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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 1 November 2011

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
9th Meeting 2011, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

*Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)

*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Phil Barton (Scottish Children's Services Coalition)

Claire Burns (Centre for Excellence for Looked-after Children in Scotland)

Bryan Evans (Children 1st)

Sara Lurie (Fostering Network Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 1 November 2011

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:03]

Educational Attainment of Looked-after Children

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning everybody, and welcome to the ninth meeting in session 4 of the Education and Culture Committee. I remind members and those in the public gallery to ensure that their mobile phones and any other electronic devices are switched off at all times.

No apologies have been received. We have a full turnout.

This morning, we will begin to take evidence in our inquiry into the educational attainment of looked-after children. Our first witness is Claire Burns, who is from the centre for excellence for looked-after children in Scotland. She will provide us with an overview of the main themes in the policy area. Later, we will take evidence from a second panel on how the parents and carers of looked-after children can be better supported.

I welcome Claire Burns to the meeting, and invite her to make opening remarks.

Claire Burns (Centre for Excellence for Looked-after Children in Scotland): I will provide some context about my role. I am the strategic policy implementation manager at the new centre for excellence for looked-after children in Scotland, or CELCIS. For the past year, I have also been the programme manager for the looked-after children strategic implementation group, or LACSIG. I bring an understanding of that group's work, including its consideration of work on the educational attainment of looked-after children.

I want to consider five key themes that are pivotal in the inquiry: focusing support where it is more required; care planning for young people; the designated manager's role in respect of looked-after children; support for families; and throughcare and aftercare. I will talk briefly about each of those themes, if that is okay.

On focusing support where it is most required, we acknowledge that there has been progress on educational outcomes for looked-after children. There have been initiatives such as the we can and must do better initiative and roles for designated managers, which have resulted in a

significant improvement in the understanding of education staff of their responsibilities and looked-after children's needs. There has been progress, particularly on school attendance and the educational achievement of looked-after children in foster care and residential care, but we need to focus our attention on children who are looked after at home, as that area is very resistant to change. That seems to be where the real challenge is.

The new mechanism for reporting on the educational attainment of looked-after children is much more robust and analytical than the old one, and that has allowed us to focus on where support is required for children who are looked after at home and on the move from primary school to secondary school, which is where the real divergence in attainment between looked-after and non-looked-after children happens. I urge the committee to say that the role of designated managers in schools, for example, needs to be considered and that we need to focus our attention on that.

Attendance is the key to attainment. The research tells us that where there is good attendance, there is good attainment. Children who are looked after at home have the lowest attendance of all looked-after children. We urge the committee to consider the role of quality improvement officers in local authorities, who should perhaps have a more rigorous role in looking at the attendance of looked-after children.

I will make one more point about attendance. From working with stakeholders, I know that they are really concerned that there is no way of monitoring the significant number of looked-after young people who appear to be in part-time education. It might look as though their attendance has been full, but that might relate to a timetable of one or two days. A more rigorous attempt to quantify attendance is needed. If some young people cannot cope with a full curriculum, we must consider alternative ways of building in a full curriculum for them around other activities that can build their self-esteem and resilience.

There has been huge improvement with respect to children's plans. We know that all looked-after children now have a plan, but where we fall down with our getting it right for every child approach is in the fact that much better co-ordination of services in those plans is still needed. Does the social work plan reflect the importance of educational outcomes? Do teachers know what the care plan looks like? Communication about parts of plans should be better.

The other key thing that the research tells us is that the assessments need to be much more focused on outcomes. That is also reflected in comments by the Social Work Inspection Agency

and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education. We are very good at assessing what the problems are, but we are not good at saying what we will do about them. What are the roles of everybody with corporate parenting responsibilities in that regard? That should be rigorously monitored.

On children's plans, we know that stability in a care placement is important for educational outcomes. I am sure that the committee will want to come back to that issue, on which my colleague from the Fostering Network Scotland will give it more evidence. We know that, if young people have a number of placements, that really disrupts their educational attainment. We need to consider how to co-ordinate all the services so that there is stability in care placements and in relation to health. That will improve educational outcomes.

A child's plan has significant implications for pre-qualifying and post-qualifying training for staff. We know that some of the reviews, such as the Donaldson review, have said that teachers need many more opportunities to work with their colleagues in pre-qualifying roles so that they understand what multidisciplinary work looks like when they are training and can put that understanding into practice.

We see the designated manager role as pivotal in improving the educational outcomes of looked-after children, but we think that designated managers need to take on a greater role and that their roles and responsibilities need to be clearer. Teachers need to know not only who the looked-after children are in their school, but how they should lead on innovative practice with those children.

There is still some confusion, particularly in secondary schools, about who needs to know what about children and young people. Although we recognise the need to uphold confidentiality requirements, it is clear that teachers cannot work effectively with looked-after children unless they know who those children are and what the issues are.

The research tells us that that becomes even more pivotal in secondary school, when a number of different teachers are involved. Children tend to feel less secure in that environment. The role of a designated manager is to ensure that teaching staff take a consistent approach and are informed about looked-after children with regard to behaviour triggers and the challenges that those children face.

We emphasise that support for family and carers is pivotal to improving educational outcomes for children who are looked after at home. We know that for a significant number of looked-after children, the ecology of their backgrounds involves parental substance misuse

and mental health difficulties, poverty and neglect. It is important that teachers understand how trauma and neglect might impact on the ability of children and young people to manage their education and to manage themselves in an educational setting.

We need to consider what works in engaging with parents and carers. We know that early work on literacy and language is important, but many of the parents are not aware of their own literacy levels. It can be a great challenge for them, if there are huge issues around poverty and domestic violence, to work on a one-to-one basis with their children on language and literacy early on. More research is needed on what constitutes effective intervention with families.

My colleagues in the looked-after children division in the Scottish Government are producing a rigorous and detailed plan for throughcare and aftercare support. Many looked-after children will finish their education at 16, but we need to support them through that period to adulthood.

The research is beginning to tell us that many young people and looked-after children who do not do well at school often use further education as a way back in, but there is a huge drop-out rate. The plan that my colleagues have put together demonstrates that we need to do much more work with residential units, foster carers and the further education sector on how we support adults who were previously looked-after children and who come back into the education system at FE level.

There are some issues around FE funding at present, but FE is one of the keys to ensuring that even if young people do not do well at school, we can support them later in life to come back to education.

The Convener: Thank you—that is helpful in providing an overview at the start of our inquiry.

You mentioned a range of different carers and professionals who are involved in the process. How might approaches to those groups differ with regard to maximising their support for looked-after children? It is clear that you cannot take the same approach with all the different groups.

Claire Burns: We need rigorous data that tells us what the differences are between those groups. We need to examine the evidence and to understand why the attendance and achievement of looked-after children in residential childcare and foster care has improved.

We must be much clearer about the way in which professionals do their pre-qualifying training. Do they understand the needs of those different care groups and their own role within a co-ordinated plan?

Some of the evidence in the report “Review of the Additional Support for Learning Act: Adding Benefits for Learners” indicated that a significant number of teachers had not heard about the GIRFEC approach, so we need to do more around how people work together.

Is that what you were asking about, or was it more about how we meet the different needs of different groups of children?

The Convener: It was a general question. With regard to some of the specifics, you mentioned professional pre-qualification training. What scope is there for introducing some sort of joint training for education and social work, for example?

10:15

Claire Burns: LACSIG is aware of the need for that and is taking it forward. The champion for the workforce development hub is Anna Fowlie, who is the chief executive of the Scottish Social Services Council. That is a significant part of our priorities for year 2 of LACSIG. We are going to run a pilot project in FE to bring together students in social care, childcare and additional support for learning and we will evaluate the impact of training them together, which should give them a much clearer view of different people’s roles. A child protection module is part of all those courses, but the students are never taught together. That is one thing that we are going to look at.

We also understand that we need to engage much more with the higher education sector. We hope to bring the sector together to consider how it can better co-ordinate pre-qualifying training. It came out in the Donaldson review that, if people train together, they are much more aware of one another’s roles as practitioners and they will work in a co-ordinated way. There are also clear implications for us in relation to post-qualifying training, because we already have a set of staff who are out there. CELCIS is considering how we can set up communities of practice and bring people together in a much more localised way.

Previously, we have done training and development by getting designated managers or teachers together. Although that has its place, we need cognate groups in particular areas. We are going to work on other training around, for example, the role of designated managers and making care planning more effective. That will be done on a locality basis so that we can bring together teachers, social workers and people from the children’s hearings system in particular locales. That is probably the direction that we should take.

