



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 12 August 2014

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

20th Meeting 2014, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)
Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Colin Baird (Scottish Government)
David Blair (Scottish Government)
Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)
Michael Russell (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 12 August 2014

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Subordinate Legislation

Public Appointments and Public Bodies etc (Scotland) Act 2003 (Treatment of the Convener of the School Closure Review Panels as Specified Authority) Order 2014 [Draft]

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the 20th meeting of the Education and Culture Committee in 2014. I remind all those present that electronic devices, particularly mobile phones, should be switched off, because they interfere with the sound system.

Apologies have been received from Clare Adamson, and I welcome as her substitute Joan McAlpine. It is the second week in a row that Joan has acted as a substitute member—thank you very much for coming along. We have received a note from Liam McArthur, whose transport has been slightly disrupted, but we believe that he is on his way and will be here soon. In addition, we have received apologies from Mary Scanlon.

The first item on our agenda is evidence taking on the draft Public Appointments and Public Bodies etc (Scotland) Act 2003 (Treatment of the Convener of the School Closure Review Panels as Specified Authority) Order 2014. I welcome the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Michael Russell, and his supporting officials from the Scottish Government. After we have taken evidence on the order, we will, of course, debate the motion in the name of the cabinet secretary. As I am sure that they are aware, officials are not permitted to participate in the formal debate.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make some opening remarks.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): Thank you, convener.

The order is required in preparation for the appointment of the convener of the school closure review panels. At present, school closure proposals that have been called in are determined by the Scottish ministers under section 16 of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. Amendments to that act that were made by the

Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 will change that process by referring school closure proposals that are called in by the Scottish ministers to the convener of the school closure review panels.

The convener is a public appointment. One of their key roles will be to appoint a pool of people to be panel members and to select three members to form a school closure review panel to determine each case that is referred to the convener. Although other amendments to the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 came into force on 1 August 2014, the provisions to establish the functions of the convener of the school closure review panels and the panels themselves are not due to be brought into force until March 2015, as they require more preparation in relation to appointments and the training of panel members.

It is desirable for the order under discussion to come into force before the process of appointing the convener begins, so that the appointment process is regulated by the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland and so that the process can comply with the code of practice that is prepared and published by the commissioner under section 2 of the Public Appointments and Public Bodies etc (Scotland) Act 2003.

Regulations making provision for or about eligibility for and disqualification from appointment as convener and as panel members, their tenure, removal from office and the payment of salary, fees and allowances under paragraphs 1(9) and 2(5) of new schedule 2A to the 2010 act are to be made and laid in Parliament in early October 2014, prior to the date of publication of the advertisement for the convener's post, with a commencement order being laid in Parliament in November 2014 that would commence the relevant provisions in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 on the appointment of the convener and panels, as well as various other provisions, in January 2015. We aim to complete the appointments process and the necessary training and preparation to allow the convener and the school closure review panels to be in place and take up their functions from March 2015.

The Convener: Thank you very much, cabinet secretary.

Do members have any questions?

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, cabinet secretary.

What will happen if you do not like the decision that is made by the review panel?

Michael Russell: It will be a decision that is final. That is why we have the order. There are many things in the world that people do not like.

There is a legal process, and the legal process that we are putting in place will lead to a proper and, I think, justifiable set of decisions that will be taken in the most transparent manner possible.

The Convener: As no other member wishes to ask any questions, we will move on to the formal debate on the draft order, which is item 2. I invite the cabinet secretary to speak to and move the motion.

Michael Russell: I think that I have made as much of the matter as I possibly can in giving members the detail that I have given.

I move,

That the Education and Culture Committee recommends that the Public Appointments and Public Bodies etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 (Treatment of the Convener of the School Closure Review Panels as Specified Authority) Order 2014 [draft] be approved.

The Convener: Members have no contributions to make. I do not suppose that the cabinet secretary wants to respond to that.

Michael Russell: I am not even tempted.

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I know that you will stay with us, but is there a change in your officials for the next item?

Michael Russell: There is. I was just wondering whether Janet Gardner's journey was strictly necessary, but I am very glad that she was here. Can we change the officials?

The Convener: I will suspend the meeting briefly while the officials change.

10:05

Meeting suspended.

10:06

On resuming—

Lanarkshire Colleges Order 2014 [Draft]

The Convener: Our next agenda item is to take evidence on the draft Lanarkshire Colleges Order 2014. I thank the cabinet secretary for his continued presence and welcome the officials for the item.

Again, after we have taken evidence from the cabinet secretary, we will have a debate on the motion in his name. I again confirm that officials will not be permitted to contribute to the formal debate.

I welcome Liam McArthur to the meeting. I know that his transport rather held him up, but I am glad that he has made it.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make some opening remarks.

Michael Russell: The draft order is one of a series of orders that put in place the new regional structure for colleges as part of the implementation of the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013. The new structure will support colleges to be more responsive to the needs of learners and employers in improving the life chances of our young people, supporting Scotland's economic ambitions and creating a more sustainable and secure system.

As the committee is aware, there are 13 college regions, each of which is to have a single body that is responsible for regional outcomes. Orders have already been made for 12 of those. The draft Lanarkshire Colleges Order 2014 will put in place arrangements for Lanarkshire, which is the final college region.

Lanarkshire is one of only three regions with more than one college. In each of those regions, a regional strategic body will plan and distribute funding on a regional basis.

The order will mean that Lanarkshire will be unique in having a regional strategic body that is a college: New College Lanarkshire. Having listened carefully to the sector, I am persuaded that that arrangement will best deliver for learners and businesses in Lanarkshire. That is the regional structure that both colleges in the region want. It is not my solution; it is their solution, but it is one that I am pleased to endorse. It is a Lanarkshire solution made in Lanarkshire.

In addition to making New College Lanarkshire the regional strategic body, the order does a number of things that flow from that. It assigns the other college in the region—South Lanarkshire College—to the regional strategic body. Speaking of South Lanarkshire College, I look forward to cutting the first sod for its new state-of-the-art £2.1 million teaching block later this month. That is the latest in a long line of investments that we have made in the college estate and in Lanarkshire.

The order will make New College Lanarkshire a regional college. Being both a regional strategic body and a regional college means that it will have regional functions in relation to the two colleges in the region.

The order will broaden the membership of the board of New College Lanarkshire to include members from South Lanarkshire College in recognition of its new responsibilities.

