



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 26 May 2015

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

13th 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:

Dr Alasdair Allan (Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages)

Lesley Brown (Education Scotland)

Colin Spivey (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 26 May 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the 13th meeting in 2015 of the Education and Culture Committee. I remind everybody present that electronic devices should be switched off at all times.

Our first item of business is to consider whether to take item 3, which is consideration of our annual report, in private. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Liam McArthur is not present at the moment, because of technical difficulties with his plane, but he will join us shortly—assuming the plane is on its way. He therefore sends his apologies, but he will hopefully be with us soon.

Attainment of Pupils with Sensory Impairment

10:00

The Convener: Item 2 on our agenda is the final evidence session in our inquiry into the attainment of pupils with sensory impairment. I welcome to the committee Dr Alasdair Allan, Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages, and his supporting officials.

I believe that you wish to make an opening statement, minister.

The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Alasdair Allan): Thank you, convener. As you have mentioned, I have with me Lesley Brown from Education Scotland and Colin Spivey from the Scottish Government's learning directorate. With your permission, I may bat some questions on to them for further detail, as usual.

The Convener: It depends on the questions. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Allan: With your permission, obviously.

I thank the committee for taking such evident interest in this subject, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue of attainment of school pupils with sensory impairment.

As the committee will be aware, the additional support for learning legislation places education authorities under duties to identify, provide for and review the additional support needs of their pupils. Those provisions, which are tailored to the individual needs of children and young people and which are coupled with the personalised learning offered through curriculum for excellence, support our aim of all children and young people making the most of the educational opportunities available to them and being able to reach their potential in learning and in life.

The committee will have noted that the position in relation to learners with hearing impairment is improving. In particular, average tariff scores and leaver destinations indicate sustained progress. Visually impaired attainment has been sustained, and we will continue to focus our efforts on securing sustained improvement.

I know that you have had a chance to see for yourself some of the excellent practice at Craigie and Windsor Park schools. The professionalism and dedication of staff in those and many other establishments is evident and should be applauded.

I believe that there is much good work going on in local authorities across Scotland, against the

background of a tight financial position and competing priorities. In addition, we provide direct national funding, for example to the Scottish sensory centre, CALL Scotland and the Royal Blind and Donaldson's schools.

That said, we recognise that there is still significant room for improvement. The committee has already heard evidence from experts in the field, and I am aware that issues have been raised, including on support data, the training of staff, inclusive education and transitions.

I will carefully consider the evidence that the committee has collected and any recommendations that it makes that would improve the lives of our pupils.

I am happy to respond to any questions that members may have.

The Convener: Thank you for that statement, minister, and for attending today. We will go straight to questions.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, minister. You said that some local authorities are doing good work. There are some good authorities and some bad authorities in terms of how they approach the issue of pupils with sensory impairment.

We heard from the Scottish sensory centre and East Renfrewshire Council that those with an impairment are doing as well, and sometimes better than, those with no additional support needs. First, given the focus on the scale of the attainment gap between pupils generally and between sensory-impaired pupils and other pupils in particular, can you indicate how you see us being able to close the gap for sensory-impaired pupils?

My second question is: why do we have some good authorities, such as East Renfrewshire Council, and some that are not so good? What can we do to bridge the gap between them?

Dr Allan: As you have indicated, the attainment gap between sensory-impaired young people and others is clearly real. However, we also know—I have already touched on this—that the situation is definitely improving, real as the gap still is.

Attainment is certainly improving among the pupils we are talking about. The average scores for deaf school leavers have increased on the tariff scale from 225 to 289 from 2009-10 to 2012-13, and the scores for visually impaired school leavers have increased from 161 to 241 over the same period. I do not mention the statistics to take away from the point that you are making, which is that the gap is real and it is a gap that we seek to do something about.