The Convener: I do not mean to be critical as that is all welcome news, but why is it only being thought about now? Why are we only talking about

pilots now? The problem is not new; it has been around for a long time. Many people have talked about the silo mentality of different professional groups. All the professional groups have been involved in this area for—well, for ever. Why is the cross-fertilisation only happening now?

Claire Burns: Some of it is already happening, but the research on education attainment is telling us more explicitly all the time that there is a problem. I do not know that I have an answer as to why it has not happened before now. There have been some attempts, but I think that people now recognise the severity of the problem.

The Convener: Okay. I have one final question before I throw open the discussion. What efforts is CELCIS making to link the work that it is doing with the work of the various professionals on the ground and other groups that operate in the area? How have links been established between the overview work that you produce and the work on the ground?

Claire Burns: CELCIS was only launched in September, so we are fairly new, but we recognise that good stakeholder engagement is important and that we must ensure that there is constant communication between us and people on the ground. As part of our governance structure, we will have a strategic steering group that comprises key stakeholders and people in key positions across corporate parenting. We will have people from education, health and social work and they will influence our agenda, but we will also be able to feed back to them. We also have themed advisory groups around what we see as the particular challenges, such as educational attainment. We have people feeding into those groups, including key people at certain levels in local authorities. We need to hear what they are saying so that we know that our agenda fits with what is required on the ground.

The Convener: Thank you. I will bring in the rest of the committee now, beginning with Jean Urquhart.

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Thank you for your presentation. The written submission from CELCIS states that LACSIG will

“drive forward an implementation programme to improve outcomes for looked after children and young people”.

How will it do that?

Claire Burns: The looked-after children strategic implementation group came out of the reports from the national residential child care initiative. It was recognised that a number of the issues that were prevalent in residential childcare were actually prevalent across looked-after children.

LACSIG brings together key people in organisations—people who can influence what happens in organisations, such as chief executives and the head of HMIE. We are working on the themes of learning outcomes, health outcomes, commissioning, and workforce and care planning. We need to work on specific matters within those areas. LACSIG meets quarterly to consider the cross-cutting themes from that work and the meaning of what we are finding out for each individual's organisation.

One of our big bits of work has been on permanence. We are looking at each organisation's responsibility for taking that forward. We know that social work needs to do better care planning, in which better decisions need to be made more quickly. That feeds into the children's hearings system. The Scottish Children's Reporter Administration's chief executive is a member of the group and we are looking at what permanence means for training for children's panel members and whether they understand the most recent lessons about child development and have a greater appreciation that better decisions need to be made faster. In the health hub, we know that medicals for children who go for permanence can often cause delay. We are also looking at what the issue means in planning for educational outcomes for looked-after children. Much of that is underpinned by encouraging local authorities to do better strategic commissioning.

LACSIG can take a particular issue that we can see from the research is a problem area, such as permanence, and ask what that means. That relates to what we talked about earlier. We ask how we can take a corporate parenting approach and a much more co-ordinated approach to the issue. We ask what it means for the children's hearings system—it means that we need to review our panel members' training. What does it mean for health professionals? It means that they need to be much clearer about what permanence means. LACSIG takes an issue and asks what it means for all the organisations and how they can work together differently.

Jean Urquhart: Your response bears out what is in a lot of our suggested reading material, which shows frustration that a great deal of observation and declaration has taken place about what needs to be done, but things have not happened for years and years. What is the key to loosening that? What is the barrier for all the groups? I suspect that you cannot give a single answer, but there must be something that can be better communicated to all the people whom you have talked about, because at the end of the process is a child. Huge frustration is felt about the fact that children who are clearly able do not achieve because of their circumstances. As local authorities, teachers and members of the

Parliament, we want to see a difference, but the barriers are not clear. We refer to driving forward, but the circumstances are complicated.

Claire Burns: There are ways to drive forward and we are pulling together in the right way. We must be clear about what works. For example, community planning partners' role is important to understanding what is happening in their area and to us in articulating what works.

The subject is complex. Looked-after children are the most disadvantaged and deprived children in our communities. They reflect huge inequality. That makes the situation very difficult.

Jean Urquhart: What is the most important single first step for a child?

Claire Burns: That is getting the co-ordinated care plan and having a care plan that everybody is involved in, which everybody knows about and which is monitored and reviewed.

Jean Urquhart: What is the single biggest barrier to getting that care plan?

Claire Burns: It is to do with everybody having ownership of the care plan. One difficulty, which comes out in the Association of Directors of Social Work submission, is that looked-after children are still very much seen as social work's problem and there is still a way to go to get other corporate parents on board and to take equal responsibility for the outcomes for looked-after children. They need to have a shared understanding and vision of what they want for that young person.

Jean Urquhart: Finally on that theme, other than education, there will be different aspects to helping a child attain educationally. What are they, and how do you envisage them playing out in the care plan?

Claire Burns: We need to ensure that clear support is provided in school and outwith it. I talked about the role of the designated manager in school. They are very much involved in the care planning process and have a clear idea about the appropriate supports for the young person. That goes alongside better support at home and for the family. There are ways in which schools can engage better with families on issues such as early literacy and language development. Some places do that very well. Some residential schools, such as Harmeny School, take the view that parents are partners in the school. We all know that some parents are very motivated and that we do not have to work hard to involve them with school, but more can be done to get parents of looked-after children to engage more with what is happening in the school and to feel supported by the school.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I have a supplementary question on that issue. You

talked about the difficulties of putting in place a care plan, which involves co-ordinating a range of professionals. Do issues such as absenteeism and staff turnover affect the process of putting together care plans, perhaps by slowing it down?

Claire Burns: I am not aware of that. We have not considered that issue, but we could get information on it to you if you want.

Joan McAlpine: The reason why I ask is that I have come across the issue with care plans in other areas. I just wondered if it was an issue with care plans for looked-after children.

Claire Burns: From the research, we have not been made aware that there is an issue with staff absenteeism, but we can examine that issue for you. The issue that the research raised was that there is not a shared understanding of what is in care plans. For example, teachers might not know what is in a child's care plan that has been produced by social work. The issue is more to do with joint working and joint communication.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I have a quick supplementary question. You mentioned that some parents are very involved in schooling. Obviously, the parents of some children who are struggling will demand the rights that are now in statute. Is there a place for independent advocacy in relation to educational attainment for young children?

Claire Burns: Yes, I think so, but it should not take the parent out of the equation. As the member will be aware, we do not know about the literacy levels of parents of looked-after children. We know that early reading is important, but we need to know what the issues are in the family home before we know how to provide proper support.

We should follow the model of having champions in schools for certain young people to ensure that their care plan is monitored and evaluated. If it has been agreed that a young person should be assessed, the champion can find out whether that has happened yet or what the timescales are. That is about somebody keeping a check on the situation all the time. Research on assessment for dyslexia shows that it can take a long time for an assessment to happen. If someone has four years of secondary schooling and it takes a year to get an assessment, that is a huge chunk during which they will not have teaching and learning that is structured in the way that they need.

10:30

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): My question follows on from Jean Urquhart's question. I want to focus on identifying what

works. This is our first evidence session and you have raised a lot of important issues. It can be difficult to cut through all the issues to reach the nub of what will make the difference. It seems from your opening statement that a huge amount of work is going on but that how that translates to delivery on the ground in the classroom is where the challenge lies. You have mentioned some examples, including the Harmeny example and the idea of having champions in schools.

I am not sure whether the solution is to identify good practice, good pilots and good projects or for the systems that are already in place to work better and for people to share information better and take ownership and leadership to a greater extent. Can you give some examples of good practice and indicate what ultimately makes the difference and what works?

Claire Burns: The solution is about both. As I said, the planning and assessment process needs to be more co-ordinated—it needs to be better. That goes in tandem with knowing what works better on the ground. We gave some examples in our submission. We know that when people intervene and provide support it can make a difference to young people. For example, the reading rich project in South Lanarkshire supported residential childcare staff to do more work around literacy with young people.

I think that my colleague from the Fostering Network Scotland can give quite a lot of good examples of how foster carers are supported better around educational attainment.

The Convener: We can raise that with them.

Claire Burns: In the next week we can put together a paper for the committee that gives examples of good practice.

Claire Baker: How easy is it to share good practice? When something works, does that depend on factors local to the authority and to the school? Might it be effective there but not as effective elsewhere? Are we missing a trick? Should we identify good practice that works in one area and ensure that we deliver it in other areas?

Claire Burns: Sharing good practice is what this is about, because part of the overall problem is that how we support looked-after children generally and how we support their educational attainment is so variable. The ADSW also made that point. There are local issues—for example, the number of looked-after children in the north of Glasgow is much higher than elsewhere—but we will miss a trick if we do not try to roll out approaches that we know work well in different areas.

