

AUDIT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 28 October 2003
(*Morning*)

Session 2

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AUDIT COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2003, Session 2

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab)

*Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)

*Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green)

*Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)

*George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green)

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Mr Robert Black (Auditor General for Scotland)

David Pia (Audit Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Shelagh McKinlay

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Joanna Hardy

ASSISTANT CLERK

Christine Lambourne

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Audit Committee

Tuesday 28 October 2003

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:36*]

Items in Private

The Convener (Mr Brian Monteith): Good morning. I welcome everyone to this meeting of the Audit Committee and apologise for the slight delay in starting the meeting. We have received no formal apologies: Robin Harper was here, but he has had to run off again because he has forgotten some papers. As usual, I ask members to switch off their mobile phones and pagers. I also welcome to the meeting Christine Lambourne, the committee's new assistant clerk. I should point out that although there are only three items on the agenda, it might not be a short meeting.

The first item is to consider whether to take in private agenda item 3, which concerns our draft report on individual learning accounts. It is normal practice to take such items in private and I seek the committee's agreement to do so. Are members agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Moreover, on 11 November, we will take evidence from Roger McClure from the Scottish Further Education Funding Council and Graham Donaldson from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education on the Auditor General's report on SFEFC. I seek the committee's agreement to take in private our discussion of lines of questioning at that meeting. Are members agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

"Dealing with offending by young people"

10:38

The Convener: The second item on the agenda concerns the report "Dealing with offending by young people". Members will be aware that we wrote to the Scottish Executive to seek clarification on a number of points. Now that we have received a further response from the Executive, I invite members' comments or observations about it.

Margaret Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): Although some of the information in the response is very helpful, I require clarification of the phrase "indirect evidence" in the Executive's response to the committee's first question. After all, the Executive goes on to mention "mapping returns". Either that is evidence or it is not.

Secondly, the committee had recommended that inspections should be multidisciplinary. In its response to our second question, the Executive says:

"A multidisciplinary approach will be considered".

My question is whether the Executive is going to accept our recommendation or not.

As for the response to the committee's third question, it appears that the Executive is somewhat lacking when it comes to following up correspondence. For example, in the final two paragraphs of that particular section, it indicates that it wrote to the children and families subcommittee of the Association of Directors of Social Work in June and then says:

"To date, we have not had a response."

However, the Executive does not indicate whether it has chased the subcommittee up or anything else. It appears that it is leaving it up to other organisations to pursue the matter.

The Convener: Indeed, so good was that answer, the Executive has given it twice in its letter.

Margaret Jamieson: The third paragraph of the response to our fourth question mentions a "fast tracking scheme" for social workers. However, the Executive provides only the number of fully qualified workers that it expects to emerge from that scheme in 2005; it does not give us the expected numbers for 2006 or 2007, which I understand form part of the financial package.

Furthermore, the figures in the final paragraph of the second page of the response do not appear to add up. For example, the Executive says that a

staffing census carried out on 7 October 2002 showed that staff numbers were up 5 per cent on 2001. However, later in that paragraph, it indicates that the final figure for that increase is 3.7 per cent. As a result, the figure is either 5 or 3.7 per cent.

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): I agree with many of Margaret Jamieson's comments. I was intrigued by the fact that the report appears to predate Susan O'Brien's comments on the Caleb Ness case. Although I appreciate that those comments relate to a specific matter in a specific local authority social work department, they have national implications. Given that the Executive is rather hands-off in its approach on such matters and leaves them to individual local authorities, I wonder whether it will take cognisance of Susan O'Brien's views and any effect that they will have. Clearly, everything in the garden is not rosy in the city of Edinburgh, and such a situation impacts on staff recruitment, morale and retention. Will the Executive factor that into its approach to these matters? Moreover, will it deal with this situation or does it intend to leave it as an Edinburgh issue? I think that it is a policy issue that transcends local authorities.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): I want to pick up on Margaret Jamieson's comments about a multidisciplinary approach. Our fifth question to the Executive asked for a

"description of the respective responsibilities of the Education and Justice Departments".

Perhaps it is the way in which it has been worded, but the Executive's response does not seem to set out a multidisciplinary approach. Although it outlines the different departments' responsibilities, I am not clear about which department leads on a matter or has an overview of everything and how the approach works in practice. Perhaps we simply need to ask the Executive about that. Is it just me, or do any other members find that response a bit vague?

The Convener: I have to say that I found the response fairly woolly throughout. There are a number of other sentences that seem to be woolly. Would members like to make any other points before we invite the Auditor General's team to comment?

10:45

Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): On question 4, I share concerns about the need to take cognisance of the experience not only of the Caleb Ness case but of the report and of the wider debate that has ensued and which will no doubt continue. That has a bearing on a number of aspects of the report, and the issue that has come under the spotlight once

again is that of recruitment and retention. I am sure that that case and the response to it will in turn impact further on that area, and not necessarily for the better.