Finally, the order will remove from legislation the entry on the regional board for Lanarkshire colleges. That body has not, of course, come into being.

I mentioned earlier that I had been persuaded of the case for New College Lanarkshire taking on

regional responsibilities. Let me touch on how my thinking has evolved as the plans have changed, as a result of changed circumstances, on delivering the structure that the colleges in the region want.

Initially, we planned to establish a regional board. That is a particular type of regional strategic body that is a stand-alone organisation. When the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill was introduced, there were to be four colleges in the region. When it was passed, there were to be three. However, by the time it came round to consulting on assigning colleges, there were to be only two.

Given those changes, it would have been remiss not to consult on whether a regional board remained the optimal structure for the region. After careful deliberation, the colleges in the region ultimately recommended making New College Lanarkshire a regional strategic body instead.

I put on record my appreciation for the work of all concerned in the two colleges and beyond, including and especially the region's presumptive chair, the patient and tireless Linda McTavish, in developing the plans for Lanarkshire—plans that avoid creating a new stand-alone public body. The arrangements require close partnership working with New College Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire College and call on Stewart McKillop, the principal of South Lanarkshire College, and Martin McGuire, the principal of New College Lanarkshire, to work particularly closely together. I am sure that they will, because the plans are very much the product of their thinking and co-operation, and I have every confidence in the colleges and the principals.

I am pleased to answer the committee's questions.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. Before I ask members for their questions, I want to raise one point. Paragraph 11 of the policy note to the order talks about ministers making “a separate Order” and seems to suggest that

“South Lanarkshire College will remain eligible in principle for funding from the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council”

until the council is satisfied that the new arrangements are working well. I am not aware of that having happened elsewhere. Can you give us some background to why that arrangement has been put in place?

Michael Russell: There can be only one fundable body in a region: the regional strategic body. In this case, there will be two fundable bodies; we want to move to one, but it is right to do so once we have ensured that the funding arrangement is working well.

At the heart of this is a new structure that requires the money to be routed through the new regional college to another college. Both principals are quite confident about that, as are we all. However, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council needs, by law, to know that the arrangement is working well. We will bring forward a proposal to remove South Lanarkshire College as a fundable body, but we want to be assured—and the funding council needs to be assured—that things are working properly. That is why we are putting this arrangement in place.

Neil Bibby: Paragraph 17 of the policy note says:

“Overall no consensus emerged from the consultation about the type of regional strategic body in Lanarkshire.”

What issues were highlighted in the consultation, and what was the pattern of responses that you got that suggested that there was no overall consensus?

Michael Russell: Colin Baird will answer that question.

Colin Baird (Scottish Government): When the colleges were considering the proposal, they needed more time to understand the implications of New College Lanarkshire being the regional strategic body instead of there being a regional body. The colleges identified issues such as conflicts of interest that might arise as a result of New College Lanarkshire's dual function and other such matters—indeed, South Lanarkshire College expressed such concerns in its response to the consultation—and the colleges worked through those issues to deliver the proposal in the draft order.

The Convener: As members have no more questions, we will move to agenda item 4, which is the formal debate on the order. I invite the cabinet secretary to speak to and move the motion,

Michael Russell: I want very briefly to quote the two principals involved, who deserve to be quoted on this matter. Martin McGuire has said:

“I support the proposed governance model for Lanarkshire and believe it will provide a more streamlined, cost effective arrangement that will remove unnecessary bureaucracy whilst improving effectiveness.”

Stewart McKillop, the principal of South Lanarkshire College, has said:

“South Lanarkshire ... is supportive of the proposed structure to deliver college provision across The Lanarkshire Region ... These arrangements will deliver the best possible educational outcomes for the students within the region.”

Mr McKillop also comments that, with regard to my commitment to not forcing a merger, he felt that I had “been true to” my word.

This solution has been developed by the colleges, which, as Colin Baird has said, worked through the issues very thoroughly. I commend that work, and I am very pleased to move the motion.

I move,

That the Education and Culture Committee recommends that the Lanarkshire Colleges Order 2014 [draft] be approved.

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary and his officials for their attendance, and I briefly suspend the meeting.

10:14

Meeting suspended.

10:15

On resuming—

Taking Children into Care Inquiry

The Convener: The next item is to continue our follow-up work on the inquiry into decision making on whether to take children into care. Our report, which we published almost a year ago, gave a clear commitment to return to the issues, so that we could understand the progress that we hope is being made.

I welcome to the committee David Blair, who is the head of the Scottish Government's looked-after children unit. Mr Blair will know that, last week, we heard very moving evidence on the experiences of young people who had been through the care system. We also heard from Who Cares? Scotland. Those young people had a lot to cope with. Some of the evidence that we received was shocking and their experiences were, I am sure, emotionally scarring for them, their friends and their family. Those were the very reasons why we wanted to embark on the inquiry in the first place; we also wanted to ensure that such care experiences improve.

All the committee members were moved not only by last week's evidence but by the evidence that we heard during the inquiry. Today is an opportunity for members to raise issues with the Scottish Government. We will, I hope, focus not only on the questions that we put to the Government and the responses that we have received thus far, but on all the material that we published as part of the inquiry report.

We will move to questions. Colin Beattie will ask the first question.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Do you want me to ask it now?

The Convener: I am sorry—I forgot to ask whether David Blair wanted to make an opening statement.

David Blair (Scottish Government): I did not want to presume. I have a statement to make—it is three minutes long—so that would be helpful.

The Convener: Okay—carry on.

David Blair: Thank you, convener. Good morning. The Scottish Government's priorities are threefold: intervening earlier and more effectively, building on the assets within families to prevent children becoming looked-after where possible; securing earlier permanence by reducing long-term supervision; and enhancing the quality of care through corporate parenting for those who need it, including a planned and supported

transition to independence at a time that is right for each young person.

There are four aspects to our approach: child-centred thinking and listening to what young people say; encouraging collaborative effort; gathering and using evidence; and empowering those at the front line. Through our approach, all attention is focused on the changes close to each child and not the system. The cumulative effect of each small improvement leads to a better system.

For families on the edge of care, we are introducing a comprehensive framework towards enshrining early intervention, particularly for those who want help, through the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 getting it right for every child provisions; part 5 of the act, which covers children service planning; part 12, which covers services for families with a child at risk of becoming looked after; as well as our joint strategic commissioning programme.

