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Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 19 May 2015

Session 4

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

12th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
*Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP)
*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)
*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)
*Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Eileen Burns (Hamilton School for the Deaf)
Richard Hellewell (Royal Blind)
Alison McGillivray (East Renfrewshire Council)
Brian Shannan (Fife Council)
David Watt (Education Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 19 May 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:02]

Attainment of Pupils with Sensory Impairment

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning, and welcome to the 12th meeting in 2015 of the Education and Culture Committee. I remind all those present to switch off all electronic devices, as they can interfere with the sound system.

Our only item today is to continue taking evidence for our inquiry into the attainment of pupils with a sensory impairment. I welcome to the committee Alison McGillivray from East Renfrewshire Council, David Watt from Education Scotland, Brian Shannan from Fife Council, Eileen Burns from the Hamilton school for the deaf and Richard Hellewell from Royal Blind. Good morning and welcome to you all. Thank you for your written submissions, which we have read in advance of today's meeting—and very interesting they were, too.

Our discussion will be based on the evidence that we have received so far and that we obtained yesterday on our visit to Craigie high school, where we met staff from the Dundee multi-sensory service and some of the pupils and parents who receive support. I think that I speak on behalf of all the committee members who were there when I say that it was a very useful visit. I place on record our thanks to Craigie high school and the multi-sensory service for welcoming us yesterday in Dundee.

We will move straight to questions from members.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I wanted to put this question to Marie Kelly, the education senior manager from East Renfrewshire Council, but I think that she has become Alison McGillivray.

The Convener: I am sorry, Mary, but Marie Kelly is not here.

Mary Scanlon: I realise that. It is Alison McGillivray who is here from East Renfrewshire.

The Convener: It is, yes.

Mary Scanlon: I was particularly taken by East Renfrewshire Council's written evidence, which I thought was very thorough. I wish to consider the role of providing early intervention support for families and children. Thanks to Mark Griffin's British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill, I now have an awareness that 90 per cent of children with a hearing impairment are born to hearing families. I also wish to discuss any improvements that can be made to promote multi-agency working at the earliest opportunity, with information sharing and so on. My questions are along those lines.

Referring to the first page of your submission, I am impressed to see that East Renfrewshire schools hold

> "comprehensive data on the attainment of all children through analysis of baseline, standardised tests at P3, P5, P7 and S2, SQA results and now in its second year, developmental milestones."

I compare that with an Audit Scotland report of last year, which said that some councils—I now realise which ones—look at standardised tests on a regular basis. Audit Scotland also said:

> "At a council level, there is no consistent approach to tracking and monitoring the progress of pupils from P1 to S3."

It seems that East Renfrewshire is perhaps one of the better councils, if I can put it that way. You seem to have the information that, from the evidence that I have heard, appears to be lacking. How do you get those "baseline, standardised tests", which are so critical to identifying sensory loss?

Alison McGillivray (East Renfrewshire Council): We collate very robust data for all our learners. We are always improving on that and we are not complacent about the information that we have. We collect a range of information about young people's attainment, which is held in the schools and then collated centrally. Our staff can track any young person's attainment closely and support and intervene as appropriate.

East Renfrewshire Council has carried out standardised tests for a number of years. They are a good indication of a young person's progress and where they are in terms of curriculum for excellence. The tests support our staff and schools to intervene where necessary.

You asked about early intervention—

Mary Scanlon: Yes, and perhaps you could answer in relation to nursery schools, too, although I realise that your testing does not take place there.

Alison McGillivray: It does not, but we have a good staged intervention system, so that all our staff are aware of all the young people who they work with, as soon as they come into any of our provision, be it in P5 or in high school. The staff are also aware of the range of impairments and barriers that there can be to learning. They are very attuned to whether young people are making the progress that they should. That is where the strong multi-agency work comes in. We have good joint support teams—multi-agency partnerships—from very early on. We do good work with our educational psychologists so that, if anything about a child's progress raises concern, it will be looked at closely and followed up.

Mary Scanlon: Are you confident that, from newborns to five-year-olds, if any child has a sensory impairment, it will be picked up and the child will be identified and given multi-agency support to address their needs and help them through school? Is East Renfrewshire a beacon of good practice?

Alison McGillivray: Yes. If we are aware that a child has a sensory impairment, all that support will come into place very quickly.

Mary Scanlon: Did you not say that, with all that you have in place, you would be aware of such a child?

Alison McGillivray: I know from my colleagues who work in the service that sometimes someone may come into the authority from elsewhere or there may be instances where, for whatever reason, the issue has not been picked up by the time that a young person or child comes into our provision. If that were the case, I hope that we would quickly identify that child.

We have good relationships with our allied health professional colleagues and there is good information sharing in the authority. We work with babies in the home. We have a home-visiting teacher who is separate from the sensory support service but who works alongside that service. The home-visiting teacher may be accompanied by one of the sensory support service team, and the child may have alternate fortnightly visits from home visiting or sensory support.

In that way, we are also able to support families. We do that because, as you say, it can be difficult for parents to understand sensory impairment and its impact. If parents work with the right people in the right partnerships early on, that can make a significant difference to how they feel and their ability to support their child.

Mary Scanlon: That is helpful. I want to ask about the baseline standardised tests. I am aware that there is not a national Government test and that many local authorities in Scotland buy in tests from the private sector in England, so there is no comparison between one local authority and another. Given that background, when you say that the test is "baseline" and "standardised", what do you mean? I thought that there was no standardised test across Scotland, but have I misunderstood?

Alison McGillivray: They are standardised tests within the authority. We commission them.

Mary Scanlon: I see—they are standardised in your authority. Could you compare them with another authority?

Alison McGillivray: No. We can compare the progress of children against each other only within the authority. We can say where we expect them to be and whether they are above or below that.

Mary Scanlon: I understand that better. We cannot make a comparison between your authority and others because they do not use the same tests—your test is standardised only for East Renfrewshire and not across Scotland. That is helpful.

The Convener: Before we move on, I want to hear from the rest of the panel on the questions that Mary Scanlon has asked. What is your experience of, and what are your views on, early intervention in relation to children with either a hearing or visual impairment?

David Watt (Education Scotland): That is clearly an area where we can continue to improve. Through getting it right for every child, we are putting in place the approach to multi-agency working that addresses the good practice that takes place in East Renfrewshire. For children from the ages of zero to five, a named person in health will identify any areas where support is required. That person will work in partnership with education and other providers to ensure that the additional support needs of those children are met at an early stage.

The early years collaborative is rolling through. It has a set of stretch aims, with screening at 30 months. Additional support is an area in the early years collaborative that requires further improvement.

Brian Shannan (Fife Council): The newborn hearing screening programme, which has been in place for a number of years now, was implemented very differently in Scotland from the approach in England. England had a standardised screening programme and a follow-up programme that enabled professionals and families to monitor and intervene effectively. In Scotland, we have a standard screening programme but two different screening methods are used, depending on the health board.

Unfortunately, there has never been a programme in place to monitor the children's development. England used what were called the early monitoring protocols, which were part of the early years programme. Initially, those materials were available in Scotland, but they are no longer available here, as there is not actually a standardised method.

In addition, back in 2003, the Public Health Institute of Scotland recommended that, at the point of sharing the news with the family that their child was deaf, there should be not just a health professional but a professional from education or social services involved. That was also one of the recommendations in the Scottish sensory centre's standards for children from birth to the age of three.

That is what we do in our area of Fife. My colleague and I are responsible for sharing the news with families, phoning them the next day, providing them with information and ensuring that they are flexible in their approach. Families sometimes start out with spoken language development as their desired aim but, for a range of reasons, that might not be achievable. We encourage families to be flexible in their approach and to have a positive attitude to deafness. That can work only if we have multi-agency working on the ground so that colleagues can influence one another. I have gained experience by working with my colleague, who does the screening, and he has gained experience of the bigger picture by working with me.