That is pivotal to what CELCIS will do. It is about asking about what the research tells us

about what works and identifying validated practice. We must also be very careful about what we say is good practice and what works. We have to identify practice that we can evaluate and validate and ask how we can get professional groups such as teachers, or professionals in particular areas, to look at how they implement that good practice on the ground.

How we support parents effectively has not really featured in the research agenda and has to be another priority for CELCIS. This is about identifying good practice and taking it forward. My mind has gone a bit blank on the examples, but we can give you a commitment to put a paper together with some examples of good practice.

Claire Baker: That is great. Thank you.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I will raise an issue that you touched on briefly when you gave the example of teachers not being aware of GIRFEC. There have been a lot of national developments in GIRFEC, the looked-after children regulations and the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, which was amended by the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009. Is there evidence of those being implemented, filtering through and changing approaches at the front line, or it a case of proclamations being made from on high?

Claire Burns: My understanding of the review materials is that they show that there is huge variation in how local authorities use the ASL legislation. Some use it as an assessment process and some use it to identify looked-after children.

We are good at assessment and identifying problems, but who is implementing the plan and what does that mean for different people's responsibilities and for monitoring? That is where we fall down. We are not good at being outcomes-focused—at identifying the targets for the young people for the next year and saying who is responsible for those targets. SWIA and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education identified that. The difficulty is in being outcomes-focused and asking where we expect the young person to be educationally within the next six months or few years, what support mechanisms we are putting in place, who is responsible for them and who monitors them.

Marco Biagi: Is it fair to say that implementation is patchy?

Claire Burns: Yes. The policy framework is in place. One of the issues might be that there are still young people who have a number of different plans: a care plan, a co-ordinated support plan and a behaviour support plan. It is important that those be pulled together and that people have joint ownership of the single plan.

Marco Biagi: Maybe this is rehashing a question that has already been asked, but why have the national priorities and national plans not been followed through at local level? Is there a problem of silo thinking, is there just slow progress or is there some other factor?

Claire Burns: It is partly a capacity issue for staff who are incredibly busy. For example, teaching staff in a school that has a high number of looked-after children spend a lot of the day just managing some of that.

We need to do more on teachers' confidence and capacity. We must equip them with the language that enables them to assess impacts. Teachers are confident about teaching, but the issues around dealing with looked-after children include how to deal with attachment or trauma and how to make an assessment. If we do not give them those competencies and capacities as part of their training or continuing professional development, it will be difficult for them to feel confident about contributing to the assessment.

Marco Biagi: Continuing professional development is, of course, a local authority issue and local authorities are under as much capacity pressure as everybody else.

Is the current national framework generally reasonably robust and is the problem with implementation?

Claire Burns: Yes. The policy framework is in place and the tools are available in, for example, the ASL legislation, co-ordinated support plans or the child's plan under GIRFEC. It is about ensuring that all staff pull together and that they have the confidence and capacity to contribute to the assessments.

Marco Biagi: The Government wants to introduce a children's services bill in order, as far as I can tell, to put GIRFEC on a firm legislative basis. Could that help to address some of the problems, if only symbolically?

Claire Burns: Yes, it would help symbolically. We have gone so far. A lot of work has been done on corporate parenting responsibilities. Who Cares? Scotland has done a lot of training with elected members, who have said that it has given them a huge amount of information and has advanced their understanding.

The children's services bill must reinforce the fact that looked-after children are the responsibility of everybody within the local authority, and are not just the problem of social work services. If we are to raise the educational attainment of looked-after children and young people, a really good care plan is needed. Teachers also need to understand what it is for children to be looked after and they need to

have in place structures to help them to support that.

The health service must be involved, as well. One of the points that has come through is that there is a huge issue with referrals to child and adolescent mental health services. We will not make a breakthrough unless we have the commitment of people across the board to do that. There is a real issue with meeting the health needs of looked-after children and how that will filter through into better education outcomes.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I was going to come in later, but it seems to be more appropriate to ask my question on the back of Marco Biagi's.

You have sent a fairly clear message that the framework is largely what it needs to be, and that we should focus our efforts on getting implementation right. You also talked about collaboration and capacity issues.

The committee is finishing its consideration of the Scottish Government's budget. Is there a means of assisting that collaboration in order that—either overall or by local authority—the budget is targeted as it should be? You picked the example of FE funding and the problem of the drop-out rate, which has been very much on the committee's agenda. However, whatever the rhetoric about collaboration, is the fact that the budgets are for education, health, social work and so on inhibiting collaboration?

Claire Burns: Yes. That is also due to the restrictions on local authorities pooling budgets and redirecting funding to early intervention and early years. The research tells us that early literacy and early language—and support for those—are pivotal to later education outcomes. Attention needs to be redirected to supporting children who are on the margins of being looked after and those who are vulnerable so that we can make a difference later on. There is evidence that the single most significant thing we can do to impact on education outcomes for looked-after children is to work on getting them into a pattern of early attendance at school.

Liam McArthur: I am sure that colleagues will be putting their heads in their hands if I mention the pupil premium.

You have said that the framework is right and that the issue is about redirecting the budget, or loosening the strings or restrictions on that budget. The Government has an early years fund, which is extremely welcome to all the parties in Parliament but, notwithstanding that, could the budget be targeted more effectively, particularly at the early years?

Claire Burns: Yes. We also need to be clear about evidence-based programmes. The funding will be effective only if we can give local authorities a clear message about what works. CELCIS is very early in its life; it will go hand in hand with our being able to give a clear message about what the research is saying about what works.

Liam McArthur: From the examples, it seems that we are in danger in this area—as in so many others—of pilotitis. We are good at setting things up to build up the evidence base, but we do not follow through. Is that the problem? Should we be trialling other approaches?

Claire Burns: No. One of the reasons why CELCIS exists is that it has been recognised that there are pockets of really good practice. Money that has been given to local authorities before for education outcomes for looked-after children was used very disparately. Some authorities used it in pilot projects and short-term projects.

There is no sharing of good practice and of what is working well, for example among local authorities. It is not just about redirecting money to early years and early intervention; it is also about being clear about what we will do with the money.

The Convener: In response to Mr McArthur, you mentioned restrictions on local authorities' ability to pool and redirect budgets. What did you mean?

10:45

Claire Burns: I just meant that health, education, social care and so on have their budgets and that there might be ways of pooling them to get more funding. For example, disabled young people who come out of a service and go back home find that one of the biggest challenges is the number of different services—and different budgets—that have to be dealt with, which very much adds to the stress of finding another placement. The same is true of young people going from primary to secondary school.

The Convener: Is there a lack of co-ordination between primary and secondary education and between various services?

Claire Burns: Indeed. Again, evidence suggests that points of transition are incredibly stressful for children and their families.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I was interested in your comments about patchy implementation. Do you mean that it is patchy from local authority to local authority?

Claire Burns: Yes. For example, although each looked-after young person has an automatic right to an additional support for learning assessment, provision is patchy in terms of the tools that are

used to do that assessment. There is an assessment of need, but how is it taken forward, who is the lead person and who monitors it? Some local authorities use the assessment as a screening process and as a means of identification, some use it more to implement provision and others say that they have other tools. When there is real variability around how those tools are used, we are not clear about their effectiveness or cannot hold people to account on them.

I am sorry—I am not making myself very clear.

Jenny Marra: Perhaps I can help you. I am not asking you to name them, but are you saying that some local authorities are very good at this and some are not so good?

Claire Burns: I do not know that I would say that. Some local authorities might implement GIRFEC very well, but might not be so good at additional support for learning. Part of the problem is that there is no consistency. Again, we must recognise that for some local authorities the problem is massive. In areas of Glasgow or Edinburgh, the sheer volume of looked-after children and the scale of the risk and vulnerability that they face every day make things very difficult. If you are firefighting all day every day, at some point you need to be able to stand back and reassess the situation. That is a huge issue.

Jenny Marra: That is exactly the point of my question. I am not trying to pinpoint any one council, but I wonder whether the fact that certain local authorities are good at this comes down to their areas of deprivation and the number of looked-after children in their system. In other words, are they good at it because they have to be? Claire Baker asked about areas of best practice. Do you have any examples of best practice in local authorities that could be fed into the paper that you are going to send us?

Claire Burns: I think so. No local authority is going to say, "We're getting all of this right," but there are some good bits in what local authorities are doing. We will set those out in our paper.

LACSIG is trying to find out what is working well and suggesting what should be disseminated. Although that work is not related to education outcomes, it does influence it. As part of a project in East Ayrshire, a much closer relationship has been established between the council's social care and legal departments to deal with children who are moving towards permanence. We have written up that work and are very much encouraging other local authorities to take the same approach. CELCIS is very much about identifying what is working well in local authorities and supporting other local authorities in implementing such measures.