On early permanence, we intend to mandate the permanence tracking of all looked-after children, spreading important learning from our permanence and care excellence programme. We will put pressure on reducing long-term supervision in favour of secure, legal permanence, such as adoption, permanence and kinship care orders and sustainable home returns.

On the role of data, we monitor overall progress through our national statistics, namely the children looked after statistics and those from other public bodies. Throughout the activities that I have mentioned—PACE and the joint strategic commissioning programme—high-quality data is systematically collected for use within each project. At a national level, we are actively exploring building a national permanence dataset, and we intend to publish a wider data strategy shortly.

Finally, on corporate parenting, recognising the importance of strong, positive relationships to young people, we are taking forward our national mentoring programme. It will work with the grain of the measures in the 2014 act and act as a significant step towards further participation of care-experienced young people.

Our experience of passing the continuing care measures in the act taught us that we need to do things collaboratively and with young people at the table. In that regard, we are working with Who Cares? Scotland and its care-experienced young people on an enhanced corporate parenting training programme to ensure that corporate parents are ready for the act next year and have asked the centre for excellence for looked-after children in Scotland to lead on the guidance writing.

We have a full and ambitious agenda. Our programmes reflect the change that is required in the care system and are drawn from the evidence of underlying needs. The committee has played a role in clarifying what those needs are.

I hope that that brief summary was helpful. I am happy to answer any questions that you have.

The Convener: Thank you very much, David. I apologise for forgetting that you had an opening statement.

Colin Beattie: I have a couple of points to bring up. The first relates to legal representation at children's hearings, which is a constant refrain. Most recently, it has been brought up in paragraph 4.1 of the most recent submission by Social Work Scotland on page 25 of committee paper 4.

Concern has been expressed that, most frequently, parents are represented by their legal representatives at children's hearings and that legal arguments going to and fro can dominate the hearings. The people who run the hearings are not necessarily legally trained nor, as I understand it, was the structure of the children's hearings intended to be like a courtroom. The comment has been made that, as a result, in many cases the interests of the child are ignored or forgotten in the exchanges with the lawyers. GIRFEC rightly wants to put the child and decisions about the child at the centre of everything, so how can this be managed and made more effective?

David Blair: We could answer that question in a number of ways. GIRFEC will have an important role to play and we have to give it time to bed in.

To touch on something to which Ashley Cameron referred, there is a need to have a trusted adult in the life of every care-experienced young person. That is sometimes missing when hearings are called. You will have heard the stories as well as I have of children and young people appearing at hearings where the room is largely full of strangers. That creates a difficult environment for young people to express themselves positively. What often comes out are the views of the young person from the point of view of fear and rejection of a system that they do not understand.

That is part of the motivation for introducing the national mentoring scheme. It is one possible contribution towards addressing the problem of not every young person having a trusted, positive adult role model—someone to whom they can turn and whom they trust to advocate for them. I do not want to overplay that, but it is an important aspect.

The children's hearings system is a relatively newly reformed system. There is now a multi-agency programme board working to a clear blueprint, and a formal review of the legislation is

expected in spring 2015. That is the mechanism by which we will ensure that the system is suitable for young people, but we will encourage young people to take part in it.

Colin Beattie: I hear what you say. Are we, in effect, just relying on GIRFEC itself to remedy the matter because everybody will supposedly be focused on the child? We have also heard in past meetings that members of the children's panel who are present and social workers feel, to some extent, intimidated by the presence of the legal representatives. Not having the legal background themselves, they have no way to discuss, debate or refute any of the points that are made. The danger is that the hearings descend into an argument between two lawyers—who, in many cases, really represent two different parents—and the child is someplace in the middle. Will GIRFEC be capable of handling that?

David Blair: GIRFEC has a role to play, along with a number of other things. It says a lot that we are open to continuing to evolve the children's hearings system. I do not think that it is ever going to reach a steady state, but we have a multi-agency programme board looking at how we can improve the system, and that is the mechanism by which we will evolve it.

There is a natural tension between the welfare-based principle and the rights-based agenda. It is not an unmanageable one, but we need to be vigilant about it, and the occasional review, such as through the programme board, is an opportunity to do just that.

Colin Beattie: It is clear that more work needs to be done on that aspect, though, to ensure that the child is kept at the very centre of what happens at the children's hearing.

To move on to my second point, the—

The Convener: Sorry, Colin, but have you finished asking about the children's hearings system? Members may have supplementary questions on that.

Colin Beattie: Yes.

The Convener: I call Liam McArthur.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Colin Beattie accurately set out some of the concerns that were put to us during the inquiry about the creation of a courtroom atmosphere out of the hearings system. However, even after the inquiry that we undertook, it was not clear to me to what extent hearings panels are not following the advice of social work, or to what extent we have a mismatch between social work expertise, judgment and advice and the decisions that panels reach. Is there any evidence or data that you can draw on that shows the extent to which there is a

mismatch and panels are opting not to follow—in whole or in part—advice that is led by social work?

David Blair: We do not collect data nationally on that issue, or on a number of other issues.

As I remember, last time we gave evidence, the Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 was too new to report on. There were a lot of changes and the system was in flux. The existence of Children's Hearings Scotland has come about only recently, and the best answer to your question is probably that it will be better placed than the system was in the past to monitor that dynamic and that issue.

Liam McArthur: I know that drawing parallels between what I see locally and any national picture is fraught with difficulties, but it appears to me that situations in which decisions are overturned or at least questioned often arise where decisions are taken before the sheriff rather than by the children's hearings panel. I wonder whether we are getting a conflating of two different dynamics within the process.

David Blair: I am not sure. Are you suggesting that the courtroom approach is working its way into the hearings system?

Liam McArthur: No. One would have thought that social workers' concern that panel members are inclined to be unduly influenced by representations from solicitors who are representing parents would be reflected in panels going against the recommendations of social work, but I am not sure whether we have seen a pattern of that happening. It might be more likely that it is at the point when decisions from hearings come before a sheriff that those decisions are overturned or questions are asked about them.

David Blair: There are a number of different ways in which I could answer that question. I would not want to speak on behalf of the social work profession, but I know that there are a number of concerns that social work is being marginalised in the decision-making process and that recommendations are not necessarily being adhered to or agreed with. That has to come down to how the system works. We have to have trust in the new system as it runs in, and we have to invest in the improvement agenda with the new programme board that is looking at the system. It is only a year old in its current form and CHS has a strong role to play in ensuring that panel decisions are adhered to. That is really all that I have to say on the subject.