You asked what the Government is doing to address the matter. A number of agencies are funded directly by the Scottish Government with a view to reducing the gap. The Scottish sensory centre receives a grant—£150,000 for 2014-15 and 2016-17—to provide support for teachers of deaf, visually impaired and deafblind pupils. CALL Scotland receives a grant—£367,000 for 2014-15 and 2015-16—to provide support through assistive technology and other interventions that can seek specifically to address the gap that you mentioned.

Chic Brodie: That is very important information and—as evidence has shown—there has been improvement, but why is there no consistency in closing the attainment gap across local authorities?

Dr Allan: You may tire of hearing education ministers saying this, but it remains true nonetheless: the education authorities are the local authorities. That does not mean that the Scottish Government has no responsibility in this area, but it is for the education authorities to assess how best to deploy their resources. I have already mentioned a number of things that the Scottish Government does at a national level, but the legal authority rests with the education authorities.

With your permission, convener, I will ask my officials whether they want to say anything more than what I already know, which is that Education Scotland seeks to promote good practice between local authorities and to share that good practice.

Lesley Brown (Education Scotland): Education Scotland's evidence from inspections carried out across all sectors also points to there being an improving picture, specifically in relation to the establishments for sensory-impaired young people. In addition, our inclusion team works very closely with local authorities. When authorities have particular matters that they want to improve on, they come to our organisation and we work with those authorities and with specific schools to support their practice. We have a strong track record in taking that forward.

Chic Brodie: I have one last question. Clearly and rightly, the inquiry has been focusing on the attainment of pupils with sensory impairment. What we have not done is to look at positive destinations for these pupils—how we can effect meaningful transitions to employment and further education. Do you have any views on that?

Dr Allan: Clearly, transitions are very important. You will have seen from the statistics that, for instance, young people with sensory impairments have traditionally been overrepresented—statistically, I hasten to add—in the further education sector when it comes to transitions from school as school-leavers. They have done very

well in that sector. Where those young people have been underrepresented has been in going into the world of work and into higher education directly from school. On all of those fronts, however, the figures have been improving.

I have mentioned some statistics, but it is worth pointing to those on transitions. For instance, for leavers with a hearing impairment, the numbers going into higher education have gone up in the last four years from 12 per cent of the cohort to 20 per cent. Those going into work have gone up from 9 per cent to 12 per cent. The pictures are slowly improving, but I concede that there is still a great deal to be done.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I have a supplementary question. Given the large proportion of pupils with a sensory impairment who go on to further education, has there been any further work on the transition beyond college to see whether those students go on to work or university? Do we have any statistics beyond that transition from school?

Dr Allan: I may call for help on that question. What I can say is that one of the things close to all of our hearts is to make sure that, whether it is people who are visually impaired, people who are deaf or people with any other disability, they find their way—in college in particular but in the further education sector generally—into courses that lead them purposefully and help them to achieve their career ambitions. They must not be merely pushed from one course to another. We need to make sure that we respect the right of those young people to take the courses that they feel will lead them into employment.

In terms of whether there is data held on transitions beyond college and university, my impression is that there is not, but I may be corrected.

Lesley Brown: I am not aware of any data.

In terms of developing the young workforce, which is work that Education Scotland and the Government are involved in at the moment, we are about to launch new national standards on work experience and careers education. Those will be launched for feedback, specifically on equalities. In addition, scoping work is already under way to identify how best to support young people, and specifically those with sensory impairments, into the world of work and also to support the needs of practitioners, teachers and employers.

Colin Spivey (Scottish Government): I want to point to a couple of other specific examples. The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council funds Enable Scotland to deliver a transitions to employment project that specifically focuses on this area. There is also a publication, "Partnership Matters", which describes the roles of

agencies in supporting ASN students to move at various points of transition—from school to college and from college or higher education into employment. That is a 2009 publication, but it is due to be updated this year.

The Convener: I want to follow up on one point. You mentioned earlier, minister, that those with a hearing or a visual impairment were, statistically speaking, overrepresented in the further education sector. Is that not if not proof then at least a suggestion that those young people are being put on college courses for what are not the correct reasons? They are effectively doing what you suggested: going from college course to college course rather than going to a college course for a purpose and then moving on to the world of work or higher education.