There needs to be a training programme for staff, and there needs to be in place a standardised method of monitoring language development. The advantage of the early monitoring protocols is that they monitor not just spoken language but British Sign Language. Just as all children are assessed by health visitors at an early stage using a standardised method, we need a standardised method for identifying where children are so that a child and family-centred approach to intervening where things are not going right can be put in place.

Eileen Burns (Hamilton School for the Deaf): We have newborn hearing screening, which is wonderful. It means that we know whether children are deaf at an early age, before they leave the maternity hospital. They are provided with hearing aids earlier, and cochlear implantation has been taking place earlier than ever before. However, the idea that British Sign Language can be used with children right at that early stage, when it is basically the only language that they can communicate with naturally and have full access to, is often not suggested. BSL is not suggested as a positive option for children.

An important issue is who is part of the multi-agency group. If a child has been diagnosed as deaf, it is important to try to dispel the deficit approach that suggests that that is the end of the world. Deaf people need to be involved in the multi-agency group so that parents can meet deaf people who communicate effectively, who are married and have children and who function in society. That is a much more positive way of looking at deafness.

10:15

We must also raise awareness in the health profession about the positive effect of teaching children and the importance of giving them access to a language as early as possible. Health professionals often discourage parents from making use of sign language. Basically, they say that signing with a child will affect their spoken language development, but the evidence shows that that is not the case. We have to dispel that.

We just accept language delay for deaf children. We say that, if someone is deaf, we will give them hearing aids and cochlear implants, and we accept that there will be times in their lives when they will not be able to communicate, such as while they are waiting for cochlear implantation or if they have a cochlear implant and take it out at night. We accept that there are times when deaf people are not able to communicate, but that is because of our monolingual approach to deaf education.

Throughout the world, bilingualism is thought of as a fantastic thing for cognitive development, but when it comes to deaf children we say, "No—don't sign." That is the advice that parents of deaf children are being given. If they are told by a consultant not to sign with their child, that will have a massive effect on how they view British Sign Language. To raise the attainment of deaf children, we must allow them to develop cognitively, and to do that they need a language. There is a language there that they could have access to, but we are denying them access to it.

We should say to people who have a deaf child at an early age that British Sign Language might be a good thing to learn. We should tell them that using BSL would mean that, from an early age, their child's mind would be developing and cognitively active. We have to support that and provide parents with sign language classes in the home. I am not saying that that does not happen in Scotland—it does, and we should learn from that good practice—but it is not the norm. We are leaving children with no language so that we can focus on spoken language.

To improve attainment, we should give children language as early as possible. That is my experience. There is a language available, and it may not be easy but, by supporting parents, teaching them sign language in the home and making it accessible, we can help them to learn it. It might not be reasonable to expect someone with a new baby to go to a class, so we have to think outside the box and provide support for families to learn sign language, and we must dispel the deficit idea that spoken language will be held back because of using sign language, when the opposite is the case.

Richard Hellewell (Royal Blind): In the field of visual impairment, there is an echo of what has just been said about sign language when it comes to the use of Braille. Of course, Braille is not a distinct language in anything like the same way, but it is a means of access to the written word. The best time for a child to learn Braille is when his or her peers are learning to read. The same connections are being made and the same skills are being learned, and early intervention is important because Braille needs to be front loaded, as do other aspects such as habilitation, living skills and the equipping of access to the whole curriculum. Doing that as early as possible gives a child confidence and allows us to set targets for them to aim at, which helps the child to realise that they can be part of the whole education thing, along with their peers, and that they can approach it with confidence.

A huge amount of inclusion is about confidence and allowing a child or young person to feel that they can be included and can assert themselves. They need to know that the things that they do and say and their motions affect their environment and other people's response to them, and that needs to happen as early as possible in their school career. Regrettably, it does not always happen.

There is a lot of excellent practice around, but a few influences over the past 10 or 15 years have led to phased interventions. That has been because of well-thought-through and good policy ideas, such as the presumption that we start with a mainstream classroom. However, too often, that means that we are starting somebody where they will fail and that remedial and catch-up work are then needed. The approach needs to be the other way round. The interventions that give the child confidence and access to the written word need to happen first. If they do, the inclusion in the classroom thereafter is much more effective.

The Convener: Thank you.

I am sorry, Mary.

Mary Scanlon: Thank you—that was helpful. I did not want to take advantage.

I will lump together my final questions. Most of the witnesses have talked about screening newborns. In its evidence last week, the National Deaf Children's Society told us that the guidance for that initiative has still not been published, although it began in 2005. Perhaps that explains why there are different practices throughout Scotland.

I have some questions for Alison McGillivray. First, I do not pretend to understand this, but page 3 of East Renfrewshire Council's submission says:

> "There are many more children being diagnosed with a conductive hearing loss who display auditory processing disorder (APD) type difficulties".

I ask her to explain that term. I am not familiar with it and it would be helpful if I got an explanation. The submission continues:

> "these children could benefit from programmes worked on at home and in the … nursery."

Secondly, we are talking about best practice, working together and the integration of health and social care, so I am shocked that East Renfrewshire Council finds it difficult to get information from the health service for children and young people who are seen at ear, nose and throat departments. It gets information from the audiology service, but there seems to be an unwillingness to share information, which is obviously detrimental.

I do not think that my final point is to be picked up in later questions. East Renfrewshire Council's submission recommends that

> "Scotland should consider the introduction of building guidelines such as Building Bulletin 93 which is mandatory in England."

I am not sure what building bulletin 93 does, but it would help if Alison McGillivray explained to us what it is and how it would benefit buildings in Scotland.

Alison McGillivray: There are people sitting here who are far better qualified than I am to explain auditory processing disorder, so I look to my colleagues on the panel to give you a proper explanation of its impact.

You made a point about ear, nose and throat departments. To be fair to health colleagues, a lot of good practice in supporting any additional support need comes down to good relationships, and it can take time to foster relationships, whether with education or health colleagues.

Our teams have strong links with the audiology departments in hospitals, but we do not have the same pathways for who contacts whom and whom to get in touch with about diagnosis that is done through ear, nose and throat departments. That is what my team tells me—hence its desire to have the information as soon as any health professional is aware of a sensory impairment for a child or young person.

Mary Scanlon: Is the national health service unwilling to give you that information, which would benefit the child?

Alison McGillivray: I would not characterise the approach as unwillingness, but things could be done to improve communication when it comes to early identification and diagnosis. Sometimes, links are made but then elements of agencies that are around a child are restructured or changed.

There is a constant process of making contacts and being clear about who the person to get in touch with is.

Building bulletin 93 is in place in England and Wales. Our team is concerned that new builds in Scotland should be accessible from the first brick. We should not be going in after the event to make buildings accessible to a range of young people; we should future proof them to be inclusive for all the children and young people who come their way.

Mary Scanlon: I am trying to understand what changes there would be and what difference we would see if the guidance was implemented in Scotland.

Alison McGillivray: We have no open-plan classrooms in East Renfrewshire and we no longer build such classrooms.

One of the strengths of supporting sensory impairment is that whatever we put in place to support children with sensory impairment will benefit a range of other children with additional support needs. A sound field system can be of benefit to children on the autistic spectrum, as it can help them to concentrate and focus.

Our submission cited England and Wales because of the mandatory provision there. The preference might be for guidance, but we all aspire to the best possible learning environment for all our children, which is why our team would like mandatory measures to be considered.

The Convener: Alison McGillivray said that someone else might describe auditory processing disorder.

Brian Shannan: I am happy to deal with the three issues that were raised. There is not really a standardised test for auditory processing disorder, which is a phrase that has come into common usage. It is better to think of auditory processing difficulties, which are a problem that many children can face. There are three difficulties: making sense of sound, making sense of phonics and making sense of language.