Colin Beattie: The other point that I want to discuss is data collection. The committee's report called on the Scottish Government, as a matter of priority, to collect more detailed data

"that would provide a fuller picture of looked after children's outcomes, and allow for judgement to be made on whether interventions have been successful".

The response was that the Scottish Government has undertaken a data review for looked-after children

“confirming that the data we currently collect is lacking”.

The obvious question is: what is happening?

10:30

David Blair: Our review was prompted by the work of the committee. When we last gave evidence, our ambition was somewhat similar to the committee's in the sense that we wanted to see what we could link up in the national data sets across government. To summarise, we discovered that such linking is considerably more complicated than we thought. That is partly because, historically, data sets have been crafted by different public bodies over many, many years. Some data sets are more narrative and some are more quantitative. It is a very difficult task, which is why we put it into our wider data strategy. It will require a long time and we will have to commit to the graft that is needed to make it happen.

We have prioritised the bit that is most important to us in terms of our permanence agenda. That is why we are meeting a number of relevant public bodies later in the month to talk about creating a national permanence data set so that we can track the whole permanence process at a national level.

The aim of that is to be able to have a barometer of the health of the permanence bit of the care system, because it is such a good proxy for a number of other things in relation to reform. It is worth pointing out that national data is one thing, but if we are driving a reform agenda, it is very important that we collect high-quality local data. Through the PACE programme, which you have heard a little bit about, high-quality data is collected on each of the changes as the programme evolves. That data is fundamental to the local changes and to determining what improvement is being achieved.

Also, part of the joint strategic commissioning programme is about collecting very high-quality data across the whole of a local area. The idea is to reverse engineer, in the medium term, the services that are needed in children's services. That is being done and that data is very high quality as well.

There are a number of different strands to our data approach, which have evolved from our initial discussions with the committee and go beyond just the Scottish Government leading the effort.

Colin Beattie: What is the timescale for this?

David Blair: With the permanence data sets, a lot of it will come down to what our partners say is achievable. We perhaps did not invest enough

time in that step before. We are happy to write back to you on what comes out of that meeting if that is helpful.

The joint strategic commissioning programme is just about to start and the PACE programme has started, so data is already being collected in two local authority areas through PACE. We are about to expand that as we go round the country. We have a timescale for allowing every local authority to take part—should they wish to do so—of about three years, which we think is reasonable. If we can do it faster, we will.

The joint strategic commissioning programme is a very intensive data collection exercise, but it is very high quality and needs to be done only every now and then. That programme has just been signed off and it will be starting with three local authority areas this autumn when schools go back.

Colin Beattie: It sounds as though you are in the very early stages of putting in place the capability to gather together all the data that is needed. It is a very important area, as the committee has highlighted. Convener, could we ask for the Scottish Government to come back to us as this proceeds so that we are aware of what is happening?

The Convener: I think that it is not unreasonable to ask David Blair to do that, given the priority that the committee gave the area in our evidence taking. I will bring in Neil Bibby in a moment but—to follow up on what Colin Beattie said—I have a question. I do not mean to be awkward but, unfortunately for you, it is in my nature.

We said in our report that we felt that this area was a matter of priority. Your written response and what you have said today include a lot of nice phrases about things that you are going to do—you are going to meet to discuss data collection, you are working hard to think about it and you are strategising about it—lots of stuff is going to happen at some point in the future. We felt that this was a matter of priority, but it has been a year, give or take a week or two, since we published our report. Given the time that has passed and what you have just said, is this a priority for the Government?

David Blair: It is, and I think that it is worth clarifying where we have invested our time and effort. At our last appearance before the committee, we had not started PACE or joint strategic commissioning or conducted our review.

I must emphasise the complexity of the task of joining up data nationally and also reflect on the fact that the Scottish Government's role, as we see it, is very much to provide support on the ground to ensure that people can improve their own systems in situ. That is why we have invested

our time in the two change programmes; they are comprehensive programmes that will make a massive difference in a relatively short space of time. It takes time to set up those programmes, but the data that will come from them can be shared with other bodies locally to improve their permanence systems.

We think that the time spent investing in those programmes has been time well spent, because what matters is that local decision makers have the right data to improve their systems. That sort of thing is fundamentally missing from social work planning when it comes to, say, the care system.

Neil Bibby: In her submission to the committee, the minister has said:

“We have seen some signs of improvement for our looked after children.”

Leading on from the data issues, I want to ask you about the statistics on the education outcomes for looked-after children, which show a drop in 2011-12 and 2012-13 in attainment tariff scores and the percentage of looked-after children going to positive destinations. I accept that there has been an increase in the figures from those in 2009-10, but I note that, for children who are not looked after, attainment tariff scores and the percentage going to positive destinations have increased every year from 2009-10 to 2012-13. On the other hand, the attainment score for looked-after children, which was 106 in 2011-12, fell to 86 in 2012-13, while the percentage of looked-after children going to positive destinations was 75 per cent in 2011-12 but 71 per cent in 2012-13.

As I have said, I acknowledge that that is an increase on the 2009-10 figures, but the most recent statistics show a decrease. That cannot be viewed as an improvement. Can the Government explain the decrease in 2011-12 and 2012-13 at a time when there was an increase in the same figures for non-looked-after children?

David Blair: You are absolutely right to point out the steady increase in a number of the criteria, including tariff scores, attendance and exclusion, over a number of years and then what looks like a dip in the last year. We have asked our analytical colleagues for advice, but I have to say that the figures do not entirely chime with our sense of how things are moving.

We think that there might be a statistical aspect to the blip. What we have published is the second year of a two-year collection cycle; if you look at the children looked after statistics, you will see that we cautioned that, because it was the first year of a two-year collection cycle, the figures might have been exaggerated. The figures that we got this year suggest that that is what happened. The sample size in the two-year samples is twice that of the previous collection, and we think that that

might have ironed out the vagaries that you might get in a lower sample size.

We are not yet convinced that an underlying change can be detected in the statistics. We want to run the exercise for a couple of years—certainly for a year—to find out whether there was a blip and whether, in fact, the figures in the previous collection were too high.

In short, we do not know the reason for the decrease, and we are checking it.

Neil Bibby: If it was a blip over one year, why is it not in keeping with the increase for non-looked-after children in the same year?