10:15

Dr Allan: Many people, whether they are visually or otherwise impaired, go to college for the right reasons. It is interesting to note that there has been a slight levelling off in the figures for the past few years and the numbers have been getting better for people going into work. When I say "better", I mean that they are more like the figures for the cohort of other young people, and they also apply to those who go to university.

It has to be said that great change is happening in the college sector. One reason for that change is that we want to ensure that young people feel that their courses are likely to lead them into work, whether or not they have a disability. There is a better sense of that and, in spite of those great changes, people who have disabilities continue to use the college sector. In fact, the percentage of young people who have a disability and who are going through college is higher than it was, going up from 19 per cent to 22 per cent in the past three or four years.

People who have disabilities continue to go to college, but I would like to think that they feel that they have the same choices as other young people in college and the same choices about work when they come out of college.

The Convener: My question does not seek to denigrate the quality of the further education system.

Dr Allan: I realise that.

The Convener: However, I wonder whether you will accept the risk that young people who have a sensory impairment have been put into college courses for the wrong reasons. That is not to denigrate them, their parents, their teachers or the colleges; it is to suggest that they have effectively been circulating in the college sector rather than

getting on and getting out into the world of work. That has been suggested by others before now.

Dr Allan: There is anecdotal evidence that young people who have visual impairments or are deaf have felt that, in the past, they were not given the same choices as other people.

The Convener: I have one final question before I bring in Mary Scanlon. Earlier you mentioned the statistics about the increase in attainment for those who have a sensory impairment. Could you give us a comparison between the statistics that you gave earlier and those for the general population as a whole? Are the figures that show the improvement among those who have a sensory impairment greater or less than, or about the same as, the increases among the rest of the population?

Dr Allan: That is the challenging area that I mentioned earlier. I look to Colin Spivey and Lesley Brown for the statistics, but I believe that the picture is one of improvement for those who have a visual impairment or are deaf, although it is not quite at the same rate as the overall cohort of young people. On the figures for visually impaired people compared with the overall figure—

Colin Spivey: I do not think that we have the figures for the overall cohort with us.

The Convener: If you do not have the figures to hand, minister, perhaps you could write to the committee with a comparison of those who have a visual impairment, those who have a hearing impairment and the general population. Although it is welcome that there is an increase in attainment in the particular groups, it would be nice to see a comparison so that we can see whether they are improving at a faster or slower rate than the general population.

Dr Allan: I can certainly provide that, convener, although my impression is that the statistics show that the improvement in the general population has been slightly greater than in the two groups that we are talking about.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): My questions are about the early identification of sensory loss. We all know that that can have a positive impact and reduce the potential for negative outcomes.

The National Deaf Children's Society mentioned that, in 10 years, the Government has not published any guidance on the newborn testing that was introduced in 2005, and a fairly ad hoc approach is being taken to such testing across Scotland. Why has guidance not been published in the past 10 years?

Given that many children might miss out on the support that they need, what testing for sensory impairment takes place along with the

development check that is given between 24 and 36 months?

Dr Allan: As you mentioned, there is the universal newborn hearing screening programme. It is true to say that the Scottish Government has not published any guidance on the post-diagnostic side of that, but there is early years support and guidance, to which the Government commits funding in the form of the support that we give to the National Deaf Children's Society and other organisations.

The Scottish Government's sensory impairment strategy, which was launched in April 2014, covers children and adults. It asks for local partnerships to be developed to ensure that there are care pathways for people with a sensory impairment. I accept the point that you make about formal guidance, and I will ask officials to say more about that. However, the strategy represents a support to families and to deaf people more generally.

Colin Spivey: I echo the minister's comments—such guidance has not been published. In conjunction with health colleagues, we will look into why that is the case but, as the minister has indicated, work is being done on the issue.

Mary Scanlon: That is helpful to hear. We were told in evidence that it would be very helpful if Government guidance were provided.