The ear is a bit like a piano—it makes sense of sound in the same way. A sound always appears in the ear in the same place and the brain expects that sound to appear in the auditory part of the brain in the same place. For some children, the sound leaves the ear at the correct place but the brain does not pick it up in the right location, so those children find it quite challenging to make sense of sound. They can also find literacy quite challenging, because the system is phonics based. In Fife, we have been developing a system that uses sign to overcome those challenges. We have used it with deaf children quite successfully and are now using it with some hearing children.

The ENT issue is a common problem throughout Scotland. An indication of the difficulties is that, according to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, 80 per cent of children will by the age of 10 have had otitis media with effusion, which is glue ear. The mean for the period of glue ear is generally between six and 10 weeks, which is roughly a term in school.

General practitioners get a range of children coming to them, and they will often watch and wait, which is appropriate medically but fails to understand the challenges that that presents for children in the classroom. The younger someone is, the bigger the impact of glue ear is. Glue ear will have a bigger impact on a youngster who is developing their language skills or is in early primary than on a 16 or 17-year-old, whose brain is fully matured to sound.

In a sense, that ties into the building bulletin 93 issue. Deaf children’s primary difficulty with auditory systems arises either because the mechanical part of the ear does not work—namely, the sound is attenuated and is much quieter—or because they have a sensory neural difficulty, which means that the sound is not only quieter but distorted. In addition, the brain requires a nice signal, which is why the thing to look at with barriers to deaf attainment, within the wider barriers to attainment across the board—especially for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds—is that the brain matures at a different rate to sound. In addition, the brain requires a good, strong language base and good working memory to make sense of what it hears.

If a classroom is noisy or there is a lot of reverberation—

Mary Scanlon: When it is open plan.

Brian Shannan: Yes. Reverberation just means that the room is echoey and open plan. The difference between, say, a gym hall and a classroom is that one is very echoey. However, some classrooms can be echoey, which degrades the signal for everyone. If we think about the ENT issue again, and given that 80 per cent of children in every primary school will have hearing difficulties at some point, we want to ensure that schools are built to a standard that means that everyone can hear clearly.

Building bulletin 93 sets that out, but it is quite discriminatory, because it sets a reverberation time of 0.6 for primary schools and 0.8 for secondary schools. That is based on the presumption that children’s brains mature to sound. However, we are living in an inclusive society and, for a lot of children in classrooms, their brains are not so fully matured to sound. We should set a standard for primary schools for all builds and identify rooms in buildings that would be set for deaf children at 0.4, so that we have more inclusive buildings.

10:30

The Convener: We will move on to our next area of questioning.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): One of the things that I have found a wee bit frustrating has been the quality of the data to support some of the assertions that have been made in evidence. For example, we have four different figures for the number of children with visual impairment: the 869 children who are registered as blind or partially sighted; the 2,080 quoted in a *Times Educational Supplement Scotland* article; the 2,200 highlighted by the Scottish sensory centre; and the 3,544 who have been identified by Education Scotland. How can you ensure that you are making adequate provision and providing the correct support if you have no reliable figures to work from?

David Watt: First, I should point out that the data that you said was from Education Scotland actually comes from schools across Scotland. Each September, schools complete a census on a range of factors, including aspects that relate to additional support. The quality of the data—the figures—for additional support has been improving, but the additional support measure is not the same as the blind or partially sighted measure. With the former, teachers and schools are asked to identify those who require additional support because of the principal factor of visual impairment, and that identification could be at a more sensitive level than identifying someone as blind or visually impaired.

The same is true of hearing impairment. That is not just about children who are deaf; it could be schools picking up on, say, cases of glue ear, because the teachers in those schools know the young people in front of them and the challenges that they face. The definition of what is required for additional support is sensitive, and it represents teachers' views on who requires such support to benefit from school education.

Colin Beattie: You are saying that the 3,544 figure represents the children with sensory impairment who have been identified and are receiving some form of support or provision in the school system.

David Watt: That is what we ask teachers to record in the census and what that data covers.

I should also say that the committee has made a major contribution to the improvement of the data on the form in question, because back in 2010 you asked us to take fuller account of those with mental health issues, young carers, looked-after children and those with sensory impairment. As a result, legislation was introduced to amend the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 to ensure that we report on and record factors across additional support.

The quality of that data continues to improve and I can tell the committee that no one else, nationally or internationally, has the same range of data on the prevalence of additional support needs and the education outcomes and positive destinations of the children in question. We know more and more about those children.

Richard Hellewell: I should point out that registering as blind is a voluntary process and that not everyone opts to do it, which means that the official statistics usually understate the number of blind and partially sighted people. That is probably more of an issue with regard to people who are of working age and older rather than young people but, nevertheless, there is a big problem with blind registration. We need to ensure that it becomes more common for people who suffer a sight loss.

I echo the comment that the committee should go with the larger figure. Another point about registration is that we are talking about a work-based definition of blindness—in other words, it is based on a person's practical ability to do work—when what we around the table are more interested in is educational attainment. The two things are similar, but not necessarily the same, and there is a danger in taking one set of statistics from a particular measurement and making more of it than simply a broad indicator of the numbers out there.

Colin Beattie: Do you agree that it creates confusion if different organisations quote different and conflicting figures? We sit here and try to make sense of all this. We try to get our heads around it, but we have to face a multiplicity of figures. How do we reconcile that?

Richard Hellewell: I agree entirely. We need to get past the view that the statistics conflict and move to understanding that different figures are different because they mean something different. However, I agree that that makes it hard to get into the subject.

Colin Beattie: Has the confusion over the figures affected service provision?

Eileen Burns: There is a possible reason why, in deaf education, some people provide higher figures than others. Children who have a mild hearing loss are often not included in the figures for children who need additional support in schools, but they are included in the Consortium for Research into Deaf Education figures. That might be why there is a discrepancy.

My experience of supporting deaf children is that we know the children in our authority area who are deaf. There are issues with being told late about a child, perhaps because of information coming late from audiology, when we would like to know and become involved earlier.

I have an example of good practice in multi-agency working. In the authority where I previously worked, I would sit with the ENT consultant in the audiology clinic every month to meet deaf children and their parents who were coming through the clinic. I realised early that that was an important meeting. I could find out about the children's hearing loss, any changes, whether they were to have an operation and so on. That meant that I could quickly change the support that I provided.

Education, audiology and health people sitting together and meeting parents and children is good practice but, unfortunately, I think that it is under threat because of the centralisation of the health service in the west of Scotland. Audiology might well be moved to the new hospital, and it will be more difficult for people in local authority areas outwith the hospital's area to meet their client base, because they might have appointments all over the place and such meetings will not be realistic.

Colin Beattie: How will the confusion be resolved?

David Watt: We are looking at educational attainment, and notice should be taken of the data that we have in education, although it can still be improved. We have identified more young people who have additional support needs. Those figures continue to increase. If we were getting right the support that we provide, we would expect those figures to decrease, because we would have met the need. There could be a role for greater publicity about the Scottish figures and what they tell us.

We will review the census and how it applies in Scotland. The aim of that is to get greater consistency across education authorities. Some of them have identified 10 per cent of the pupil population as having additional support needs, and others are identifying percentages in the low 30s. If we can standardise and achieve greater consistency, we can ensure that there is no misallocation of resources.

Colin Beattie: There is another conflict in the information that is given. East Renfrewshire Council has indicated that the attainment levels of visually impaired and hearing impaired children are at least equal to those of other pupils, and in some cases they are better. That conflicts a little with some of what we have heard from elsewhere. Education Scotland provides an element of support for East Renfrewshire's view by stating that visually impaired and hearing impaired students are performing well and above the national average, but that is still at odds with everything that we have heard up to now. How does that come about?