Jenny Marra: Do you think that the balance is right between the responsibilities of stakeholders—schools, health professionals, general practitioners, social workers—and the local authority and then the national Government, as the next tiers? Do all the agencies and stakeholders have appropriate powers, or should there be redistribution of responsibility or power among them? Should the responsibility rest with local authorities?

Claire Burns: Yes. The role of community planning partners is pivotal, because they have the data and the information about what is happening in their local areas. That must be in the commissioning process, because we must be aware of what the population of looked-after children is now and what it will be in the future. Local authorities must hold that responsibility.

Jenny Marra: I have a final quick question. You talked about two key areas; the transition from primary to secondary school, and the early years. I have spoken to primary headteachers who are wringing their hands at the thought of some of their looked-after children leaving the security of the primary school to move on to secondary, because they can see, from years of experience, exactly what will happen to those children. There is a horrible inevitability that, once they leave the security of the primary school, their attainment, their attendance and their security will drop. Have you seen—in Scotland or anywhere else—any examples of best practice that this Government could push through to try to stop that horrible inevitability?

Claire Burns: I have said this before: the role of the designated manager in a school is pivotal. Good preparation is needed for children going from primary school to high school so that the designated manager is aware of each child's needs. That should be communicated to staff early on. Young people have told us that they need teachers to know their issues. There are matters around confidentiality, but young people have said that in one class the teacher knows what their issues are, but in two or three others the teachers do not know. Sometimes teachers feel that they have dealt with something inappropriately, or have said something inappropriate because they did not know.

We have good examples, particularly in foster care and residential childcare where schools have a close relationship with the residential staff. There are examples where the residential staff speak to the school's designated manager every Monday morning—they check in, they know that the children are at school—and every Friday they have another conversation asking what kind of week they have had and what the issues have been. It is about the residential staff doing

homework with children and young people and being aware of what homework needs to be done for the next day. We can give examples of what is working well in residential childcare. We have seen that come to fruition, with educational attainment and attendance of children in residential childcare being much better than it was in the past.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will probe a little further on best practice. Is there a common theme in areas of best practice on how decisions are made? What is making that best practice happen?

Claire Burns: Can you say a bit more on that?

Liz Smith: Yes. You have flagged up that there are examples of best practice. Is there a common theme in the examples? What is making that best practice, in terms of the quality of the decision making?

Claire Burns: Best practice exists where there is a co-ordinated approach. In terms of education outcomes, it happens where there are good relationships between the school and the home environment, or between the school and the foster carers or residential childcare workers.

Liz Smith: Is that down to personalities or to local authority structures?

Claire Burns: It is often about individual relationships with carers and teachers.

Liz Smith: Is that, in turn, down to training?

Claire Burns: Some of it is about individual orientation and some of it is about leadership in schools. Headteachers or deputy headteachers can be very committed to looked-after children.

Liz Smith: Obviously, the voluntary sector can provide excellent support. Are we using the voluntary sector as well as we should?

Claire Burns: The voluntary sector's engagement with parents and carers on how it supports them to get kids up in the morning, to get them to school and to do homework with them is helpful. I have seen an evaluation of the children experiencing domestic abuse recovery—CEDAR—project, which works with women and children who have experienced domestic violence issues. Women are trained and supported to take their children through a process to understand what is happening to them. That has helped attachments between parents and carers, as has going through the process of reading literacy stuff together.

Liz Smith: Are headteachers and designated senior managers fully aware of what voluntary sector help can be provided in their local areas?

Claire Burns: I think that awareness is patchy. Some schools' headteachers and designated senior managers have a better understanding of that than others do.

Liz Smith: Would you like to see that understanding expanded?

Claire Burns: Yes. We can provide additional information on that, if the committee is looking for it.

The Convener: That would be helpful.

Clare Adamson: Claire Burns has already covered many issues that we wanted to cover, but I want to ask specific questions about children who are looked after at home, because the statistics relating to them are so bad. In North Lanarkshire Council, which is my council, there is a housing and social work department and a learning and leisure department. I understand that social workers are more likely to visit homes and provide support. Do they have enough capacity to deal with a child's education at that point, or do they focus on the bigger issues that you have already mentioned, such as poverty and substance abuse?

Claire Burns: Social work staff understand that education is important and that education outcomes will provide people with a better future, so they are absolutely committed to ensuring that education outcomes are part of the scenario. However, there is a huge capacity issue again. Because of the number of children who are looked after at home, the support that a social worker can provide in visits aims to ensure that they are safe and okay. The response from the ADSW says that, because of what social workers are dealing with, there might be visits every fortnight or three weeks. If we are to consider seriously the educational attainment of looked-after children at home, we should realise that much more intense support is needed.

What has been said about the voluntary sector is important. Much more structured support is needed. I think that social workers appreciate that, but I do not think that area team social workers can provide it. Social work assistants have traditionally done that job, but they have recently taken on much more of a case-management role. Therefore, there is a bit of a gulf with respect to the people who can play a traditional social work assistant home-maker role in helping with educational attainment, getting kids to school and getting them to do homework or supporting parents with homework.

The research tells us that looked-after children are predominantly from lone-parent households. We are not really talking about all parents; rather, we are talking about predominantly lone mothers who are poverty managers and for whom there

have often been domestic-violence issues. The traditional role that home makers or social work assistants played is pivotal to the educational attainment of looked-after children at home.

Clare Adamson: I will ask a quick supplementary question about attendance. There has been a lot of coverage recently of hidden exclusions and attendance levels. How confident are you that your figures on attendance reflect what is happening on the ground for looked-after children?

Claire Burns: We are confident about what the figures tell us about the increase in educational attainment and attendance in terms of foster care compared with residential care. However, we are not confident that we are capturing the whole picture, because there is only anecdotal evidence on that. The issue has been raised a number of times in the looked-after children education forum.

A lot of the staff who I work with through LACSIG have raised with me real concerns about the statistics masking the fact that a significant number of looked-after children at home are not on a full-time curriculum or might do only two days a week. The view is that the inspectorate has a real role to play in being much more rigorous about ensuring that children are on a full curriculum.

We recognise that the children can be very challenging and that it might not be safe for them or others if they were in school on a full-time curriculum. However, we must consider other more creative ways of filling their curriculum and ways in which we can record differently the young people's achievements, because they may be involved in different things.

We do not want to minimise our aspirations for the young people; we want them to have the same education outcomes as others. We do not want to set up a two-tier system. However, we need to consider what we can do to record the different achievements of the young people. There is a project just now on how we record the achievement of young carers with regard to some of the real skills that they have.

The attendance aspect is a real concern and is something that we need to know more about, because the official statistics mask the reality.

The Convener: I will finish the questioning with a more general question. The stereotype of looked-after children is the child in a residential home. Is that partly because, as a society, we are reluctant to face up to the fact that is indicated by figures that show that attendance and attainment is worse for looked-after children who are looked after at home? Are people reluctant to point the finger at the difficulty of children who are looked

after at home, as opposed to those who are in residential care?

Claire Burns: The Scottish institute for residential child care has done a lot of work over the past 10 years with residential childcare staff on their development. Pivotal to that was their understanding of the importance of the educational attainment of the children in their care. A lot of work on that has been done with foster carers, too. The childcare staff perceive it as being part of their professional responsibility to prioritise the educational attainment of the children for whom they care. Part of the problem for looked-after children at home is around who advocates for them, as was mentioned earlier. If they were our children and their educational attainment was not going well, we would be up at the school to demand certain things from it. Perhaps looked-after children at home do not have an adult around them who is able or confident enough to monitor and invest in their education in the same way that we would with our children.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We certainly appreciate your time and your evidence this morning, and we look forward to seeing the supplementary evidence that you have agreed to supply.

11:03

Meeting suspended.

11:08

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel of witnesses, who are Sara Lurie, who is director of the Fostering Network Scotland; Bryan Evans, who is assistant director, children and family services at Children 1st; and Phil Barton, who is director of Starley Hall and is representing the Scottish children's services coalition. No doubt you will have heard some of Claire Burns's evidence a few minutes ago. We will move straight into questions because we are trying to cover a lot of issues in a relatively short time.

Joan McAlpine: Thank you all very much for coming. We have heard evidence this morning, and it is a point that comes through very strongly in many of the written submissions, that attainment is lower for children who are looked after at home than it is for children who are looked after in residential care. Can you each address that issue and suggest ways in which we can improve the situation?

Sara Lurie (Fostering Network Scotland): The Fostering Network's primary focus is on foster carers. I should say with regard to the work in Northern Ireland to which I referred in my written

submission that the term “foster carers” includes kinship carers in Northern Ireland, so the latter were involved in that work as well.