The second part of my question was about the development check that children get between 24 and 36 months. Are sensory impairments included in that check?

Dr Allan: My impression is that they are, but I will need to ask for advice on that.

Lesley Brown: I do not have the evidence in front of me, but I will be happy to supply it for you.

Dr Allan: We do not have the answer, but I will write to you about that.

Mary Scanlon: Okay. I would like to get that information as soon as possible.

The Convener: There are a number of issues on which I am sure that the minister will follow up in writing. We will chase that up.

Mary Scanlon: I would have hoped that the minister or his officials would have known that, but never mind.

How do you check that additional support needs are identified for each and every individual child who has them? How are such needs identified and how are they supported? Lesley Brown mentioned inspections. I have had a quick look through all the inspection reports for the Highlands and Islands since 1999 and, unless I missed something, I cannot remember any inspection report saying that there was a focus on additional support

needs. Is that part and parcel of every inspection, or are additional support needs not always reported on?

Lesley Brown: Every inspection that we do, whether it is of early years provision or of a school, covers quality indicator 5.3, which is on meeting learning needs. That has a focus on the needs of all children and young people and a particular focus on the needs of those who have specific additional support needs.

Prior to every inspection, inspectors are given information on the range of needs of young people in the establishment, whether they relate to a hearing impairment, a visual impairment or a disability. On an inspection, inspectors follow audit trails of those young people to check on whether their needs are being met. That is reported on in the letter to parents in each inspection that we do.

Mary Scanlon: That is about meeting the learning needs.

Lesley Brown: Yes.

Mary Scanlon: What I am interested in is whether all the learning needs are identified.

Lesley Brown: On an inspection, we look at how effective the establishment is at identifying the learning needs of children and young people. It is very much part of our audit trails to look at whether the staff in the establishment understand who the children who have identified needs are and what steps they are taking to make sure that those needs are being met. That is very much part of our inspection activity.

Mary Scanlon: If the development check that is carried out between 24 and 36 months—which I thought that you would know about—does what it is supposed to do, it should inform the process that we are talking about, but you do not have any information about it. If the development check on pre-school children is effective, that would help to inform this process, would it not?

Lesley Brown: Yes, it would.

Early years inspections are exactly the same as school inspections. Our expectation is that practitioners would take on board all information available to them about the children in their care and then plan for the needs of those children, both at the early stages and in their transition to school.

Mary Scanlon: Last week, Education Scotland acknowledged that further work is needed—that is an understatement, but never mind—to improve the attainment of sensory-impaired pupils. What specific measures do you intend to prioritise on that?

Dr Allan: One thing that is relevant—it picks up on a point that you have made in committee and which you have raised, rightly, in Parliament—is

work at the earliest stages in families on communication within families, given that 90 per cent of deaf children are born into families where the parents are not deaf.

Mary Scanlon: My next question was going to be about that.

Dr Allan: I am sorry to have stolen that from you; I know that it is relevant to the point that you made about support for young families.

It is worth saying that the Government's funding to the NDCS, which amounts to £281,000, is centred around intervening helpfully in such family situations to help to provide the communication skills that are needed so that families can support their children. I would take the question all the way back to the initial point—how we support families from the word go.

Mary Scanlon: My final question relates to an amendment to Mark Griffin's British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill; after all, there is no point in lodging an amendment if it is going to be totally rejected. I know that you will write guidance, minister, although I appreciate that you are not doing so now. Would you be minded to include in that guidance—I have forgotten the full title of it—help for families as well as help for children, given that 90 per cent of deaf children are born to hearing families and that their British Sign Language is much more advanced, to allow better communication within families? Would you be minded to include that in the national framework or whatever it is called?

Dr Allan: As you mentioned, much of the guidance has not been written yet. I am very open to ideas. Working with Mark Griffin on his bill has helped the Government in that it has made us think about the issue. A large part of the bill's focus is on BSL's status as a language—its status culturally and in our society—but it also raises bigger issues about BSL's status in the family.