David Watt: The attainment outcomes for deaf children and those with visual impairment are not good enough. They are below national averages on their overall tariff score and on the range of qualifications that the children get. There is no complacency here. We must do better by those with additional support needs right across the piece. People with additional support needs may be achieving at 60 per cent of the national average. That is not good enough either, but that is where we are. That is about our schools, including our good schools, but it is also about who a pupil is in a school—that is, the background that they bring and the nature of their additional support needs. Schools could go further to do better by those with additional support needs.

Colin Beattie: Why is East Renfrewshire so different?

Alison McGillivray: I am delighted that we are in the position that we are in with our young people. It is their success, and we have supported them to achieve that.

As David Watt says, we are not complacent. We are perhaps talking about small numbers of people and specifically about those for whom sensory impairment is the sole barrier to their learning that we are aware of. We have a vision for all learners in East Renfrewshire to achieve, and it is important to us that that is the case, irrespective the attainment level that they can reach.

We have the data. There is no magic; rather, what is described in various documents is good practice. There are qualified, committed, passionate teachers who are nurturing in their approach, so they are looking at the health and wellbeing of the young people, as well as supporting them to act and removing barriers to their learning. They are producing confident and independent young people who are able to talk about their needs and understand the different things that can be done to address those learning barriers, because the sensory support service staff cannot be with them all the time in schools.

That brings me on to say that we have very good schools in which the young people are learning. Our sensory support staff are working alongside other staff who are equally committed to removing learning barriers for all young people, and not just for those who go on to university, because they want to ensure that every young person achieves the best they can.

We are good at listening to what learners want. We talk to the young person about different equipment or adaptations, so that we know what they want to use and are comfortable with. I have an example of a young man who is going on to university who has not made use of a radio transmitter throughout his secondary school career but who thinks that that might be useful to him. We are supporting him to trial different models, so that he can have one with him for the transition to university.

As I say, it is about listening to what the young people want. It is also about working with families.

We are thinking about learning-friendly approaches. Perhaps a challenge of the curriculum for excellence is the increase in active learning, which means that there may be a bit more noise in classrooms now than there was 40 years ago. The approach is good for learners, but we must ensure that it does not impede the learning of young people with sensory impairment.

We seek up-to-date equipment. During my involvement with the service, if a young person has needed something to help them to access their learning, that has been supplied as soon as possible. We do not have delays; we do not wait for budgets to be renewed. They get what they need to access their learning.

There is good communication between the sensory support staff and the schools, the parents and the partners they work with. All that together is sound practice in meeting learners' needs.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning. I have a question for David Watt. He said that there is no complacency, and I accept that. He also said that there are good and bad schools. We have heard an indication that East Renfrewshire has good schools, which is perhaps due to geographical and economic considerations. Why do we still have bad schools?

David Watt: I am not sure that I referred to bad schools. Overall, Scottish schools are good schools. We are providing a good service. I said that it is about who a pupil is within the school.

For schools that need to improve, the challenge, which has been taken up across Europe with greater success than we have had, is about equity and inclusiveness, and ensuring that the environment in which people work takes note of who they are and what they need to engage. It is a question of having a social justice agenda and ensuring that neither a child's gender nor their disability nor their social background is a barrier to how well they do in school.

Chic Brodie: You say that there are no bad schools, but in which areas would you say that local authorities provide insufficient support to achieve what we are trying to do on the attainment of those with sensory impairment? Which are the bad authorities?

10:45

David Watt: We work with authorities to self-evaluate their progress.

Chic Brodie: I am asking which are the bad authorities as far as you are concerned.

David Watt: I am not sure that that is a question that meets the needs of children and young people. Authorities and schools across Scotland are delivering on the capacities for the curriculum for excellence and are providing the support, but that is not done coherently across authority areas. Given that the general level of schooling is good, we are talking about within-school differences. Through the work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, we were told that provision in schools is generally good, but there can be an issue with a particular class or teacher. It is a case of ensuring consistency of good practice across each school and each authority.

It is the case that, even taking into account social background, there are authorities that do better by those young people with a hearing impairment, and we should be looking to challenge authorities further.

Chic Brodie: I want to move on to the issue of data and getting an accurate picture of attainment. It has been suggested that the Scottish Government's additional support needs data is limited as it reports only on the qualifications that are achieved by pupils when they leave school but, for non-ASN pupils, attainment data is also collected at the end of secondary 4.

Do you think that the current data provides an accurate picture of the attainment of pupils with a single sensory impairment? If not, what would be the merit of collecting additional attainment data specifically for pupils with a single sensory impairment? Perhaps Mr Shannan might want to comment on that.

Brian Shannan: Our authority collects data using the University of Durham centre for evaluation and monitoring's AFE—achievement for excellence—assessments. As in East Renfrewshire, the children sit the assessments in primary 1, 3, 5 and 7, and then there are the national qualifications at secondary level. That data provides very useful information on where children are at across a broad range of subject areas.

I think that we need to focus on issues to do with literacy, because that is an area in which deaf children have traditionally been poorly served. I agree that we need to look at where there is good practice and to follow that good practice. In our authority, we have had quite a bit of success with children who use BSL in a mainstream setting. According to the AFE data, they have a language base two years above their age.

We need to look at such successes and at the models of support that are in place for deaf children. The curriculum has changed drastically over the past 20 or 30 years, but the models of support for deaf children have remained relatively unchanged. Many of the submissions talk about restricting the curriculum further and one-to-one support. We need to give kids the chance to be resilient and to take risks. Deaf children often feel reluctant to take the risk of being wrong, and I think that we need to look at the successes that have been achieved. The AFE blind testing is really helpful because it is independent, whereas internal assessments can sometimes be subject to grade inflation.

Chic Brodie: Surely S4 is a period of risk for any pupil. Do you think that not reporting on the attainment of pupils with ASN at S4, as opposed to earlier or later, creates a significant problem in assessing attainment at that specific age?

Brian Shannan: It would be better to have robust assessments throughout the primary period, not just at S4. We need to know where deaf learners are at with their learning so that the gap that I mentioned can be bridged.

In part, it comes back to the availability of data. As I said, children with a sensory-neural type of deafness will be identified through the newborn screening, whereas children with glue ear and other issues may be missed in the system. There is definitely an issue with getting the data, and there is a need for assessments throughout the primary system to see where the children are in relation to their hearing peers.

The Convener: Liam McArthur has a brief supplementary question.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): It follows on from David Watt’s response to Chic Brodie. The Scottish Government has insisted that it wants to raise the level of attainment across the board as well as close the attainment gap, and we have been wrestling with the question of whether there is an inherent contradiction in that. I am interested in David Watt’s assessment of where good practice is established and recognised. Is there evidence to show that resources are being used to support that good practice in a way that they are not being used in other areas? I am not suggesting that in some areas there is no provision or that there are not services that may have strengths and weaknesses, but is there a commitment of resource to the level that is needed? Is the good practice emerging from those areas where there is a willingness to target the resource to meet the need?

David Watt: The good practice that we have found through recent inspections is in schools such as Calderside academy, Clydeview academy, Dalziel high school, Grange academy, St Margaret’s primary school and Carlogie primary school in Angus. Across the country, the level and nature of the support that goes into schools and mainstream classes is different in different areas. However, there is also an element of deaf young people working together within the schools to ensure that they are not socially isolated or excluded and that they can participate fully in classes. Support is one aspect, but I echo the comment that was made about young people being more confident, which is an area that we need to go into right across additional support needs so that we can expect young people to assert what they need in order to do better in school and expect schools to be more responsive to them.

We recently held a deaf learners conference that was attended by more than 60 young deaf people. It was the first time that they had been in a room with so many other deaf young people, and they set out some of their challenges and support needs. They also set out some of their achievements. It was heartening to hear that a British motocross champion is deaf, that somebody in the Scottish national sailing team is deaf and that young people are taking pride in how they represent themselves around their schools and are gaining awards in their schools. That aspect of their achievement has not been remarked on, but there are some terrific young deaf people out there.

