difficult for a family to contend with being put into what is a quasi-legal situation.

Bryan Kirkaldy: Just to follow on from what Brian Cooklin said, we are concerned about exclusions and do not expect a child to be excluded because of their additional support needs. Our position is that we want good identification of their needs and appropriate and responsive support to meet those needs. It is possible that a child who is classified as being on the autistic spectrum will be excluded for reasons that are not directly related to their additional support needs. Exclusion decisions are taken by headteachers, but our policy is that we want children with additional support needs responded to through a support route rather than an exclusion route.

The other part of Kenneth Gibson’s question was about parental dispute. If we make parents integral partners in the decision-making and planning process, we are likely to minimise the prospect of dispute. It is when parents feel disempowered and disconnected from the next steps for their child that we run the risk of a dispute. Our foundation is therefore to do all that we can to ensure that, in a person-centred planning way, parents are integral to the process and feel empowered to plan and make decisions. As a consequence, we minimise the number of disputes. Where we have disputes, we seek to resolve them at the lowest possible level, ideally in the school but, if necessary, at local authority level. We certainly do not expect any dispute to go out to tribunal or into more formal mechanisms; that would be an indicator of failure on the part of the local authority as far as we are concerned.

11:45

Professor Munn: The committee would benefit from looking at the national statistical collection that is published every year on exclusions from schools; that is what I was quoting. There are figures there for children who are on the autistic spectrum and who have general special needs. An interesting finding in those statistics is that children who have additional support needs are more likely to be excluded than the general population.

A lot of emphasis has been placed on promoting positive behaviour in schools, and exclusion rates are going down. They went down last year and in January 2010 we will get the figures for 2008-09. Exclusion rates have been going down and that is to be welcomed.

The Government has a strategic advisory group looking at behaviour in schools, and it has representatives on it from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and the teacher unions, as well as from the Government itself. It is intending to update the guidance on exclusion. No guidance on exclusion has been issued since 2003, I think, so the committee might want to ask when the new guidance is likely to appear.

You might also like to ask about the number of appeals that there have been. Most local authorities would echo what Bryan Kirkaldy has just said about the ideal being that disputes are resolved at the lowest possible level within the school, and that they do not escalate. It is also important to remind the committee that the majority of exclusions—more than 90 per cent—are temporary and last for a week or less. The number of longer term or permanent exclusions, where a child is removed from the register of a school, is small. Again, it would be interesting to know how many of those permanent exclusions are of children who have additional support needs of one kind or another.

Shona Pinkerton: I want to come back to something that might be to do with the CSP situation. The 2008-09 annual report from the Additional Support Needs Tribunal for Scotland identified that 50 per cent of its cases related to people who had ASD, although only 12 per cent of the population who have additional support needs have ASD. That means that a significant percentage of people with ASD have used the ASNTS, whether to challenge a CSP or an out-of-authority placement—we have certainly been involved in those. ASD features highly in those figures.

Kenneth Gibson: A child who exhibits disruptive behaviour, whether or not they have ASD, obviously causes difficulties for other pupils and staff, and for the learning environment in a classroom. Some teachers have said to me that

that issue is not being properly addressed. There is a focus on the child who might have specific needs, and sometimes the rest of the class is not given the attention that it deserves. What would best practice be in such a case? There are pockets of excellent work and best practice in the field, but I am concerned that ideas might not be being shared. How can we ensure that ideas are shared and that a more common approach is taken to dealing with such cases? How can we make staff feel that they have the support of the school and the authorities?

Carolyn Brown: You are right that plenty examples of good practice can be identified. I agree with Pamela Munn's point about the advisory group's guidance, which is to be issued. I anticipate that a number of the dimensions that exemplify good practice will be included in there. I have put together a little shopping list of dimensions in which schools handle behaviour well, to which I direct members. You will never get rid of the most extreme situations, but if a school has a number of best practices in place, that will minimise disruption and allow pressing situations to be coped with more easily.

There are good examples of teachers creating an autism-friendly environment in the school, classroom and playground. Excellent de-escalation strategies and teaching practices are available, which are backed up by systems and processes in the school and the local authority. Managing challenging behaviour is not a unitary concept; it is diverse and depends on local authority systems being in place at all levels. I am sure that the committee will want to look at the advisory group's findings, which Pamela Munn mentioned.

Professor Munn: The group includes a positive behaviour team, members of which have responsibility for liaising with particular local authorities. The idea is that they are on hand to offer training and development if required—they spread best practice in that way.

Modern thinking is that a good way of sharing best practice is for schools to learn from one another, rather than have people come in to do a one-off presentation and then disappear. It is important for schools to have lots of opportunities to reflect on what they are doing and how they might change.

Our research on behaviour revealed that local authorities take their responsibilities for training in this area very seriously. They offer a wide range of provision for general CPD on improving behaviour in schools.