My concern in relation to the Executive's response is that, as in many debates about many parts of the public service, people tend to talk about the two sides of the coin—staff numbers and demands on staff—without necessarily making the connection between the two. The Executive's answer to question 4 is a case in point. There are a lot of data in the response, many of which are interesting and encouraging, about increases in the recruitment of social workers. However, the last paragraph also states:

"The Executive has an extensive programme of work in relation to children, in which social work has a crucial role".

A number of aspects of social work are then listed. The demands placed on social work services with those responsibilities are significant, and that connection is not made. I do not think that we can just look at bald numbers and then, with a positive tone, tag on all those extra things that are happening. I am not saying that they should not happen, but something in the middle is missing—an incisive and revealing assessment of what that means in practical terms for a service that is under a lot of pressure and now, more than ever, under a lot of scrutiny.

The Convener: If I understand you correctly, your concern is that, as in effect the work load is increasing, the complement needs to be increased to match the work load in any case, rather than that there is a need simply to address a shortfall in complement itself.

Susan Deacon: Yes. The only caveat that I would add to your helpful summary is that we should not always just talk about more, more, more, on either side of the equation. When I read things like that, I get frustrated, because I do not think that they drill down into some of the more challenging, but potentially more productive, areas of discussion about how, in everybody's interest, we can enable that service and those professionals to carry out their task effectively.

Rhona Brankin: On a point of clarification, who is the social work services inspectorate answerable to?

The Convener: We shall have to check that with the Auditor General's team.

David Pia (Audit Scotland): It is part of the Scottish Executive Education Department. The chief inspector reports to the head of the Education Department.

Rhona Brankin: That is what I thought. I just wondered why the response did not mention the Education Department.

The Convener: At this stage, it would be useful to have some comments from the Auditor General's team before we try to work out where we go next with the response.

Mr Robert Black (Auditor General for Scotland): I would like to make one or two points that might be helpful. First, we should remind ourselves of the context in which the response has been written, as there is a huge amount of development activity going on in the service at the moment. The imperfect nature of the response reflects the fact that so much work is on-going and that the delivery will be in the future rather than now. The report is useful in that it provides some pointers on matters that we might usefully follow up in a subsequent audit. As members of the committee will remember, we are going to revisit the progress in that complex area in quite a fundamental way in two or three years' time. The report is a useful starting point for that.

There are a number of areas in which further work needs to be undertaken. For example, much more needs to be done on staff numbers. In a sense, the report acknowledges that the Executive is working on improved systems to collect returns from local authorities on staffing levels. Susan Deacon said that staff numbers are but one part of the picture and that we need to relate that to future work loads. In looking at the future work programme, we are considering the whole area of forward staff planning for key services. It is helpful to hear the committee expressing the view that it is concerned not only about staff numbers but about pressures on staff. That is something that we can take on board when we come back to consider the service in future, so it is helpful to have that guidance on future work.

On 6 November, we will publish a report that follows up on parts of the response, particularly in relation to what is happening in local authorities. If I may, I shall invite my colleague to say more about that.

David Pia: Next week, we will publish a report that follows up some critical aspects of the system that were identified in the main study published last December. The report will cover some aspects of the supervision of children who have been offending, the submission of reports by the police and social work services to the reporter and the organisation and impact of the youth justice teams, which are the co-ordinating bodies to which the Executive has given quite a major role.

That initial follow-up report was done to look into progress across the whole of Scotland. At the time of our main study, we found particular difficulties in identifying aspects of risk in the areas that we sampled. It will interest the committee to study that report, which has material about the provision of services to children under supervision that is

relevant both to the issues raised by the Caleb Ness case and also to some of the points about staffing that the Executive has made in its response.

One aspect that we identified in our main study, and which we have picked up on in our follow-up study, is the quality of management practice. In the Executive's response to the committee's letter asking what steps the Executive was taking to address problems in social work services, the quality of management practice has been rather overlooked. That is an aspect that we are interested in following up on over time, because it is much more than a matter of numbers, as members have said.

The Convener: A number of points have been raised. Given that we are looking not to produce another report but simply to clarify how the Executive is responding to a previous report, I suggest that we have the time and opportunity to seek further clarification on the points that members have raised. There will obviously be a further report from Audit Scotland on issues surrounding the response, so there will be an opportunity for us to consider matters further and bring the two together. If the clerks were to draft a letter seeking further clarification, would that be agreeable to members?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I propose that, in the meantime, we copy the correspondence that we have received so far to the justice committees and to the Education Committee to keep them briefed.

10:54

Meeting continued in private until 12:10.

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