Liam McArthur: I understand the argument that being a more demanding constituency of interest will help to make the case for improvements, but I am trying to get at whether there is a resource implication that requires local authorities and individual schools to prioritise investment in the area—however that comes about—to make it work. Alternatively, are there examples where the resource is not particularly targeted but good practice happens because a group of excellent teachers work collaboratively with their counterparts in health services and other areas and just get round the problems that others struggle to get round?

Eileen Burns: David Watt mentioned good practice in a lot of schools that I know, but there is good practice throughout Scotland. Most of the schools that David mentioned, if not all of them, have resource base provision for their deaf children. Deaf people have been telling us for a long time that being individually placed in a mainstream school is not the ideal way for deaf children to be educated and that their social experiences from that are limiting and isolating and can result in mental health issues.

The "Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education", which states that deaf children should have the opportunity to go to mainstream schools, is the cornerstone of the inclusion philosophy that has taken forward practice in this country and, to an extent, the rest of the world. However, I remember reading a paragraph in the Salamanca statement that says that, because of their communication needs, deaf children or deafblind children might be better served in a resource base or a special school. When I read that, I thought, "Wow!" because, although the document promotes inclusive education and the presumption that deaf children should have access to mainstream education, it recognises that deaf children also need a deaf peer group, the opportunity to develop BSL and specialist staff. More important, though, the document also recognises that a deaf child needs to be part of a group of deaf children who can communicate effectively and naturally with one another.

In terms of best practice throughout Scotland, I would like to see more resource bases to allow deaf children to come together and be educated together. Deaf people have been telling us for a long time that that is what they want. There is an organisation called the deaf ex-mainstreamers group, whose members have experience of being individually placed in mainstream education. The group campaigns against mainstreaming for deaf children and for deaf children to be educated within a deaf peer group and have access to specialist staff, especially for the teaching of English.

Deaf children have to be taught English in a completely different way because they do not hear it as we do. We can say of something we read that it does not sound right, but deaf children cannot do that because they do not hear those sounds. The irregularities of English have to be taught to them—for example, the different forms of the verb "to be"—which means that English is taught to them, in effect, as a second language. I often think that it is a wee bit like learning Latin, because word order in BSL is different from that in English. It is a difficult, skilled job to teach deaf children English. If a resource base has qualified, skilled teachers who understand the challenges for deaf children in learning English, deaf children's literacy skills can improve.

Richard Hellewell: To answer Liam McArthur's question, which is mainly about where we should invest, I would stress training and qualifications. Certainly from our angle, a qualification in teaching children with a visual impairment is needed to keep the quality up. Our written submission and others mention that a bit of a demographic, manpower-planning problem is coming up because of retirals. There really is a need for expertise, because what makes the whole thing work is having people who know how to set targets and arrange the classroom environment for a child with a visual impairment.

Similarly, we need investment in training and organising the provision of habilitation, which is not an academic attainment and is not measured in the same way, but it must not be forgotten. A child with a visual impairment needs to know the techniques for getting by in daily life. In order to later hold down a job, they need not only academic success but simple skills such as how to handle being given a cup of tea or coffee, which does not come naturally to somebody who cannot see. They need a good, solid input of such habilitation skills throughout their school career.

Liam McArthur: I was due to come back to mainstreaming later, but it would appear more sensible to bring it in now because you have just mentioned it—

The Convener: No, we will move on to teaching questions from Gordon MacDonald, if you do not mind.

Liam McArthur: We will come back to mainstreaming.

11:00

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Thank you, convener. I thank Richard Hellewell for that introduction, because I will start by asking about teaching staff specifically.

We have heard that there is a lack of qualified teachers to support pupils with sensory impairments. In your submission, you said:

> "There are many qualified teachers of the visually impaired (QTVI) who have retired and this has left a huge deficit in those who are able to fully understand how to educate pupils with visual impairment."

We have also had evidence to suggest that, across the 32 local authorities, there are only a handful of audiologists and there is a lack of teachers who have appropriate BSL qualifications. What practical steps can be taken to address the shortfall?

Richard Hellewell: We need to build that specialism as a respected specialism and one that people want to go into and that has the potential for career progression. The trend towards mainstreaming in the past 20 years has made mainstream teaching and generalism the things to aim for. That is honourable and good, but there is a need for people who have detailed expertise.

There needs to be recognition for the people who have such expertise. One possibility would be to set up a pay structure that has some incentive for those teachers. We do that in the Royal Blind school. We have an addition to salary for being a qualified teacher of the visually impaired and for having contracted Braille skills. If someone has both, we pay an incentive on top. That could be done across Scotland as part of a strategy of recognition and seeing those people as very important professionals in this environment.

Eileen Burns: I agree with that. There is no financial incentive for anyone to become a teacher of the deaf. To become a teacher of the deaf it is only necessary to have BSL level 1, which is just a basic level of BSL. I would like to see that requirement increased to at least level 3 so that, if someone is working with deaf children, they can provide BSL as an option.

Often, the signing skills of teachers of the deaf who are working with deaf children are such that they cannot offer BSL. Subconsciously, that may be why they do not offer it, because they cannot provide it. Of the teachers of the deaf who are supporting children peripatetically in Scotland, 10 per cent have BSL level 3 or above. That means that 90 per cent have a lower level.

There are examples of good practice, with local authorities paying for teachers to go through the BSL levels. On the whole, the BSL skills of teachers in Scotland have improved over the past 10 years, but we need more teachers with a good level of BSL skills so that they can offer BSL as an option for deaf children.

Brian Shannan: It is a two-way process, because we must attract the really good teachers—those who are interested and want to help deaf children learn. In the past, there was a financial addition, but it was quite small and, considering the level of training required, it would not necessarily have been a big incentive. The real incentive was that the teachers wanted to work in the field.

We must promote the profession to make sure that we are getting the right people, from probationary teachers through to experienced teachers. We also need to ensure that, as well as having signing skills, those who have been in the field for a long time have not become too narrow in their approach. There is a broad range of experience out there that everyone in the field can learn from. We must look to that broader experience.

The issue is not just about the provision of training for teachers and educational audiologists. Many deaf children are supported by very effective pupil support staff. Ensuring that the skills of those staff are recognised and that they feel that they are valued members of the team is part of how services should work locally. It should be a collegiate approach, involving a range of staff; there should not be a hierarchy of teachers of the deaf and support staff. A range of things could be put in place.

Alison McGillivray: I endorse what Brian Shannan says about having interested and committed staff and about valuing those staff who have the qualifications. We support continuing lifelong professional learning for our teachers.

I want to comment on the pathway to becoming a teacher of the deaf or a teacher of the visually impaired. There are lots of support-for-learning courses that people can do and there is a lot of in-house training—our own sensory support staff deliver high-quality sessions to staff in schools. However, if you are a teacher in a school who is thinking about that, you could only go into the job and then train to gain the qualification while you were in that post. Maybe we should consider having an interim qualification on additional support needs so that people who might be considering that have an option, rather than going from none at all to suddenly everybody training.

When people are training, they need to work alongside someone who is experienced and who can support them. It can be quite a lonely job if you are a peripatetic teacher and you are the voice for sensory impairment when you go out into a school; unpromoted teachers might have to explain things to and challenge principal teachers and depute heads. Therefore, it would be good to have a pathway and an incentive for people to take that route.

David Watt: I endorse the point about looking at the range of qualifications and how that develops. Some of that could be focused in the context of “Teaching Scotland’s Future: Report of a review of teacher education in Scotland”. Education Scotland has engaged with a group of deaf practitioners and teachers to discuss how we could support their career-long professional learning through identifying ways of them gaining professional recognition, which is part and parcel of the General Teaching Council for Scotland approach for professional learning. That may be something that we can resource.

Gordon MacDonald: Thank you for that. Visually impaired and hearing impaired pupils have a range of hearing and vision problems. Do we have the appropriate levels of teaching staff in our mainstream schools, our support units and our specialist schools? Obviously, the provision is tailored to the children’s needs. Where are the gaps? Are they predominantly in mainstream schools or are they across the piece?