I hope that that answers Kenneth Gibson's question about how best practice can be shared.

Jim Taylor: In talking to parents groups and teachers in the field it is important to recognise that there are two elements to the exclusion: the official figures and the anecdotes that teachers and parents relate in which young people are not officially excluded but have been kept off school or sent home for a variety of reasons—indeed, many young people with Asperger's syndrome keep themselves off school. The figures for non-attendance and exclusion overlap in many ways. That issue has to be looked at.

The other issue is information about young people who are in school but are getting little access to teachers, classrooms and lessons. In the past 18 months, our school took in nine new pupils, six or seven of whom had been getting next to no hours or days in school. There is a hidden figure there.

On disruption in the classroom, I have an entirely different point to make. It is important that we take that right back to the recognition of what autism is and how it manifests itself. The challenge facing teachers is their teaching style and their responses to young people. Many young people in mainstream secondary schools have responses that can be very disruptive, because the other children in the class do not recognise that certain children are allowed to say things and respond in a particular way. My favourite story of all time is the one about the 14-year-old boy whose teacher walked in and said "Mr Brown left on Friday and I'm your new English teacher", and the boy shouted out "That's rather wonderful, I found Mr Brown somewhat less than stimulating." The place was in uproar, but difficulty was caused because the rest of the class did not recognise that they could not make comments like that. Perhaps they did not have the capacity in Falkirk to make comments like that. [*Laughter.*] I will see whether I can insult as many departments as I can.

Teachers who are trained and experienced in dealing with children with autism talk to us about the challenge of responding to the children with Asperger's syndrome in their classrooms, which must be significantly different from the responses of their colleagues. That point must be acknowledged.

Brian Cooklin: In this area more than in any other, rather than talk about best practice, we must talk about right practice. As has been said several times, even though teachers have had extensive training or support and have been made aware of a situation, they can encounter different behaviours on a daily basis, or even within the same period. A lesson may start well and it may look as if everybody is focused and involved, then something occurs, a remark is made or the person loses interest for whatever reason and the behaviour flares up.

In my experience, the best way of getting people to understand how to tackle such situations is to try to free them up to go in and out of one another's classes when they are dealing with the situations. Training is all very well, but having done the training or been at the workshop does not make someone an expert at dealing with autism and it does not necessarily mean that they can translate that training into a practical strategy to deal with the child that presents in front of them with that type of behaviour. It is therefore important that we focus on the right practice and that we try to make as much time available as possible for teachers to see one another coping with situations.

Shona Pinkerton: Some young people are still out of education for considerable periods of time. Last week, we enrolled one young person who had not been in school for three years and who had had limited educational input in a home situation. A few years ago, we took another young person who, to all intents and purposes, was excluded because his home in the high school was the jotter cupboard that had been emptied—that was his base. He went home to a bedroom that was his entire base at home, so in essence he lived out of two cardboard boxes. There are still quite emotive stories and realities for certain young people.

On a perhaps less emotive note, in talking to many families in the past year and a half I have found that they talk about being called to school regularly to collect a child because they have had enough for that day. Some parents felt that they could not take on a full-time job, because they had to be on hand. The children were often excluded in the sense that it was felt that it would be better if they did not take part in specific excursions. Such incidences may be relatively isolated, but we hear of them. It is unclear how often they happen, but if they happen at all to a particular person, that is obviously unsatisfactory.

Behaviour can be the tip of the iceberg. The question is what has generated the behaviour, and answering that question requires an understanding of autism. That is still the bit that we need to do more about.

Very often, different strategies have to be used from those that are used for other young people in the school; that presents difficulties for the school and raises questions about why someone is being treated differently from someone else. Often, the issue is about setting conditions and the context for learning. Things can be done ahead of the game to minimise the likelihood of disruption and the level of stress that is created for the young person, which, ultimately, results in the disruptive behaviour. Is the young person's behaviour a result of our failure to address many of the issues that are building up enormous levels of stress for them?

12:00

Gordon Ford: I am really disappointed to hear that someone was out of school—that is a failure to educate, so I would be interested to hear where that happened. It is good news that we have a drop in exclusion numbers and an increase in attendance. A lot of positive things are happening in our schools, such as the assessment is for learning programme, curriculum for excellence and better training of teachers.

Partnership with parents has changed beyond all recognition in the past decade or so. The secret to continuing to reduce exclusions is that headteachers and teachers now have confidence that their establishment can work in partnership with parents. We have re-established parent councils and locally elected members take a far greater interest in the general school situation than perhaps they did before. That is perhaps because of multimember wards and the recognition that everybody should be finding out what is going on. I see that as something very positive to build on. It will help us address the needs of some of our more challenging young people. We are moving forward in a really positive way.