One of the key things that children and young people need when they go to school is somebody who believes in them, promotes their interests and believes that they can succeed. For many children who are looked after at home, the problem can be their family's poor experiences of education, uncertainty about what school is, fear of questioning things and fear of the system and what might happen to them.

One of the critical issues for foster care is the need to recruit more carers to address the lack of carers in Scotland and to ensure a better match. If there were sufficient carers, there would obviously be some carers who had no child in placement, because we would want to have those carers ready for the right match. There have been some successful trials and pilots elsewhere that have involved using those foster carers who are skilled in understanding attachment, in working with birth families and in supporting children to return back home, but who are without a placement, as a pool of foster carers who can support looked-after children at home.

Bryan Evans (Children 1st): I would like a more holistic and integrated approach to be taken, with a focus on support for parents, family support and the use of evidence-based parenting approaches. One of the reasons why we do not achieve what we should for looked-after children at home is that the various agencies that are involved with the children have competing priorities. For instance, the social work department's main priority is child protection, the health agency's priority is the child's health and the school's priority is the education of the child. Sometimes those agencies miss some of the other important issues. For example, a school might miss what is going on in the child's home because it is focused on the educational outcome.

If we have good-quality, evidence-based family support, we will be able to target a range of risk factors and a range of negative outcomes for children, including attainment levels. I would like to say a few things about what that sort of family support could provide for children. With regard to increasing parenting capacity, we should be targeting the earliest stage. You are probably aware that there is a lot of evidence about children's brain development at the earliest stages, and how children's brains develop much more fully when they are parented and nurtured correctly. That connects emotional health with cognitive health.

There is a lot of evidence that the educational outcomes of children whose parents interact with them are far greater than those of parents who do

not. At the earliest stages, we need to support the parents in the most vulnerable families to play with their children. There is also a lot of evidence that reading improves the cognitive ability of children at early stages and the attachment of children to their parents.

There is a range of evidence-based interventions that parents can be taught that will generally improve parenting capacity and the educational attainment of children. Those interventions are most effective when targeted at the earliest stages.

On the home learning environment, many of the parenting interventions teach parents about the need to have a positive home learning environment. That is not only about the physical environment—ensuring that there are places where children can do homework, that they have a routine for breakfast and dinner and so on—but about the parent's attitude towards education. The parents of many of the children about whom we are talking did not have a positive educational experience, and they carry that with them. Therefore, their priorities in life are not necessarily attuned to promoting a positive educational experience for children. We need to target those families and improve parents' understanding of the need for their child to achieve at school. The physical environment is important, but so is the psychological environment.

The connection between school and home is important. There is a lot of evidence that, when the home-school link is improved and parents connect with schools, there is a much better outcome for children in education. As I mentioned, the parents of many of the children about whom we are talking did not have a positive educational experience. Many of the parents might also be stigmatised for other reasons, for example, if they have drug or alcohol problems or mental health problems. If they have a lack of confidence and self-esteem, they will not approach the school to talk about their child's requirements. There needs to be a much greater focus on that. There are different ways of doing that, but schools need to take some responsibility for it. They need to be much more aware of parents' connection with school and the requirement for such connections to be established.

In addition, we need to think about how other approaches can be delivered that connect parents with school. For example, one of our services in South Ayrshire is a family support service in which we work with children from zero to 12, which involves delivering parenting support programmes in nursery schools and primary schools. Promoting that approach of connecting parents with school is an important issue.

11:15

Phil Barton (Scottish Children's Services Coalition): You mentioned that educational attainment is better in residential care than it is in families. I agree with everything that my colleagues have said about families and parents needing support, because many of the parents of young people who are looked after have had care experiences and difficulties in school.

What we have to do, which might be more easily achieved—albeit through hard work—in residential provision, is to build relationships with young people, to have skilled staff who understand their task, and to provide boundaries and safety for young people. Learning is important, but it is necessary for them to have a sense of safety and to trust the people around them.

I guess that our biggest task is that, together, we all need to break the cycle that seems to be prevalent of young people who have not managed in school growing up and having families, and their children not managing in school. Instead, we need in some way to help the children of such families to achieve in school and have a positive educational experience. That is a very longitudinal approach, but it is crucial to moving things forward.

Joan McAlpine: I want to pick up on something that you have all raised. In the written evidence, the issue of attachment, and how failure of attachment leads to trauma, comes over very strongly.

Over the past 10 years and more, the emphasis has been on family support and keeping children with their family unit, even if the families concerned face significant challenges. Given what we are seeing on attainment and the evidence that shows that regular interventions with such families often fail, which affects the children's stability and attainment, would it be better for more such children to go into residential homes or foster care, or even to be adopted, at a much earlier stage, to break the cycle in the most challenged families that Mr Barton talked about?

Phil Barton: It is very important that decisions are made on the basis of the needs of young people rather than on the basis of the resources that are available. There is a great deal of evidence that shows that, when young people go through lots of changes, it just adds to the trauma and the difficulties that they face and breaks any progress that they are making. Early decisions need to be needs led rather than resources led. Although it is perhaps reasonable to say that stronger decisions have to be made earlier, the decision to remove a young person from a family is a very difficult one, which should not be made lightly.

Joan McAlpine: Have we got the balance wrong? Has there been too much emphasis on keeping such children at home?

Bryan Evans: There are many vulnerable families that would welcome the support that they require to enable them to keep their children at home, but they do not get that support. It would be very poor decision making to take children away from families that could manage with those children and parent them effectively if they had the support that they need. I agree with Phil Barton that it is necessary to make such decisions on the basis of assessment of families. There will be families where the outcome for the child would be improved by their being taken into foster or residential care, or being adopted.

We also need to be aware that many children will come back to their families. We need to ensure that, when they return, they do not return to the same family that they were removed from, because that would be to do them an injustice. When children have been taken away from their immediate family, we need to ensure that, if they are to be moved back to their family, they are moved back to a family that has more resilience and which can parent them more effectively. Before we take those decisions, we need to make sure that we are offering parents the opportunity to parent their children effectively. That will mean different things in different situations, but that is the general point that I want to make.

Joan McAlpine: Attachment happens right at the very start of life. Realistically, can authorities address a failure of attachment?

Bryan Evans: That is one of the issues that were highlighted in the Children in Scotland submission. We need to start planning for children pre-birth in many instances. When we are aware of the difficulties that parents have, there are opportunities to provide them with support at the earliest possible stage. The role of midwives, health visitors and family support projects in that is substantial.

Another important issue is timescales. Timescales for parents at that stage can be much longer, but timescales for children are very short. Sometimes parents think that they have a lot of time to recover from a problem, but the time for the child is very short. There is a difficulty in balancing those requirements. Our view is that we need to make a decision based on the best outcome for the child, but we also need to make sure that we are providing the required support for parents so that they can parent effectively.

Joan McAlpine: Is there more of a role for fostering in relation to the failure of attachment?

Sara Lurie: Certainly, the quality of the relationship between a foster carer and a child can

significantly impact on the child's outcomes in later life—we hear that repeatedly. I agree with my colleagues that there has to be a robust assessment of what an individual child needs before they are removed from their home. However, children can be removed and successfully returned home with additional support. One of the other issues is that, when a very young child or a baby is removed, contact with their parents can be meaningful for them. Too often, contact takes place in a contact centre where there are broken toys and nothing for a mum to do; she is being assessed on how she interacts with her baby when there is nothing to use to interact with them. Foster carers can be a very positive role model to show how to play with a child, how to bathe a child, how to read a story and how to get positive rapport and communication. Children can then return home successfully. Many children are in permanent foster care but have very positive relationships with their birth families because the situation in which their families cannot care for them, however much they might love them, is well managed. There is a balance. It is a matter of assessing individual need. I would hate to think that a blanket decision was being made, because families do change. As Bryan Evans said, children do not have the same amount of time to wait.

Liam McArthur: Clearly, there are no easy decisions at all, but are there instances where the complexity of the support that would have to be put in place to keep the child in the parental home is such that the decision is taken to remove the child, even though a structure could be put in place to support them staying in the parental home? We have heard about the outcomes for and attainment of looked-after children at home compared with those in residential or foster care. Attainment might improve if you were to take a child into residential or foster care but, for the reasons that you have suggested, you do that only when you really have to. What calculation of all that is done when deciding whether to keep the child with his or her parents? Is a measurable calculation done, or are decisions taken on such a case-by-case basis that that question is unanswerable?