Eileen Burns: In a mainstream school, when the teacher sits with 30 children in front of her and one of them is deaf, it is a challenge to meet the needs of that child. A mainstream teacher may have a deaf child once or twice in their whole teaching career. It is important that they are supported. It is important that the teacher is aware of the strategies that they need to use to include the deaf child in the class. It always depends on who the teacher is and how willing they are to take on board that information and make use of the equipment that is available. In mainstream schools, there are obvious limitations to the skills of a mainstream teacher.

Most teachers of the deaf in Scotland will go to Moray House to do a postgraduate diploma in deaf education, where they will learn about deaf studies, the appropriate curriculum for deaf children, teaching English to deaf children—a big area—and special assessments for deaf children. It is mandatory to become qualified as a teacher of the deaf within five years of working with deaf children.

We are well served by the University of Edinburgh. When teachers come out, they have the skills to meet the needs of deaf children. The issue is getting more teachers of the deaf qualified.

Brian Shannan: One of the methods that was used by the Scottish Government to try to increase numbers was to do away with having to attend the course at Moray House and to have people follow the competency route instead, whereby there was internal verification of a teacher’s standards. The problem is that that practice might not necessarily be good practice so, in a sense, the teacher is learning bad practice, which is being verified.

The number of deaf children and staff involved means that we must use an empowering model. We must empower the teachers to take responsibility, as they do now through registration, and we must also empower the kids to understand their deafness in relation to their language, audiology et cetera. That comes back to the point that they are, in a sense, the people who will enforce change.

We have to move from the expert-driven model to a different model of support. It is not just about places, but about changing how our profession works with schools and families, and giving up some of that power, as it were.

Alison McGillivray: I concur with Brian Shannan on empowerment. Teachers can have classes of 30, in which there may be one or two pupils with sensory impairment but also children with autistic spectrum disorder, children with social and emotional needs, and children with mental health issues. There might be a child in the class who is feeling the impact of bereavement at that point in their school career.

I think that our teachers are becoming more and more attuned to understanding, responding to and supporting a range of additional support needs. I find that our staff are very open and receptive to learning more about anything that will help them to support the children in front of them. They willingly take on strategies and go to twilight classes. I think that they would take up opportunities to skill themselves more around sensory impairment.

However, as Brian Shannan said, the children and young people themselves must also be empowered to challenge and to get the support that they need.

Richard Hellewell: Coming back to the question—

The Convener: Briefly, please, if you do not mind.

Richard Hellewell: Yes, I will be brief. On the question of where the shortage of qualified staff bites most, I think that it bites everywhere, but it has the greatest impact in a small-population local authority that covers a wide area in which there is a very small team of VI teachers who are very stretched. In such a team, losing one teacher means losing the ability to reach a group of pupils.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): With regard to pupils who use British Sign Language as their only language, are we setting those pupils up to fail by saying that it is acceptable that they can be taught by a teacher who has only a level 1 qualification in that language?

Eileen Burns: To a certain extent we are, because we are not giving them access. Given the breadth of the secondary curriculum, for example, we need teachers—and interpreters—in place who have the ability to interpret across the curriculum, and they need to have the sign language skills to do that. That is why it is important that we increase sign language skills.

Deaf children have told us that the sign language skills of their teachers are often not good enough, but the issue is not just about sign language skills; it is also about knowledge of the curriculum. If someone is signing in a higher physics class, they need to understand higher physics to be able to interpret properly. People cannot interpret subjects that they do not understand. Working in a secondary school is a highly skilled job, and people need to have not only sign language skills but also the skills to interpret across the curriculum.

There is a lot of talk about getting interpreters into secondary schools. That would be a good move to a certain extent, but subject knowledge is important. Pupils need an interpreter who really understands the subject.

In answer to Mark Griffin's question, I think that we are failing some deaf children, because we are not giving them good access to the curriculum as a result of the sign language skills of those who are providing that access.

Brian Shannan: There is a team approach, certainly in Fife. It is not only teachers of the deaf who are working with BSL children—as I said, we have effective pupil support staff who have qualifications. There is a need for more training opportunities for the support staff and incentives for them career-wise.

As far as teachers of the deaf are concerned, there absolutely needs to be a review of the level 1 standard but, in general, teachers will ideally be directed in such a way that the skills base will match the child.

11:15

Mark Griffin: This question is for Mr Watt in particular. Given the answers that we have had, why is it appropriate for teachers of a spoken language to have a higher in English as their minimum qualification, whereas the minimum language requirement for teachers of the deaf is level 1, which is described as basic? Level 3 is equivalent to a higher grade. Why is there that disparity between teachers of the deaf and teachers of a spoken language?

David Watt: We need to continue to improve the qualifications of those who use BSL in our schools. There is no doubt about that. That could be a key factor in explaining the gap in achievement, which is an impingement on language development. It is not a question of shying away from that. There could be further boosts.

Generally in the one-plus-two languages approach, we are looking to broaden out BSL as a first language and as an L3, so that it is open to anyone to study BSL. We are looking into that at the moment.

We can continue to improve the qualifications, but it is still the case that any learner would be more skilled in using the language than their teacher. It is a challenge for teachers to have somebody who is smarter than they are in their class. How do they adjust their practice to take account of learners who are smarter than they are? It is a case of ensuring that they can provide the right support to the right person. If the medium of learning is BSL, they should be looking to achieve a level greater than what has been described, and more could be done in that respect.

Chic Brodie: Yesterday at Craigie high school, we saw two pupils sitting an exam. There was communication with cameras and what have you. What role can technology, including videos and applications, play in having centralised teaching? With a paucity of educationists, what can we do, particularly in the case of hearing-impaired children, to use technology meaningfully and to spread a fast-track educational system throughout the bad schools as well as the good schools?

Eileen Burns: I might not answer your question—sorry about that—but I will talk a wee bit about the experience that you had yesterday of watching children accessing their exams in sign language. I will come on to technology a bit at the end.

In Scotland, deaf children have been able to have their exams delivered in sign language since 2000, and they can now also respond in sign language. I am proud that Scotland allows that access, which is not provided in England. There are issues around accessing exams in that way, however, and they include the sign language skills and the subject knowledge of the person who is delivering the exam, as well as the protocols that are used in the exam room.

A pilot has been carried out using technology to provide better access to examination arrangements. That involved working with the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Scottish sensory centre to produce a pdf of the exam with links to videos for each question. People can click on those, and a good-quality interpretation of the exam questions is provided within the exam itself.

Deaf children can therefore access exams without having their teacher with them. Can you imagine how it feels to have your teacher sitting watching you do an exam? The children can watch the question being delivered as many times as they like. Can you imagine how it makes a child feel to have to ask, "Can I have that question again?" or "Can you repeat the question?" That gives children ownership of their exam, and it provides a good-quality interpretation of the exam, in the hope that that will provide better access to examinations for deaf children.

Chic Brodie: I understand that, but given that there is a shortage of educationists, how can we centralise and use technology as it is today to ensure that pupils can plug in to a teaching session?

David Watt: We will probably not be able to centralise that sort of thing, because the answer will lie with children's own devices. Indeed, the challenge that we face is striking a balance between having a secure intranet in our schools and ensuring that young people can use the technology that they use outwith school. There is a tension in that respect: kids want to use their phones, but the wi-fi and internet are not available to them. We are continuing to engage with the question of how we can make use of mobile technology, because, as you have said, it is part of the answer.

The Convener: Centralised teaching via the radio of children who live in remote and rural communities has been commonplace for decades; in fact, I remember watching “Blue Peter” as a child and hearing about children in the outback being taught through the radio. Why have we been so slow to adapt visual means of technology to do exactly the same thing and have a single teacher teach multiple pupils remotely in the way that Chic Brodie has just highlighted?