Bryan Kirkaldy: The report that was published by Pamela Munn's team earlier this week is a good-news story for Scottish education. It indicates that staff in Scottish schools see improved pupil behaviour, which we might not expect, given the treatment of young people in the media. We should rejoice in and build on that good-news story.

The reason for the improved perception of children's behaviour and the reduction in exclusions is that schools are getting smarter at understanding the nature of children's behaviour and developing more constructive responses to it. We want children to be responsible citizens, but we cannot achieve that aim unless we have techniques to help them learn how to take responsibility for their behaviour in schools.

For a long time, exclusion was the only tool in the toolbox, particularly for secondary schools. Now we have many more tools in the toolbox, such as restorative approaches and learning-based approaches, which encourage children to learn, develop and change. That is a whole new constructive future for us. I would include children with autistic spectrum disorder and children with additional support needs in that general approach.

The statistics on the exclusions of children with additional support needs, to which Pamela Munn referred, include children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, who are in the census return on additional support needs. Those are the children who are identified for that reason as the most challenging in our system.

Kenneth Gibson: Is it not the case that no matter how preventive and positive the approach, some children cannot always be managed in a classroom situation without there being a disproportionate adverse impact on staff and other children's ability to learn? How can that be tackled? I am not talking about exclusions from school, but there might be instances in which children cannot be managed effectively and cannot learn in a classroom situation. There is also the impact on the other children and the teacher to consider.

Bryan Kirkaldy: Absolutely. I agree fully. I spoke earlier about a continuum of need, which implies that there has to be a continuum of response, which would include provision outside the campus of a mainstream school on occasion. The main provision that we would now make outside the campus of a mainstream school relates to behaviour support in the secondary sector. There are good reasons for that and we would hope that it would not be a long-term plan for any individual youngster, but we recognise that our support has to be graduated. At the lowest level, it is about class teachers giving additional consideration to understanding the youngsters' situation, and it goes through to support staff in the mainstream classroom, to support units in mainstream schools, then ultimately, for a small number, to the provision of out-of-campus support.

Jim Taylor: The answer to the question is yes. Probably surprisingly, I suggest that the number of such children is significantly smaller than we initially imagined it to be. Bryan Kirkaldy has outlined how the situation can be addressed. For a small number of young people, teacher intervention in a classroom is difficult. Again, schools need to be given the flexibility to devise creative responses, and there are examples of that.

Again, I use the example of West Lothian. It has an outstanding outdoor education practice, which is headed up by one individual, and there are attempts to broaden that across the authority. I attended a couple of presentations and saw the work that is going on in class. An entirely different curriculum, which was geared towards outdoor education, was created for a group of 14 to 17-year-olds at a specific time in their lives. That sounds a bit as if it might give teachers an excuse to do whatever, but it was tied closely into the curriculum. Schools need to be given the flexibility to do something with confidence, rather than having to say that education means being in a class at certain points of the day. In the example that I am talking about, a clear line could be drawn from what was happening to what the IEP looked like. There is a model, but we must recognise early when something more creative is required.

The Convener: Mr Macintosh has a final question that has not been covered.

Ken Macintosh: It is about resolving disputes, rather than disruptive behaviour, and what Gordon Ford said earlier. The 2004 act tried to get away from the acrimony between local authorities and parents to develop a new partnership approach, and I think that it has been successful. However, my experience as a constituency MSP is that, in the past year or so, there has been an increase in the number of disputes, which seems to be a straightforward result of the withdrawal of teaching support in the classroom.

Several contributors talked earlier about the reality check. We all have fantastic intentions. I do not doubt that all teachers and education authorities have the best of intentions, but in reality they do not have the resources to implement them. The trouble with that situation is that it breaks the bond of trust. If an authority is working in partnership with parents but does not have the resources to implement what it and the parents think it should be doing, the bond of trust breaks. We are trying to emphasise mediation as a way around that, but is that the way to resolve the problem? Is there any way to resolve it? If no resources are available, and that is what lies behind the local authority's decision, how do you get that across to parents and still treat them fairly? That is an easy question to finish on.

Gordon Ford: We, and a lot of councils, run advocacy services. Some use an external party, but we do it through social work. This takes us back to the idea of creating networks. There will be parents who do not fall within an easily identifiable group who will always have an issue with authority, and cases involving them will go through the formal process—I have not experienced one recently and, fingers crossed, will not do so soon. However, an advocacy system works where there are networks.

Shona Pinkerton talked about the importance of making up networks of parents, and I am going to talk to my colleagues about how far we are down the road of setting up such groups. Advocacy is important in giving parents confidence. If they find that the education system has broken their trust, advocacy will give them someone else to go to who will have the contacts and links to restore that confidence. That is the line we are taking, and I know that a lot of councils operate something similar.