David Blair: The sample size for non-looked-after children is vast and is statistically valid in every way. The numbers for looked-after children are in the small hundreds. One of our problems is that we have moved from annual sampling to two-year sampling, so we need to run this one for a bit longer. That is really all I have to say.

Neil Bibby: Obviously, that shows the importance of collecting data and having analysis of it as quickly as possible. I hear what you are saying about our having to wait until next year to see whether there was a blip, but the convener was right to point out that analysis of data is important for the committee because we want to see how effective the strategies are. Obviously, the statistics for the past year are concerning, although I grant that there has been an increase since 2009.

The Convener: Thank you. I think that it would have been helpful had the Government pointed out some of those points in its written response and put some caveats around the numbers, because many of us were puzzled by that blip—if that is what we are calling it. We do not know whether it is a blip or an actual trend in the wrong direction. It would have been helpful if an explanation of that had been included in the Government's response, because many of us would then not have spent the past two weeks puzzling over why it had happened, although I suspect that you may well be right about the sample size and the anomaly that it may have created.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Good morning. I want to talk about independent advocacy. In your opening statement you mentioned the importance of child-centred thinking and listening to what children say. The Scottish Government made in its written evidence a commitment to increase the quality, consistency and availability of advocacy support for all children and young people, including looked-after children. What steps is the Government taking to meet that commitment?

David Blair: It is worth referring to what was said in the minister's letter. We published the independent advocacy guide for commissioners, including principles and standards for independent advocacy, in December, and in June this year we supplemented that with an online resource on our website offering guidance for anyone who advocates for children and young people. You will be aware that we have yet to commence section 122 of the Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011, which relates to access to advocacy services for children who are attending the children's hearings system.

Officials have undertaken detailed discussions with relevant partners to scope out a range of models and to consider possible future options for advocacy services for children in the modernised children's hearings system. We will commence section 122 when we are satisfied that new services can be suitably designed and sustainably resourced for young people in the hearings system who want and need that provision.

Advocacy is available in a number of other circumstances in relation to mental health legislation and additional support for learning legislation. One of the things that we are doing to try to advance the agenda is being done through the national mentoring programme. We see advocacy as a spectrum of participation, from the parenting approach on one side to a young person being able to advocate fully for themselves on the other side. There is independent advocacy in there at the sharp end. However, there is also a much broader and shallower need for young people to have a trusted adult in their lives. We think that it is worth investing in that in the first instance, because that would mean that we would be investing early and effectively. We can then set up a system to introduce a more comprehensive independent advocacy element to that. So, our plan is multilayered and staged, but that is where we are focusing our effort at the moment.

Gordon MacDonald: At last week's committee meeting, young people made a number of comments about getting their voices heard. They said that decisions were made about their lives in which they were not included, and they said that they were not at the heart of the decision-making process. How confident are you that the range of models that you spoke about will ensure that children's voices are heard? Is it the Government's intention to provide, at least as a minimum standard, a trusted adult or advocate for all looked-after children?

10:45

David Blair: The short answer to the question is yes, in principle. We think that the national mentoring scheme can play a big role in fulfilling

some—it is important to say “some”—of that unmet need. The programme is important. In that scheme we are starting with children who are looked after at home and who have the least contact with professionals in their life, and with a particular age group—eight to 14-year-olds—who have reported sensitivities to us about attending hearings.

In the background, there is getting it right for every child. If we wind forward a few years, we would expect to see professionals being much more able to help young people to express their views. In that context, we would look to bolster our independent advocacy offering to young people, and those things have a timeline.

Gordon MacDonald: In its evidence last week, Who Cares? Scotland said that it has

“access to only about 15 per cent of the looked-after and care-experienced young people in this country.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 5 August 2014; c 4264.]

What proportion of looked-after children across the 32 local authorities currently have access to independent advocacy?

David Blair: I do not know. There is a legal duty to hear the voice of the young person, and it is well understood that local authorities should have some provision being made available to young people in their area when it is required, but planning that is a matter for local authorities.

Gordon MacDonald: Is that information available?

David Blair: It is not available through national statistics, but it can be found out.

Gordon MacDonald: Right. Given that we intend to expand the national mentoring scheme, and to provide a trusted adult and a form of advocacy, are there any estimates of the number of training places needed to provide the number of trusted adults who would be required, and of the resources that would be needed in order to fulfil that obligation?

David Blair: We are carefully investing in the design of the scheme, and we have just appointed a professional adviser to help us to scope that and all the other aspects. We are very alert to the idea that there have been many good small-scale schemes around the country over many years, but basically they have run for a couple of years, then the funding runs out or the funder changes its criteria, the model has to be changed, and the baby gets thrown out with the bath water. We are trying to overcome all those things with consistent national funding and standards through the national mentoring programme, but delivered by local, community-based organisations. That approach is drawn from the comments that we

have received throughout the process and from the likes of Who Cares? Scotland.

It all needs to be scoped. The programme is very ambitious, but we are committed to doing that, and we are happy to keep the committee informed as we go.

The Convener: You correctly said that there is a legal right for a child's voice to be heard in the process. How do you know whether a local authority is delivering on that right?

David Blair: We do not collect statistics on that, just as we do not collect statistics on every duty that applies to local authorities. Some information was collected through the work in the minister's letter that I mentioned and through the advocacy strategy. We have not collected anything recently, but we would want to do that through setting up the mentoring programme in order that we can ensure that we are matching the scheme dynamic to need out in the field.

The Convener: The view of some people whom we have heard from is that the legal right to be heard that children now have is not being met by some local authorities. If that is the case, surely it is the Government's duty to find out which local authorities are not meeting that legal duty and to deal with it, is it not?

David Blair: The Government's role is to set the framework and to create expectations—

The Convener: I am sorry, David. I do not want to interrupt, but if there is a legal duty and the child's voice must be heard, how is that monitored?

David Blair: In the normal course of things, that is monitored through the inspection framework. A component part of the inspection system should be, and is, that advocacy systems are tested in some way. We have the normal system to check on that.

I have heard representation from the care sector to the effect that independent advocacy is not consistent throughout the country, and it has been put to me that at least one local authority has no advocacy. It would concern us if a legal duty was not being met; we would expect the inspection system to pick that up. Our answer to the problem is to try to improve the system, and the range of activities that I have outlined, in the context of getting it right for every child and the national mentoring programme, is a big step in the right direction.