Phil Barton: I do not think that one could apply a particular formula to that. In my experience—I am sure that this is the experience of my colleagues—the decision is often very subjective. There is not a long time to plan or decide if a young person should be taken into care in a child protection situation, or when the social work department gets a call on Friday afternoon because there is no one to look after a child, or when something happens in a school, or whatever. It is difficult to have a specific plan.

However, steps are already being taken under the GIRFEC agenda and assessment.

If we take a wider view of what is available in Scotland, every local authority and body that works with children should sign up to the GIRFEC agenda. There would then be a more consistent way of evaluating what is happening for young people than we have at the moment. Some people opt in and some opt out. It can be confusing for professionals, let alone parents, when different authorities have different ways of assessing and reporting on aspects of life in families or the performance of a young person.

Liam McArthur: We have heard from both panels about the importance of collaboration. If we had better and more effective collaboration, would that allow more children to remain at home with their parents with the requisite amount of support? Is that not your argument?

Phil Barton: It is more likely that we would evaluate the need of a young person better and then, with a range of resources, make a better decision about where that young person should be placed or what support they should have. Placement breakdown and continual changes of placement seem to be directly related to levels of educational attainment. It is important to make good early decisions about what is appropriate placement, and for that we need good information, good assessment and consistency, particularly because some of the families that we work with move around quite a lot, often from local authority to local authority, and the process starts all over again.

Sara Lurie: The statistics on consistency, placement breakdowns and subsequent moves are quite stark. The more moves a child goes through, the poorer their attainment, which makes perfect sense if you think about it.

One of the structural issues that need to be considered alongside good assessments is about where the foster carers are going to be. There is a significant shortage of foster carers so, for example, children from Aberdeen have been placed in Dumfries. The likelihood of those children successfully returning home or moving schools and going back will decrease with each month they are away. Friendships are built up, and so on. Part of the solution is therefore the structural change of increasing the number of foster carers who are available. Also, many foster care households have four, five or six unrelated children. Imagine the experience of a child in such households. Those are some of the major structural things that we need to change if we are to improve outcomes for children in foster care. Scotland is the only one of the four nations that does not have a limit to the number of unrelated children living a household, so a foster carer could

be trying to do bedtime or homework routines for six or seven unrelated children. We can imagine how difficult that experience could be for a child.

The other structural issue that needs to be addressed is the fact that many 16-year-olds who are supposed to be attending school and thinking about what they are going to do next will instead be going into their standard grade exams not knowing where they will be living next month and where they will be going home to, because the system is such that they will need to move on. Until we address the fact that a young person cannot remain in care post-18, that will present a continual difficulty to a young person's sense of where they are going to establish themselves and with what support.

Bryan Evans: In relation to Liam McArthur's question, there are some fairly robust assessment tools that can be used to assess parenting capacity and help people to decide whether parents can successfully care for their children, so that might help. The other thing that was mentioned was co-ordination of support. GIRFEC gives us a framework in which to do that, such as using a lead professional or a named person. One issue is the varied implementation of that approach that you will see around the country. In places where it is not being implemented, it can be much more difficult, although not impossible, to co-ordinate the support. Obviously, as local authorities and health services are undergoing change, this is a time at which those fractures are most obvious.

11:30

Claire Baker: My question has two parts and is about how education professionals engage with the family. As we have identified this morning, there are different ways in which a child can be placed—with a member of their family, with a kinship carer or with foster carers. Bryan Evans talked about nurseries in his authority area, but I do not know how widespread it is to see that level of engagement between nurseries and carers. Do you find that there are differences in approach on the part of schools and nurseries on issues such as absenteeism, which has been identified as being particularly problematic for some groups of children? When a school is dealing with a grandparent, does it take a different approach?

One size does not fit all, so we need different methods when we are trying to support parents and carers. Are there particular challenges in that respect? If a kinship carer is a grandparent, do we need to consider a variety of ways in which to engage with them? For example, in comparison with when there is a parent at home, are there particular challenges for older carers when it comes to homework and so on?

Bryan Evans: You have mentioned a few points that I would be interested in responding to. You will be aware that we have a national service that works with kinship carers. Many of them bring up issues to do with the need for support as they interact with schools. You can imagine some of the issues that there might be for them. The age difference and the amount of time that has passed since they were at school will be greater than they would be if the child was living with their parents. There are also other issues to do with the stigma that there can be and grandparents' confidence about approaching schools.

You also mentioned the different attitudes of schools and nurseries to absenteeism. There is a substantial difference in the approaches to absenteeism. In some areas in Glasgow where I have worked, schools will record a problem with absenteeism when the child is absent for 65 per cent or more of the time. In other areas of Glasgow, they would approach families at a much earlier stage. There is a threshold that needs to be reached depending on what is going on at the school. I was shocked when I heard the idea of not approaching families until the absenteeism rate reached 65 per cent. That is staggering, but that is the level of need in some areas of Glasgow. I imagine that that might be replicated in some other local authority areas.

It is not just about local authorities but about the attitude of headteachers or heads of nurseries. It is also about the competence and confidence of staff in those places. Imagine, for example, asking a private nursery school to think about talking to vulnerable parents about their needs. Is it in the school's interest to speak to a parent who smells of alcohol when they bring their child to nursery in the morning about accessing a local voluntary sector support group? Even public sector nurseries might think that that is not their responsibility, and staff at private schools will think, "Well, it's not my job." The task for all of us is to develop confidence among members of the workforce so that they can do that and to develop their ownership so that they think that it is their responsibility to do it. We should ensure that they are thinking about the longer-term outcomes for the child. That is a big task, but we need to talk about it.

Finally, I want to talk about engagement with families. You mentioned kinship carers and all those issues have the potential to be exacerbated. We need to generate much more responsibility in nurseries and schools for identifying families with greater needs and doing something about them. The identification is one stage, but we need to move away from identification to engagement so that schools and nurseries engage proactively with families where there are vulnerabilities. Promoting that engagement, as we know, promotes the

achievement of greater educational outcomes for children.

The Convener: I am keen that we try to get through as much as possible this morning. If you agree with what has been said, that is fine and you can just say so, but if there is something specific that you want to add, please do not feel inhibited.

Phil Barton: Bryan Evans's point that all the resources that are involved must work in partnership is the crucial one. This should not be about separateness and different agendas. Young people and families should be at the centre. If that is the case, people will be able to pull together far more than happens at present.

Sara Lurie: As part of the fostering achievement project that I mentioned, which also supports kinship carers, there are local development workers who will go to the school with the foster carer or kinship carer and act as an advocate. That is important because many carers have not had experience of going into a school and requesting support, knowing what support is available or understanding the system. We will make the appointments, go to the school with the foster carer or kinship carer and act as their development worker.

The comments that have come back suggest that, because the development worker is not part of social work or the school, the carer does not feel that they are being judged as part of an assessment process to determine what will happen. In some ways, the approach takes down the barrier, because someone goes along as an advocate with the particular remit of sourcing additional support. As part of that, they can help to set up other resources in the home, whether it be tutoring, sports or music equipment, or lessons in music, karate or ju-jitsu. That can help the child to feel that something is happening and make the child feel good about him or herself while also engaging the child and the carer with the school.

Clare Adamson: I want to home in on the role of social work. Claire Burns said that social workers are constantly firefighting. Are educational outcomes and learning support requirements fundamental parts of the care plan, or are they seen as aspirational extras?

Phil Barton: Recent legislation seeks to make education integral to care planning, but the picture is patchy. Some local authorities work hard at doing that but, in others, education is very much an afterthought. Some education departments barely manage even to contribute to discussion and they certainly do not make any strong decisions. The fact that there is a mixed picture is a critical issue and those cases must be addressed so that there is consistency.

Bryan Evans: I echo that. Clare Adamson asked about social work but, to look at the matter the other way round, I think that the focus of education is also an issue.

I talk to people throughout the country who work more closely in the field, and one of the comments that they make is that schools seem to have moved away from additional support for learning to the curriculum for excellence. The two things are not mutually exclusive, but the point is made that people have a range of priorities in front of them and they have to choose. If we have 10 priorities, we have no priorities. The priorities that have been chosen tend to be the ones around the curriculum for excellence, and implementation of additional support for learning is patchy. That is a place in which education and social work could connect with each other, but it is not happening as well as it could.

There has been a change in social work in that, as Phil Barton said, more and more social workers are aware of the importance of education to children, but there are questions about their role in that. We talked earlier about the need for family support, and there is an important role for family support in connecting all these things together, supporting parents and children and connecting them with the school environment.

Sara Lurie: I echo what my colleagues have said. The situation is patchy and there is work to be done with social workers on their aspirations for looked-after children. That patchiness might have to do with social workers sometimes having a lack of understanding of the school situation, the key stages, the legislation and how to access educational resources.