Irene Matier: Unfortunately, I am a bit more negative. What Gordon Ford said sounds like a great idea. However, at the tail end of my previous job, I was involved in a situation in which a family wanted their child to go into an autism unit as he transferred to secondary school. It was agreed that that would be the best place for the boy, but there were no spaces. The family ended up having to go to court—the experience was as negative as that.

I do not know how local authorities can cope in such situations. If they physically have no spaces in their remaining autism units for secondary provision, they have to find the money to increase their provision. I am concerned that secondary provision may become more difficult as time goes on.

Primary schools can manage many children on the autistic spectrum reasonably well because of the ethos and nurturing in primary schools. However, it becomes much more difficult to do that when children move from a small school with, say, only seven classes into an enormous secondary school where even going up the stairs is too much to manage for a child on the autistic spectrum. It is the child whom we are thinking of: it is not what is best for the school but what is best for the child. The case that I experienced was a particular difficulty that I am sure is not uncommon.

Bryan Kirkaldy: The dimension that I offer is related to the question of building capacity. If we have a system in which the parent has confidence in the class teacher, the class and the support services that we can bring to bear, we are more likely to minimise and, indeed, obviate the potential for dispute. If we do not have that capacity, parents are likely to resort to seeking an autistic unit, a dyslexia tutor or whatever because they are not confident in the relationship.

That is why we are so keen to work on building capacity for inclusion and making every classroom autistic and dyslexia friendly. That minimises parents' moves to more intrusive, expensive options as a first resort. We do not deny that such resorts need to be on the continuum, but we do not want them to be the first resort when we can deliver more locally and effectively in every classroom.

Brian Cooklin: I want to reinforce the point that has just been made. The key to resolving disputes rests with the relationship between the school and the parents. In more extreme cases, such as the one to which Irene Matier referred, the relationship probably does not enter into it and would not prevent the dispute. However, in the vast majority of cases, if sufficient empathy and understanding exists and if the parents trust the school in how their child is treated by all, or almost all, teachers, we can resolve the dispute.

Although a support assistant may be removed as part of efficiency savings, there should still be support in place for the child. The parents may not feel that it is adequate, but if there is a good working relationship between the school and the parents they can recognise that there is still support to help their child. The relationship between the school and the parents is critical.

Shona Pinkerton: The transition from primary to secondary is also crucial. We have not mentioned transition planning today, but it is one of the most significant things that we must think about at the pivotal points in young people's lives. Transition planning must begin as soon as is necessary for each individual. A model of transition planning might have mediated in the situation that Irene Matier described.

Irene Matier: I should clarify that the transition planning in that case had taken place and was very good. However, it broke down because, although everybody, including psychologists, agreed that the correct provision was an autistic unit, there was no space in the unit. The case does not therefore match the particular conversation that we are having. Good transition is obviously the key. The child in my example had been to the secondary and it had tried every way of helping him to cope, but he could not. That is the difference in that example.

Ken Macintosh: I am pleased that you mentioned transition, because I had a note to raise a question on it but ran out of time. We did not even get a chance to talk about the transition to employment. The transition to secondary that was described was obviously very awkward. Clearly, though, the transition to employment after schooling is dramatic and, indeed, drastic.

The Convener: I am conscious that this evidence-taking session has lasted more than two hours and that we have something else on the agenda, so I am going to bring the session to a close.

I thank everybody for their attendance and participation in our round-table discussion. I am sure that all committee members found the witnesses' evidence very useful and that they will reflect on it in preparation for our evidence-taking session with the minister next week.

12:15

Meeting suspended.

12:21

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Regulation of Care (Fitness of Employees in Relation to Care Services) (Scotland) (No 2) Amendment Regulations 2009 (SSI 2009/349)

Regulation of Care (Social Service Workers) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2009 (SSI 2009/350)

Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 (Transitory Provisions in Consequence of the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007) Order 2009 (SSI 2009/375)

The Convener: We move to the second agenda item, which is the consideration of subordinate legislation.

Members have three statutory instruments before them. As no member has a comment to make on the instruments, I highlight to the committee that there have been no motions to annul and that the Subordinate Legislation Committee made no recommendation in relation to SSI 2009/350. However, the Subordinate Legislation Committee determined that it needed to draw the attention of Parliament to SSI 2009/349 and SSI 2009/375 on a number of the grounds within its remit relating to drafting and clarity. That committee is going to pursue those grounds further with the Government because drafting has left a little to be desired in a number of pieces of subordinate legislation. Given the amount of time that is available to introduce amendments, there is a need for more clarity and better drafting skills to be utilised.

If there are no comments, does the committee agree that we have no recommendation to make on the three instruments?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: I remind members that the next meeting of the committee is on Wednesday 2 December at 10 am.

Meeting closed at 12:24.

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