There is a tension in local authorities providing advocacy services while being responsible for funding of services to young people. That is part of what we are trying to resolve through the national mentoring programme, by moving the dynamic towards a national funding model, so that that

tension is removed and there can be a positive and trusted adult role model in the lives of as many children as possible—in principle, all children in care, but perhaps beyond that, although that is a longer-term aspect.

There are a number of problems with the system; there is testimony from a number of bodies about there being a deficit in the sector. However, we have a positive and meaningful programme of work to try to improve the system.

The Convener: Some authorities are doing better than others and I am sure that there is a range of available services, but it was put to the committee that one authority has no advocacy service—that is why I asked the question. You said that that had been put to you, too, in your role—

David Blair: It was probably by the same person.

The Convener: It is possible that it was by the same person. What did you do to investigate the situation?

David Blair: We have not investigated it, but that is part of the work that I want our professional adviser to take on, when they start in a few weeks' time, as they design the national mentoring programme. We want our adviser to link up with our colleagues in the children's hearings system, who are looking at implementation of section 122 of the 2011 act and other policy areas in relation to which advocacy is a concern, so that we bring together thinking on advocacy, mentoring and the whole spectrum of participation.

One of the first things that the adviser will have to do will be to take stock of advocacy provision in the country. It is best to put the issue in their hands. We are talking about that happening in a few weeks' time.

The Convener: Will the information be made available to this committee?

David Blair: When we have done a trawl, we can certainly pass on the information.

Liam McArthur: I presume that the work will include looking at the resources that have been allocated centrally for advocacy services. The resources for Orkney, for example, look fairly modest—albeit that I do not think that there has been a complaint in Orkney about independent advocacy not being available, or about the local authority not ensuring that awareness of the service is raised and it is taken up. I hope that such work will form part of the review that your expert has been taken on to carry out.

As part of the process, will attention be paid to the dynamic in smaller and rural local authorities? In such areas, the opportunities for independent

advocacy are different and the challenges might be greater, but that dynamic cannot be swept up in a catch-all analysis of advocacy across the board. In the context of organisations that provide services nationwide, I think that occasionally there are blind spots, many of which are in island and rural authorities. I suppose that this is less a question than it is a plea for your expert to take up the issue in a specific workstream.

David Blair: That is a perfectly fair point, which has been made before. That is partly why we did not want to construct a completely centralised scheme; we wanted to centralise the bits that it made sense to centralise—the funding, the national standards and quality assurance, and the vetting of volunteer mentors—and then to work through community-based organisations. Ideally, there will be a large number of community-based organisations in every part of the country as the scheme rolls forward. I hope that the issue will be picked up.

Liam McArthur: On funding a national standard, were funding allocated on a per capita basis in relation to need, that would not necessarily reflect the fact that, in order to establish a service, there is a baseline cost that we cannot get away from. Therefore, unless you factor in that cost and then have a per capita funding allocation over and above that amount, you are likely to leave some areas with a pot of funding with which they can do little.

David Blair: That is a valid point. The scheme will have to reach a critical mass of funding to make it all stack up. We are receptive to arguments of that nature. The funding would go to community advocacy and mentoring organisations, so we will work with those existing organisations. Your point is reasonable and we will take it on board.

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Last week, we heard from care-experienced young people and from Who Cares? Scotland. Many spoke about the importance of and the need to have sibling contact, and the difference that that can make to their experiences, depending on how it is managed and provided or whether it is denied. In the passage of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, the proposals to enable sibling contact were not successful. However, at the time it was said that that matter would be dealt with through guidance. What is happening with the guidance? What is the timescale? Has any progress been made in its development?

David Blair: I remember the proposals and the debate. The proposals did not succeed, partly because it was not clear how we would square the views and the rights of the siblings, should contact be not in their interest. That is not an issue that cannot be resolved, but it seemed better to leave

the matter in the hands and the judgment of the professionals than to make it a statutory function.

The guidance is under development and we are working with a number of stakeholders on it. I am happy to write to the committee on exactly where we are with the work, if that would be helpful.

Jayne Baxter: That would be helpful. Thank you.

The Convener: I will raise an issue that is of particular interest to me. During the inquiry, we took evidence from parents with a learning disability and some of their representatives. In paragraph 84 of our report, we pointed out to the Government that

“Further research is necessary to determine the true scale of the problem, and we call on all parties to work together on this ... We believe that the Scottish Government should evaluate the merits of the supported parenting approach.”

The Scottish Government response was that there is on-going work to get it right for looked-after disabled children and work to make hearings

“easier to understand for those with special needs”.

We were not talking about disabled children. Rather, we were talking about parents with learning disabilities and the huge variation in the numbers; for parents with a learning disability whose children are taken into care, the figures are very high, compared with the rest of the community, for whom the figures are much lower. I therefore ask again the questions that we asked as part of the inquiry report: what is the Government doing about removal of children from parents who have learning disabilities? What are the merits of a supportive parenting approach in trying to prevent situations in which children are removed not because the parents are bad, but because the parents need support?

David Blair: It is worth saying that part of the issue comes down to the general messages in the parenting strategy, part of it comes down to good judgment by social workers to make reasonable decisions, and part of it comes down to parents with learning disabilities having access to appropriate representation in the relevant forums, whether that is in the children's hearings system or the court system. We are receptive to suggestions for improvement on that.

I do not know whether members are aware that the ministerial working group on child protection and disability, led by Norman Dunning, has reported. We can send the committee details about that. The group has developed a new set of training and resource materials, including good practice examples, to help professionals better to understand the issues that are associated with child protection, and to ensure that services offer the best possible support for children who are

affected by disability more generally. That toolkit supplements the “National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2014”, and includes additional notes for practitioners on protecting disabled children from abuse and neglect. I appreciate that this information is more tangential to the issues that you raise, but it is all relevant in the broader context.

11:00

The Convener: I appreciate the broader context, but the question was specifically about parents who have a learning disability. It seems to me that it is not clear whether any specific research has been undertaken on the issue more widely or on the specific question about the removal rates of children from vulnerable parents. You said in your response that the Scottish Government has evaluated the merits of the supported parenting approach. What was the outcome of that evaluation?

David Blair: I could not tell you, but I am happy to write to you on that.

The Convener: I would appreciate it if you could do that. What about the specific research that we requested?

David Blair: I am not aware that that research has been done. I am happy to write to you on that as well.

The Convener: The request was in the report that we published a year ago.