Marco Biagi: I apologise for having to run out of the meeting twice now to blow my nose. I might have to do it again, but I will spare you the gory details.

The submissions that we have received tend to highlight successful projects, on issues such as attendance or reading with children, that are seen to have a positive outcome. Is there a problem with that project-based approach, which seems to be spread across the sector? Is it better to have good practice embedded in the general day-to-day activities or is there a positive benefit from having specific focused projects? I am interested in your views on that.

Bryan Evans: I absolutely agree that it is daft to have one project that promotes reading, another that promotes play, another that promotes a connection between home and school and another that promotes attachment. That is ludicrous. We need to integrate the learning that we have and deliver a much more holistic service for children and their families. That is why I have been trying

to promote a much wider family support approach that uses that learning. A range of well-evidenced parenting approaches exists that can be used to support that. For instance, one of the incredible years programmes is about getting a child school ready. That is not new stuff; it has been around for a while and has a good evidence base. Other learning about reading and play fits very much with those approaches. I agree that we do not need much more of the atomised approach.

Phil Barton: Projects can advise people and it is often useful to have a project to give evidence that an approach is successful and could be used more broadly. However, one problem with specific projects is that they come to an end and then often the benefits disappear. Integrating approaches across a whole authority and incorporating all the services that are involved, whether they are in the third sector or the independent sector, is crucial to developing more consistency and better outcomes for young people.

Marco Biagi: That pre-empts two of my questions, which were about sustainability and whether the project-based approach gets in the way of linkages, which are so important. Do you agree that there has been a great dependency on the project-based approach? If so, why is that, given that none of you seems to have a great deal of time for that approach?

Sara Lurie: One issue about the project-based approach is to do with sustainability. When something is embedded and is no longer a project but a way of working, that changes the focus. It is no longer a project that came and went; it is a different way of working and thinking. With several projects, whether on reading, maths or sports, much of the success has to do with the engagement and the time that is spent. Some of that time is spent tutoring, but is it the tutoring that made the difference or the quality of the relationship with that individual and having somebody who believes that a child can succeed? Part of the benefit is the cultural shift that sometimes happens as a result of those projects. However, the sustainability issue needs to be addressed. I am not saying that it is wrong to have projects, as there are some excellent ones, but they need to be embedded in practice holistically.

Phil Barton: One problem with projects is that they tend to be seen as a local solution or a solution to a particular issue. In recent times, a number of bodies have recognised that authorities and the Government need to take a bigger view and commission services on a wider scale. Projects tend to mean local solutions. They may well become embedded, but they live in the locality and then end. We have to take a wider view of commissioning. Authorities have to

consider the needs of young people in their area on a wider basis rather than just a local basis.

11:45

Marco Biagi: Are there any non-financial obstacles to that jump from project to embedded practice? It goes without saying that there are financial obstacles.

Sara Lurie: It is that cultural shift—a different way of thinking.

Liz Smith: In the previous evidence session, it was pointed out to us that we are pretty good at analysing the problems but perhaps not always as good at measuring the outcomes. Are there good qualitative measures of the effectiveness of indirect benefits for parents and carers, for example help with looking after the finances of the household and with parenting and so on?

Bryan Evans: Yes, and they have been around for quite a while. The Department of Health's guidance came out in about 1994. There are about seven or eight measurement tools that can be used.

One of the tools that is perhaps most relevant to what you are talking about is the parenting daily hassles tool. It is a standardised measure of the sort of problems that parents have and how severe those problems are. For instance, in one of our family support projects in South Ayrshire we use that measure when we start working with the family, do the same measurement three months later and then do it again towards the end of our work to ensure that we have made a difference. There are lots of fairly well-known tools to measure the difference in families' parenting capacity and improvements in children. The strengths and difficulties questionnaire is another commonly used tool that was in that Department of Health guidance.

Liz Smith: Are there clear instances in which that qualitative evidence points to improvements and better practice? How can such good practice be transferred to areas where such improvements are needed?

Bryan Evans: There is lots of evidence of that. In the example that I have given, the service has been running for eight years and we have been using the measurement tool for most of that time. It is clear that the service has made a substantial difference.

In response to Marco Biagi's question, I was going to talk about what stops us replicating good practice. One example of something that is not necessarily financially driven is the tendering and procurement regulations. Local authorities are required to tender for services reasonably

regularly, depending on how much the service costs.

Let us say that a local authority has a service in its area that it thinks is fantastic, and there is good evidence that that service works well. We ask that local authority why another local authority did not ask for that service in its area. The answer is that it cannot do that. The local authority needs to put the contract out to tender. The people who win the tender are those who write the best submissions and do the best interviews; they are not necessarily the people who deliver the best services. The people who win the tender can be those who deliver the best services, but that is not what is being judged. What is being judged is whether someone can write a great answer to the question in 300 words and then, if they are selected for interview, convincingly describe their service. Sometimes those things match—they are not mutually exclusive. However, we are not saying, “There’s a really good service in South Ayrshire. Why don’t we ask those people to deliver that service in North Ayrshire or even get somebody else to come in?”, or “Why don’t we deliver the same type of service in North Ayrshire?”

Liz Smith: You would reform the procurement process.

Bryan Evans: There are many reasons why I would want to reform the procurement process. It is a huge waste of energy in the voluntary sector when five, six or seven people are competing to win the same tender.

In Glasgow recently, a tender was issued for a very narrow piece of work in supporting vulnerable families on particular health outcomes. It was worth £35,000 a year. The process leads local authorities and health boards to design tenders that focus on very small pieces of work. It leads to the non-integration of work and to people doing exactly what we do not want them to do.

Liz Smith: What would you put in its place?

Bryan Evans: I would need a long time to think about that. I suppose that I would want a fair process that delivered positive outcomes. You would certainly need to design something that took account of the positive evidence generated by people working at the coalface.

For example, there could be selective competition in which local authorities would be allowed to think about who has delivered services similar to what they want in the best way. I would also want local authorities and health boards to think a bit more about joining up and integrating some of their work; after all, we do not want local authorities having to tender for very small pieces of work year after year. They should be thinking about how to develop a much more holistic and

integrated approach to tendering. Claire Burns could say a bit more about this, but we should also look at LACSIG’s work in promoting best practice in procurement, as part of which agencies get involved much earlier in designing tenders.

Phil Barton: I realise that we have moved on from the first question, which was about outcomes, but I note that last year the Christie commission and Audit Scotland made very strong statements about the need to think not only of the voluntary and private sectors when we think about tendering and procurement. Local authority services should be embraced in some way, too. Of course they are not exactly the same, but instead of separating local authorities from the third sector and the independent sector we should join them, because there are things that we all could learn about the cost of services and so on.

The Convener: That was helpful.

Liam McArthur: In his initial remarks, Bryan Evans reiterated the importance and centrality of early years—even pre-birth—in determining some later outcomes and attainment levels. What aspects of early intervention are working at the moment? If there were more directed or joined-up and collaborative support, could there be a real shift in efforts to avoid having this number of children becoming looked after in their homes or in residential, kinship or foster care?

Bryan Evans: One particular focus of work has been vulnerable pregnancies and support for the parents and families in question. A range of risk factors has to be considered. The women might have substance misuse issues; they might have other substantial vulnerabilities such as learning difficulties or mental health issues; and, in some cases, domestic violence might be involved. The best work happens where there is substantial collaboration; where there are community midwives, health visitors and so on; and where there is a recognition that parents might be vulnerable, for example, to stigma and that there is a need for access to very good ante- and post-natal support. It is all about ensuring that parents who might be quite resistant to using the normal health service are supported in accessing health services at the earliest possible stage.

Co-ordinated support is required to take account of other specialist services such as addiction services. Any approach must ensure that a parent with an alcohol addiction who becomes pregnant is connected with community midwives and other specialist support; after all, alcohol has a substantial impact on a foetus. The same approach should be taken with parents with addiction issues.

A range of services exists. We manage services in Fraserburgh and North Ayrshire and I am aware

of excellent practice by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, which runs a special needs pregnancy service. There is lots of good practice whereby families are supported at the earliest possible stage, to try to make very good decisions for their children. Sometimes, that means that children cannot stay with their parents. However, where possible, parents are supported to ensure that children can stay at home. Parents are supported to stop using alcohol or drugs—usage is reduced in stages and safe substitutes can be put in place.

There are good examples of post-birth work with vulnerable families to promote some of the measures that I have talked about on play, reading with children and positive attachment. Some of our work that I have talked about provides examples of that.

Liam McArthur: Marco Biagi mentioned financial obstacles, which we all acknowledge. I think that you were here for the previous evidence session, in which Claire Burns suggested that the funding that is available in several areas is not being pooled in the most effective way for the early years. Do you share that view? Would you like to make observations on how that might be done better?