David Watt: We already have that facility; it is called glow, and we are continuing to build its capacity as a national intranet. We want more teachers and young people to use glow, which can now be accessed on phones and engaged with in a variety of ways.

The Convener: I am sorry. Perhaps it is the way I am putting it, but I am not talking about people accessing a website on their phones. I am talking about a teacher with, say, very high-quality BSL skills teaching a set lesson to children in various schools across the country at 10 o’clock on a Wednesday morning.

David Watt: It is not in the format that you have referred to, but people can tie into a glow meet or glow event at a prescribed time. If you are talking about having a national centre for providing a range of lessons, I have to say that that is not on the agenda.

The Convener: Why not?

David Watt: Partly because education authorities are responsible for providing education. Schools, classroom teachers and young people buy into and make use of glow as and when they need it. In that respect, it is a dispersed rather than a centralised system.

The Convener: I do not find that answer very satisfactory, but I would like to hear the views of other panel members.

Brian Shannan: One example of good practice can be found in St Margaret’s primary school, which has already been mentioned and with which I have been involved. It is not resource-base but mainstream provision, and in that case technology has been core not only to making books accessible—we signed pretty much all the books into BSL and made that resource available to different schools and nurseries in Fife—but to developing the language skills of children in mainstream schools. For instance, we used software such as Clicker to incorporate video and develop the signing skills of the children in the schools.

As for the question of centralised resources, I certainly think that some way of sharing resources should be explored, because I am sure that we are not the only the authority that is creating them. It would also be worth investigating the types of technology that could be used. Finally—and moving away slightly from signing—I think that we also need to look at a range of issues with regard to making schools’ video and DVD resources subtitle friendly.

Eileen Burns: May I add something?

The Convener: Please be brief, if you do not mind.

Eileen Burns: Sure—no worries. An example of good practice is the Scottish sensory centre, which has quite a lot of BSL resources—a glossary of all the technical signs, video clips of science experiments and so on—that are linked to the curriculum. We can look at that as a starting point to see the kind of resources that we could be creating. It would be wonderful for deaf children to be able to go to the internet and access resources in BSL that link to the curriculum.

Voice-to-text software would also be useful in schools, as it would enable subtitles to come up as teachers speak. That would allow better access, too, and I would like some research into it.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you. I think that Liam McArthur wants to go back to mainstreaming.

Liam McArthur: Yes. My question is for Eileen Burns. You touched on the subject in answer to an earlier question, and you kick off your written evidence with the statement:

> “It is well documented that deaf young people individually placed in mainstream schools often feel isolated.”

You go on to make a link with the prevalence of mental health issues. The subject also came up in our discussion last week. I do not think that the witnesses were necessarily opposed to the presumption of mainstreaming, but we heard that the way in which that presumption is applied does not always recognise the needs of those with a sensory impairment at each age and stage. Rachel O’Neill went so far as to say that the approach does a disservice to deaf children in some senses.

I am interested to know whether our witnesses this week believe that that is the case. Are there things that we can do to modify the presumption to ensure that, at each age and stage, it works in the best interests of both the visually impaired and the hearing impaired?

Eileen Burns: Local authorities have to look at provision for deaf children, and one size does not fit all. Deaf children are individuals and they need choices. I would like each local authority—or smaller local authorities working together—to provide resource-base provision for deaf children. If realistic opportunities are created to teach sign language to a good level to children's hearing peers, that will reduce isolation. Children also need access to deaf role models. Schools should have deaf people going into them, and maybe deaf teachers. Having English taught effectively and having skilled staff are also important.

I have watched children in resource bases and realised how important it is that they have a deaf peer group to communicate with. In primary school, children tend to communicate more physically—they run around and so on—but when it comes to the secondary situation, communication, interaction and relationships are much more language based. At that point, deaf children have issues in the playground with keeping up with their hearing peers. Having a deaf group is good for their deaf identity because they do not see themselves as the only deaf person.

There are so many advantages to the resource-base approach, and I would like to see local authorities offering that as a positive option for deaf children. I feel that we are not listening to deaf people. They have been telling us for a long time that being individually placed in mainstream schools has not been a positive experience, but the people who make the decisions about where children go are perhaps not really listening and the resource-base option is not being used. People are told, "Go to the mainstream school, but if it doesn't work for you, we can look at something else." In a way, they are told to wait until they fail before they go to the resource base—I think that Richard Hellewell said that—rather than that being the positive first option.

It is difficult to take children away from their local community, and I am not saying that we should always do that. However, there is evidence that, in a resource base, deaf children feel more positive and have a more positive identity, and the skills exist for them to attain more effectively.

Richard Hellewell: There is no doubt that there is a real benefit in children with a visual impairment meeting others, sharing their life experience and doing things together, but one size does not fit all. There are all kinds of visual impairment, ranging from total blindness to low vision, and children mix with others in a mainstream environment to different degrees, and with different degrees of success.

There is probably an argument that, when possible and given the opportunity, visually impaired children should mix with other children with visual impairment, but that does not necessarily mean that they would not be in their mainstream school with the appropriate support for most of the time.

I come back to the point about people having the confidence to be included and claiming their part in the school's activities as well as being given it.

11:30

Liam McArthur: Does that go back to the point that the earlier that intervention and support are put in place, the more likely it is that that confidence will last throughout school?

Richard Hellewell: Yes, and the rest of the children in the school get used to accommodating a child who has a visual impairment as part of their group. I know that that gets challenging when people move from primary to secondary school because of the way in which children's social groups operate and change. We need to be aware that a child who has become settled towards the end of their primary schooling faces a great big challenge in that transition.

Brian Shannan: There has always been a spectrum of support, and that spectrum should remain. In many ways, parents have driven the change away from the days when there were high numbers in resource bases and so on. I am there to support families at the very beginning by sharing the news, and one of the first and most common questions is whether the child will go to their local school.

Resource bases have always been there, as I say, but they have not always been a driver for raising attainment. We need different models of support. I have an example that shows up the notion that this is always about isolation. During an inspection at St Margaret's, the inspectors fed back to the headteacher a comment about something that happened in the lunch hall. A deaf child was with two of her friends and they were all signing. The deaf child got up to take her tray to the waste area and the two other kids continued their conversation in sign.

We can have success, but it is about models of support and finding things that work as much as it is about placement and the value in the role of resource bases.

Liam McArthur: Alison McGillivray wants to say something.

The Convener: Please be very brief.

Alison McGillivray: It is often about choice. Young people want to be in a mainstream secondary school with their peers if they are supported to be part of that school community.

That can change, so we consult young people. We asked young people who have sensory impairment about the friendship groups that we have and the younger children were very keen, so they are brought together as a group that meets regularly at Isobel Mair school. Older pupils have attended more as buddies but they are now expressing more interest. We also have Corrie house, which is a separate life skills house, and the plan is for older young people to meet there. We have a teacher of the deaf who is deaf himself and he has been a tremendous person to have in the team to raise awareness of deafness and other sensory impairment.

With inclusion, we need to remember that having children who have sensory impairment in schools alongside their colleagues who have other additional support needs means that we increase the understanding of additional support needs across the board, including when they go out into the world of work.

Eileen Burns: On resource bases—

The Convener: I am sorry, but I have to stop you. We are running out of time and a couple of members want to ask questions.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I want to start with the Education Scotland submission, Mr Watt. To say that I am concerned about the conclusion is quite an understatement. There are six paragraphs in the conclusion and I note that they talk about what education authorities and schools need to do. What does Education Scotland need to do?

David Watt: We need to ensure that some of those messages about the data are passed through the system and that people take account of them. We need an approach that looks to boost inclusiveness and which takes account of additional support needs but in which our schools are places where social background, disability and gender are not barriers to learning. We have not distributed that story widely enough.