David Blair: Sorry—I do not have any information on that.

The Convener: You do not know. Okay. I would appreciate it if we could get a written response on those questions.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): One thing that came up during the inquiry was the fact that there was a problem with the retention of social workers within local authorities. One problem was that good social workers are promoted and taken away from the front line, and young people told us that they found it difficult that they did not have continuity of social work support from one individual.

That issue was mentioned in our report last year. The Scottish Government’s response states:

“it is for employers and practitioners to assess on a local basis the necessary roles and structures, levels of responsibility and accountability.”

It is local authorities that do that, but where is the Scottish Government on finding ways to promote the retention of social workers within the profession? A lot of them have been leaving the profession and going elsewhere.

David Blair: You have identified the right context, but in that context the Scottish Government’s role is to help, support and improve, and we do that through a number of bodies including the Scottish Social Services Council. There is a review as part of its work to develop a learning strategy for the social services workforce. That will include reviewing learning at all levels throughout a worker’s career, at both qualifying and post-qualifying levels, and the support that is needed to achieve skills and knowledge. A report will be produced by March 2015.

Work is also progressing on the review of the social work degree. That is an important element as well, with several different strands of work on-going, including research on the readiness for practice of newly qualified social workers, visits to all 32 local authorities to gather evidence of the impact of the degree and changes that are required, an online ideas platform that is being launched for all social workers to provide views on the degree, and a review of the current standards in social work education.

We are working with the SSSC to help to advance the issues that you mentioned. However, as you said, it is a matter for local authorities.

George Adam: Surely there is a way, apart from what you have already mentioned, in which the Scottish Government can lead and work with the local authorities. As the convener mentioned, the report is about a year old and we seem to be moving quite slowly.

I know that it can be difficult to get all 32 local authorities to sing from the same hymn sheet. Various local authorities have areas of excellence that others do not have. Can you tell us anything about where we have taken things on board and are moving forward a wee bit?

David Blair: I do not know whether you are aware, but Alan Baird, our chief social work adviser, is leading the social work strategic forum, which is looking into a number of different aspects that are relevant to the size and shape of the social services workforce. That is in its early days. It has met a number of times, and it has a people and workforce strand of work. I can send the committee a web link to the information that is coming out of that. That would probably be the place to focus attention on.

George Adam: Thank you for that.

The Convener: Sorry about this, but I want to follow that up for a second. You said that you would

“make sure that the issues noted by the Committee in regard to staffing levels, retention and training are considered and taken forward within the appropriate contexts.”

I have to be honest and say that I did not know what that meant. In terms of concrete progress, what does that statement mean?

David Blair: Can you clarify what you mean by progress?

The Convener: You said that you will

“make sure that the issues noted by the Committee in regard to staffing levels, retention and training are considered and taken forward within the appropriate contexts.”

I am quoting the Government's letter. What I want to know is what that actually means on the ground. What difference will it make? What are you doing in practical terms to respond to the committee's concerns in this area?

David Blair: This comes back to my previous point about the need to recognise the Scottish Government's role. It is up to local authorities to plan social work services and decide on the numbers and experience required in their own structures, and what might be suitable for one local authority might not necessarily be suitable for another, perhaps much larger, authority. Our role is to work in partnership with local government, and I think that the forum that I mentioned and which is led by our chief social work adviser will be the key mechanism for doing that.

The Convener: I am sorry, but I am struggling to understand how you measure improvements. I understand that you might need different policies for different areas, depending on how rural or urban a particular local authority is and various different circumstances between local authorities, but I am trying to understand what role the Government plays, apart from its saying, “It's a matter for local authorities, and we have a committee that's looking at it.” What in practical terms is the Government doing to drive forward the kind of change that I think we both want?

David Blair: That question takes me a bit beyond my expertise—it is not an area that I am responsible for—but I am happy to find out the answers to those questions and write back to the committee.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you.

Neil Bibby: Have the on-going reforms and the changes to legislation, guidance, work practices and so on that the Scottish Government has initiated demonstrated a need for additional resources to be spent on looked-after children? During our consideration of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, we heard a lot of evidence from trade unions suggesting that the named person provision would work properly only if additional resources were made available. I do not want to get bogged down in a discussion on that policy, but have the Scottish Government's

on-going reforms demonstrated a need for additional resources in this particular area?

David Blair: The answer to your question is yes and no.

When we started our reform agenda for the care system, we were acutely aware that financial resources were very constrained. I can give you an example from my own area. When we set up the permanence and care excellence—PACE—programme, we did so on the basis that it would not involve handing a pot of money to local authorities; instead, we needed to engender a sense of change that could be achieved without adding more money to the pot.

Actually, the evidence suggests that it is very liberating not to hand over money but to provide support in a non-financial sense through consultancy, data trawls and a number of different mechanisms. The sustainable legacy is that you leave a critical mass of skills and knowledge about how to do things better.

That approach is working. It did not require any more resources, and it is leading to a more efficient permanence planning system, which means that young people are leaving care for legal permanence sooner and fewer children are on long-term supervision. There are resource savings associated with a programme that does not require more and more money being handed over.

Joint strategic commissioning is of an order of magnitude more ambitious than that. It is not about handing money to local authorities for investing in innovative schemes or whatever but about facilitating local change within the existing resource envelope and securing better outcomes through re-engineered children's services. We very much hope that both approaches, which are backed by very strong evidence, can lead to fundamental change and release resources as a result of freeing not only social workers but the whole system from wasteful practice.

Other areas such as the mentoring and advocacy side of things are likely to need more resources, and central Government is putting in more money to facilitate that.

Neil Bibby: You have referred to increasing resources. We have examined how much is spent on looked-after children; according to the Scottish local government finance statistics, £750 million was spent on children's social work services in 2009-10, and that figure is due to go up in cash terms to an estimated £824 million in 2014-15.

The figure has therefore gone up in cash terms, but I understand that, in real terms, it is actually a cut of around £350 million when we take inflation into account. No one is in any doubt that there are funding pressures on local authorities at the

moment, but what is the impact of the funding pressures and real-terms cuts on the range of indicators that we are considering and the things that we have talked about, such as workload management, social workers being able to support young people and children, outcomes for looked-after children, and issues with local authorities having the resources and time to collect data?