Bryan Evans: Some people who work in early years services understand the connections between the issues, which are sometimes seen as a social work problem or an addiction problem. Funds are allocated to adult health services for addictions. Funds for early years services might be held by a local authority education department or might be given to health services. Sometimes, those funds are not joined up.

The arrangements work best when people understand that outcomes for children are achieved best when budgets are pooled. I have examples of where that does not happen very well, unfortunately. However, in South Ayrshire, the early years fund has given money to a family support service that is funded through the local authority education department and which also generates positive health outcomes. Budgets can be pooled in a way that makes complete sense.

Liam McArthur: It would be useful to have examples of where pooled budgets are working and possibly of where they are not working quite so well. It is generally accepted that such preventative spend has a significant payback in several areas.

It would be interesting to know your estimate of timescales. It is easy to talk about spending to save but, in tight financial times, committing additional resource for a payback that will be in the offing in five or 10 years or beyond is a difficult political decision.

Can you make observations about the additional funding that has been targeted on the early years? What impact do you expect that to make? Are we talking about the right magnitude of funding that is required for early years?

Bryan Evans: I cannot give figures off the top of my head, but some evidence has shown that the payback with the most vulnerable families can be very quick—I have read that information and I can source it and direct the committee to it. The impact depends on a family's vulnerability, but when resources are targeted at the earliest stage on the most vulnerable families, the payback can be very quick.

The cost of accommodating a child can be anything from £1,500 to £2,500 a week—that depends on where they are accommodated. If we set that cost against looking after a child well in their own family, we can think about savings at the earliest stage.

I have seen figures, which I can source and send to the committee.

Claire Baker: The submission from the Scottish children's services coalition, which Phil Barton represents, talks about "full joint budgeting". Liam McArthur talked about the spending review and the implication that there is a drive towards more preventative spend. I ask Phil Barton to say a bit more about that and what impact residential third sector or private providers may have on the kinds of problems that we are discussing.

The submission also says that the coalition recognises the huge increase in numbers of looked-after children and that,

"Placed against a backdrop of cuts to Local and Scottish Government budgets there is a very real danger that services will not be able to keep pace with demand."

Do the steps that are being taken on that at the moment allay those concerns or does the coalition still have them?

12:00

Phil Barton: The coalition includes representatives from the third sector and advocacy groups, so it considers young people's services from not only a provider's point of view, but a number of angles.

Our view is not that residential care and other interventions of that type are expensive. The most cost-effective solution may well not be from the local authority but from another provider. However, it is important that everybody works together at an earlier point and that there are no territorial divides between services. The more seamless that the service can be and the more that people can work together, the more costs will be saved.

Placement breakdown is one of the major costs involved and one of the major areas in which money can be saved. Each placement breakdown not only costs more money, but leads to more difficulties for the young people and everybody around them.

I cannot provide any reassurance that people are working together at that stage at the moment. The more that everybody works together and aims to provide services from the point that Bryan Evans talked about, however, the fewer young people will need to be in care, and when residential care or a similar service is needed, local authorities will be able to use a wider range of resources rather than a last-resort residential resource. For example, they would be able to use an independent resource or a third sector resource.

Sara Lurie: LACSIG's commissioning hub is about to embark on a piece of work—the Loughborough study—that measures the long-term save as well as the short-term save in terms of outcomes. That is in its early stages. Comparable studies have been done in England, but LACSIG has agreed that that will be the next piece of work that it undertakes in the next year.

The Convener: I am aware of the time, but I want to get in questions on another couple of areas.

Jean Urquhart: I will ask about getting the balance right between national aspiration or commitment and local discretion. GIRFEC has been referred to a few times. Claire Burns talked about places where it was not heard of, picked up or developed at all and others where it worked really well. Bryan Evans talked about absenteeism from school and approaches that were acceptable in one area but clearly unacceptable in another. What observations do the witnesses have on that? How do we address those issues?

Bryan Evans: One of the issues is that substantial levels of deprivation have an impact on not only the thresholds for access to services, but perceptions of what is a problem and how substantial a problem is. That is about capacity. If capacity is fixed but the need is substantially greater, people tend to focus on the greatest need. In areas where there is huge need, the capacity will be focused on a much smaller group of children who are in the greatest need. One can understand why that happens.

The issue for us is to ensure that the areas of greatest deprivation get the greatest resource, so that they can meet those needs. I imagine that that sometimes happens, but I am sure that there are other occasions when it does not. When there is greatest need there are a lot of other things that happen as well and it challenges the

implementation of the getting it right agenda. For example, in one area of north Glasgow where I tried to set up a service to target families with substance misuse problems at an earlier stage, it was very difficult to get health visitors, schools or nurseries to identify families with problems at an early stage, because their focus was so much on families where the problems were substantial. Trying to generate an earlier intervention approach was very difficult. People were struggling so much to target their resources at the greatest need that it was very difficult for them to implement a getting it right approach and ensure that all children got the services they needed when they needed them.

There are some real challenges for us, particularly with the budget constraints that we now have. It works best when you have very strong leadership and people understand that, for instance, a whole school can have a culture that targets children with greatest need and that that approach means that all children benefit. There are examples where the culture and ethos of a school and its teaching staff is to care for its children and to understand that all children work best when they are happy and when their emotional needs are met. A whole-school approach that addresses children's emotional health will mean that their learning will be better and when that culture is communicated through all the staff in a school, you will get those benefits. Similarly, when the school looks outwards towards the families of children in the community, you will get a greater benefit for the children who attend that school when its approach includes all the families that send their children to the school, including kinship carers and parents with other problems.

Has that gone some way towards answering your question?

Jean Urquhart: Well, it answers another question. It is complex, I understand that.

The Scottish index of multiple deprivation is used to assess greatest need. Those of us in rural areas have an issue with that, because the criteria are quite different and could lead to people not seeing the deprivation that we have in rural areas. There are more people in urban areas, so those are the overriding criteria generally used, but they do not fit rural areas.

The Convener: I do not want to get into the argument about rural versus urban on the index of multiple deprivation, but if the panellists have a quick response on that question, I am happy for them to give it.

Phil Barton: You asked about the balance between local and national. There are broad areas of agreement when you talk to people around the country, but there does seem to be a

disconnection between what some local authorities are doing and what central Government is saying. A strong lead from central Government on some of these key policy areas, so that there is more consistency across local authorities, could well lead to more consistency and joined-up thinking around the country.

The Convener: Ms Lurie, do you want to add to that?

Sara Lurie: I agree completely with Phil Barton. A lead from central Government might be required to encourage some uniformity of the highest standard.

Jenny Marra: I will be quick, convener. I realise that the witnesses have been here for a while. I have two questions. First, should there be a strategy to improve attainment for children who are on the threshold of being looked after? Secondly, does the support that looked-after children currently get impact on their attainment or is it more focused on keeping their lives on an even keel?

Sara Lurie: The support that looked-after children get is patchy. It will often depend on the quality of the relationship with the social worker. One of the tensions is often that the child's social worker and the parent's social worker is the same person. In many situations, that is absolutely fine and is how it should be, but if a child is no longer living at home and it is decided that, for particular reasons, they might not return home, there can be a tension for the social worker with that dual role in trying to meet the different needs. Often, there are competing needs, so the tension is around keeping everybody pleased, although difficult and painful decisions might have to be made.

What was your first question?

Jenny Marra: Should there be a strategy to improve attainment for children who are on the threshold of being looked after?

Sara Lurie: Yes. They should look at improving the attainment of any child who is not achieving what they could.

Phil Barton: Attainment is interesting. We tend to focus on educational attainment for young people and looked-after young people, but there should be some redefining of achievement and attainment for young people in general and specifically for looked-after young people. At a recent reunion in the service that we offer, the young people who came back were not talking about standard grades or successes that they might have had many years ago; they referred to the feeling of safety, the quality of relationships that they built up and the vocations and interests that they developed. For example, many of them who had had work experience in a local garage

became mechanics, and they did not talk about standard grades and academic success, which we tend to have a major focus on. The idea of attainment must be widened.

Bryan Evans: I want to support that last point. I said at the start that the issue is about the integration of agendas. The things that support children in avoiding the negative outcome of poor educational attainment will also support them in avoiding a lot of other negative outcomes, such as youth crime, teenage pregnancy or poor emotional health. For all such issues, we need to think about integrating our strategies instead of having very focused strategies that can lead people to generate much more atomised approaches.

The Convener: I thank all the witnesses on behalf of the committee. Your evidence has been very helpful. If you have any additional evidence that you think would assist us, we would be most grateful if you could submit it to us in writing.

Meeting closed at 12:13.

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