Education Scotland can provide platforms where teachers can come together and consider what they need from us that can benefit their delivery of the system. That includes taking account of BSL's place in the one-plus-two approach to languages and giving a greater boost to communication in relation to literacy, English and BSL as part of a diverse language policy in schools.

There are also boosts that we can give so that children have not only a voice but a means of expressing that voice in their reviews in our classrooms, so that they have a degree of ownership of their support and responsibility for how they deal with it.

We, as well as schools and authorities, have a challenging agenda. There is more that we can do.

Siobhan McMahon: I appreciate your saying that in evidence, because it was missing from the written submission.

Independent living skills and habilitation skills have been mentioned. I asked our witnesses at last week's meeting how important those skills are. The issue already come up this morning and I do not wish to go over what has been said, but how far can curriculum for excellence be used to give people independent living skills? Should we consider other models? Is there just curriculum for excellence, or is there another model that works and should be considered further?

Eileen Burns: Curriculum for excellence is an excellent framework for deaf children. It has the flexibility that allows us to build a curriculum that is relevant to them. Personalisation and choice are important, because a curriculum for deaf children will not be the same as a curriculum for hearing children with respect to English language and deaf studies, for instance.

In many ways, curriculum for excellence is a good framework for meeting the needs of deaf children. It does not present any barriers. However, one possible problem is that it encourages active types of learning. Classroom environments are different from what they were in the past, with children working more in groups and more discussion in classrooms. That is a good thing, but it means that the classroom tends to be a noisier environment, which is an issue for our children.

We must examine that environment and ask how we can make it accessible for our deaf children. We have technology; for example, children who are working in groups can make use of roaming microphones if the deaf child has a radio aid. However, the equipment must be available, and it must be used. Teachers need to know how to use it and feel confident about doing so. Adaptations are another possibility. If group working is taking place, a group that has a deaf child in it could move to a quieter area to allow that child to participate.

Curriculum for excellence does not hold any barriers, but it creates a classroom environment that can be challenging for deaf children.

The Convener: Does anybody disagree with that?

Richard Hellewell: I do not disagree with it. Curriculum for excellence has been great for VI education because it accentuates quite a few of the things that we have always needed to accentuate in VI education and it works across the whole school, so it is absolutely fantastic.

We are not coming with suggestions for different curricula but there is probably a need to consider building in habilitation and daily life skills as part of the school curriculum for any child who has special needs that affect their life skills.

Siobhan McMahon: Mr Shannan, you spoke about what is happening in Fife in relation to the use of BSL in videos and so on. That is an example of good practice that we were not aware of before today. How do we become better at sharing such good practice?

Brian Shannan: That is a good question. There might be a role for the Scottish sensory centre, which is respected throughout Scotland. We need to highlight not only the resources that are being created but the technology that is used to create them. Perhaps the SSC could hold more satellite-type courses in Scotland.

We suggested an initiative to a civil servant that related to the use not of video but of audiology equipment. The idea was to identify skills and good practice and then have roadshows, if you like, in different parts of Scotland. It is quite challenging for someone from the Highlands, for example, to come down to a course in Edinburgh, so more use could be made of web-based learning. That could be an option.

Richard Hellewell: The Royal Blind school has always done outward-facing work and has always been on the end of the phone for teachers of children with a visual impairment who have a particular issue. They phone the school to ask questions and we are happy to help. We have always provided that quiet support, but this year we are changing how we go about doing that. To complement the SSC's work, we are launching a new learning hub with e-learning seminars and other things that are very much about basic access to the curriculum for children with a visual impairment. A teacher who has a child with a visual impairment in their class will be able to hook up to that both via the net and by consulting us, and we can go out there and support them.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I want to ask about adaptations. We have discussed them already in relation to technology and issues for BSL users, but what is the most cost-effective adaptation for visually impaired pupils? What is the best way forward?

Richard Hellewell: We have mentioned that there is a spectrum of need and that needs differ according to the individual pupil. For Braille users, access to a computer through a Braille interface is very valuable. For those with low vision, there are magnifiers, which come in all kinds and sizes depending on what the pupil's sight need is and how it is best met. They can have a magnifier that sits on their desk: when they put written material under it, it comes up with the colour differentiation that helps to mitigate their sight loss. They can also have a magnifier that allows them to see, displayed next to them on their own desk, what is on display at the front of the class .

It is also about simple things such as having a desk that has enough space for those aids and which is close to a power point. Schools need to be designed for that. The school environment also needs to use the right colour contrasts so that the children can orientate themselves. A lot of it is quite basic, but they are things that an architect will not necessarily think of when they are designing a building.

George Adam: You mention the importance of colour variations. I was totally unaware of the issue until—years ago, when I was a councillor—I was given a pair of glasses by a constituent who had a visual impairment. I did an assessment of a local authority building and tripped over the stairs because there was no differentiation in colour. It was a simple case of some paint being enough to make the difference. Also, the council did not think that someone who was 6 foot 3 inches tall would have a visual impairment, so I battered my head off a TV screen. I understand that there can be quite simple solutions to some of the issues.

Richard Hellewell: That is right. It is a matter of getting the tooling right for the child. That brings us back to staff needing qualifications and learning so that they can tailor things to what the child needs.

The Convener: I will finish with a question for Mr Watt. It goes back to the statistics. In your written submission, you state:

> "The national average of attending higher and further education is 64% ... and it is 68% for both hearing and visually impaired."

In effect, you are talking about higher outcomes for those with a hearing or visual impairment in terms of positive destinations. Is that helpful, or does it just throw up a fog in terms of the reality for young people who have a hearing or visual impairment? T

The figures tell us that, at every level of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, the average tariff score of deaf pupils at S4 is behind the average for all Scottish pupils. The same is true with regard to Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 2 right up to level 7 or better. At every level, people with a visual or hearing impairment are behind those with no additional special needs—the difference is marginal at the beginning, but, by the end, the pupils with a visual or hearing impairment are achieving only a third of the outcomes of pupils without those impairments.

I am concerned that the figures that you have given about positive destinations and attending college might mask the reality for young people who have a visual or hearing impairment.

I do not want to put it too brutally, but yesterday we were told about children being dumped—that is the word that was used—in college courses. They sit there and do college course after college course until they eventually leave college. That is not really a positive destination, is it?

11:45

David Watt: There are two points. First, the gap remains, but it is narrowing. Over the past few years, the picture is improving—we have to give ourselves credit for that—although it is still too wide. As you said, kids with visual or hearing impairments are gaining qualifications—to get into higher education, for example—at a much lower level than the average.

Secondly, on the issue of positive destinations, there can be a positive outcome, because there are routes into higher education through the senior phase and further education. The issue that you have described—which is almost like simply putting someone in a warm place for a period of time—tends to involve those with more complex needs. What happens to people with complex needs, and for some of those with disabilities in general, after their time in further education in terms of employment? That has been flagged up in the report “Education working for all!” by the commission for developing Scotland’s young workforce as an area that goes across issues of gender, disability, ethnic minority status and care leaver status and where further improvement is needed. That raises a question about businesses and employment, and I think that there is more that the public sector—national Government and local authorities—could do with regard to supported employment and the provision of opportunities for those with disabilities. That is a challenge for us all.

The further education picture can mask the issue of those who are—to use your term—dumped. However, FE can be a positive destination. People with disabilities might just need a bit longer to work through FE—they might not be in a position to go straight to university after fifth year. There can be a positive story in there.

The Convener: I hasten to add that that was not my term; it was used by someone who was frustrated by the situation that they felt their child was facing.

Thank you for that answer. Although I accept that further education can be an incredibly positive destination for many pupils, there is an issue about going beyond that into employment, as you said. Clearly, the employment rates of those with a visual or hearing impairment are different from the average. Let us put it this way: there is still a lot of work to do.

I thank everyone for attending. We are grateful for your time.

Next week, we will take evidence from the Scottish Government. I am sure that we are all looking forward to that.

Meeting closed at 11:48.

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