David Blair: The impact is demonstrated through the outcome statistics. Where things have improved, they have done so in spite of a difficult funding environment. However, as I have said before, we do not collect statistics on all the detailed bits of the process, so I cannot give you a line-by-line account of how changes in national funding affect the situation on the ground. That is a matter for local authorities, but we are absolutely committed to supporting and improving it.

The joint strategic commissioning programme is a good example of how we can mobilise our roles to work with local partners—not just local authorities but community planning partners more generally—to use the existing resource envelope to better effect. I am happy to keep the committee informed of that programme.

Liam McArthur: Is there not a risk with expectation management? Intuitively, a child-centred approach would appear to be labour and time intensive. You have talked about trusted adults and mentoring. We also have to consider the data collection to which Neil Bibby referred, the convener's reference to some of the support required for parents with learning difficulties, and areas of greater collaboration between partners and agencies in the system. Although some efficiencies may come from them, overall it is inevitable that the process will require greater funding to make it work. Therefore, is there not a risk that expectations will be set about what the process will achieve but funding levels will fall some way short in different areas? The danger is that we will be back here in five years' time wondering why it did not work, even though the ideas seemed to be the right ones for us to pursue.

David Blair: I can see your point, but I am not sure that I agree with it. The evidence from the permanence and care excellence programme suggests that there is significant waste within the system. By waste, I mean processes and activities that take up time and effort—social workers' time in particular—add no value and are the product of a custom that has been prevalent in a particular authority or particular team within an authority for a decade or decades.

It has been enlightening to see some of the changes that have happened in our pilot areas, where simple measures have released time and meant that more time could be spent on case-file

management rather than servicing a bureaucracy. It does not necessarily follow that being child centred raises the implied cost of the system. The evidence that we have seen indicates that there is significant waste within the system that can be reallocated towards more productive ends.

The strategic commissioning programme is a great example. The evidence that predates the programme and justifies it indicates that there is huge waste in the system in, for example, the spot purchasing of residential care and foster care and how a lot of resource could be reallocated through strategic commissioning towards other things that support young people in decision making.

It is probably worth also saying that systems that do not take account of the child's view often make decisions that are not in the best interests of the child, which leads to a need to compensate for that with other systems. That is all waste. It is better to get the decision right at the first gasp when it needs to be made. In that sense, the system has waste in it that could be removed through the GIRFEC approach, which is what you are articulating.

11:15

Liam McArthur: I have to say that the notion that strategic commissioning and the centralised approach to the issues might lead to different types of waste and to solutions not necessarily being tailored to localised need ought to be taken into account.

Is there not also a question about the fact that the emphasis has been on what social workers and others in the system are required to do that is new, without necessarily emphasising what it is that they will no longer be required to do as a result of the changes? Certainly, the message that we have had from those at the coalface is that they are already under considerable strain and workload pressures are a real issue for them. However, with regard to what you have been talking about, there is no sign yet that they are doing less of what they have done historically and are working more efficiently and effectively as a consequence.

David Blair: That is a fair point, in the sense that things such as the strategic commissioning programme are really just about to start.

It is worth clarifying that the programme is not a centralised one; it is a locally driven programme that is supported by the Scottish Government through the joint improvement team. However, it starts with a comprehensive survey of schoolchildren, from which comes extremely high-quality data. It is all about working to understand the needs of each child in an area and reverse-engineering services in a local area to match

those needs. It is a comprehensive way of getting to the point of considering how to get the services to wrap around the needs of children. We can do that at an individual-child level and we can do it at an aggregate level. Both of those approaches are valid in this context.

The Convener: Obviously, this committee is keen to see improvement for looked-after children and young people. The Scottish Government and other bodies have been working hard to achieve demonstrably better outcomes for those children and young people. Can you provide the committee with some concrete examples of that improvement and some sort of detailed description of what the improvement looks like, whether it is improvement that has already occurred or improvement that you expect to see in the near future?

I make one request, which is that, when you answer, you do not talk about working groups, discussions, on-going initiatives and so on, and instead you talk about actual concrete examples that we can understand and see on the ground and which will lead to better outcomes.

David Blair: I will be happy to start the answer now, but I will probably not do the question justice. I would be happy to submit a follow-up response to the committee, if that would be helpful.

We have run a number of programmes, and we have evidence that they have led to improvement. Necessarily, improvement in the care system takes a long time. Historically, as we all recognise, outcomes have not been great. They have been gradually improving for a few years, although not as fast as anyone would like.

The most obvious example that I can think of is the work that we are doing in Aberdeen and Renfrew in the PACE programme. It has been running for only a few months, and it needs to run for four or five months before we have enough data points on the chart. If any of you have been involved in the early years collaborative, you will see that it is very much inspired by that approach, but with a little more in terms of localised support to implement the methods. We also support those two areas with CELCIS practice experts in legal issues, hearings and other areas.

The work that is going on in those two areas has led to a number of small-scale changes and tests of change. I do not have a list of the changes with me, but I am happy to provide them. The small-scale tests concern things that local practitioners have identified as being things that really annoy them and get in the way of making effective decisions for young people and which lead to drift and delay in the system. The drift and delay argument has been well researched by the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration—you have all seen the report. Tackling that is a

concrete example of something that improves the system.

The projects in Aberdeen and Renfrew focus squarely on reducing drift and delay. The small-scale tests of change do that. So far, in both areas, we have seen a dramatic change in the understanding of local practitioners. Practitioners have commented that it has been liberating to be able to poke holes in an established system and rework it into something that is fundamentally fitter for purpose.

The evidence from those two areas is about to be made public. The best thing would be for me to forward that information to the committee once that happens. We have a website that is about to be populated by the early evidence from the tests, and the evidence is compelling. The process is based on the early years collaborative methodology, with evidence being collected at each test of change.

That pretty much answers your question, but I will send on the evidence as soon as it is published.

The Convener: Thank you for that answer—and for attending this morning.

I know that you are going to follow up a number of points in writing, and we look forward to receiving that information. However, if the committee agrees, we might decide that we want to have regular updates on the issue, given the amount of work that we have undertaken on the matter in the past two-and-a-bit years. I am sure that we would appreciate regular updates from the Government, instigated either by us or by you—I am quite happy for you to write to us even if we do not ask, but we might well ask in the near future.

That concludes our business for today. Our next meeting will be on 19 August, when we will deal with stage 2 of the Historic Environment Scotland Bill, which concerns the merger of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and Historic Scotland. That will be our last meeting before the Parliament moves into recess before the referendum.

Meeting closed at 11:21.

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