Does Colin Spivey want to say more? I am open to ideas about anything that we can do in our work on the bill to help the status of BSL in the family as well as in wider society.

Colin Spivey: As the minister said, the guidance is at an early stage of preparation. In conjunction with ministers, officials would be keen to take on board any views.

Mary Scanlon: Am I chapping at an open door?

Dr Allan: It would seem so.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Minister, you have spoken about the attainment gap numbers, and you will give us more detail in writing. I want to know what specific things the Scottish attainment challenge fund will do to address the problem. We know that money has

been allocated to authorities, but how will it help the children who we are discussing in this inquiry?

Dr Allan: The focus of the money that you mention is on closing the attainment gap more generally—specifically in seven local authorities, but with the potential to extend beyond them. Given the recognition that, in those local authorities, children who are visually impaired or deaf have an additional reason to be on the wrong end of an attainment gap, I hope that the attainment challenge will ensure an even greater focus in those areas to help those young people.

Siobhan McMahon: I do not disagree with anything that you have said, but I am asking for specifics. In the evidence that we have heard for the past three weeks, we have found that people are looking for specific examples of how we can work together and learn from local authorities that are developing technologies and other things. It would help if you wrote to the committee to let us know what specific things the Government wishes to do to tackle the issue. I absolutely understand that local authorities will have to play their part.

Last week, I asked Education Scotland for specific examples. What specifically are you doing to challenge the difficulties that people are experiencing?

10:30

Dr Allan: I mentioned some areas in which local authorities can, with assistance, help to close the gap. They are working to close that gap. If you want me to be specific, the £100 million is fairly specific and is a substantial endorsement of local authorities' work to overcome the attainment gap.

I mentioned areas in which the Government already seeks specifically to ensure that the attainment gap for young people with sensory impairment is closed. In considering how to help young people in that situation, local authorities might wish to consider the funding that we have given for assistive technology, for instance. Local authorities might wish to learn from that or from other examples. In helping young people to overcome their disadvantages, whether those are because of disability or otherwise, local authorities might wish to consider how they spend their money on staffing and how they can tailor the interventions that they provide to the needs of individual young people.

I keep coming back to the point that local authorities are the education authorities. However, the £100 million from the Scottish Government and the statement that we will work closely with local authorities are a pretty clear sign of our intentions.

Siobhan McMahon: Absolutely, but do you have any specific examples that relate to the group of young people who we are considering? I go back to the evidence that we heard about the money that has gone to Enable Scotland and the lack of data on what people do after college and so on. If Enable Scotland has been working on the issue for many years, data should be available. How is that money helping people? I imagine that you evaluate that fund.

My question is about the good practice that is happening and how we are evaluating that. It is also about the specific things that can be done to change the situation. As I said, I do not disagree with anything that you have said, but we need more specifics.

Dr Allan: I have conceded that we need more data on where people with a visual impairment or people who are deaf go after college and university. That is a fair point.

However, in defence, I have to say that we have a lot of data on learner destinations and transitions post school. I have quoted some of that. I can give some figures from the most recent year for which data is available. For instance, for leavers with a hearing impairment, we collect the data and we know that 20 per cent go into higher education, 48 per cent go into further education and 12 per cent go directly into employment. The data that we collect for leavers with a visual impairment shows that 18 per cent go into higher education, 49 per cent go into further education and 8 per cent go into employment.

I quote those statistics in the full knowledge that, although they are improvements on the past, they are not what we want them to be, particularly on employment and entry into university education. We collect the data for that reason.

A number of members have made the fair point that we perhaps need to think collectively about how we track that group of young people after they leave college or university.

The Convener: Does Mr McArthur have a small supplementary question?

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Yes—a brief one. First, I apologise for being late. I am sure that the minister will need no convincing of the trials of flight unreliability.

There has been a broad welcome for the attainment challenge, but concerns have been raised about the area-based approach, which will exclude a large number of areas, including those that the minister and I represent. How will the sort of targeted intervention that Siobhan McMahon talked about, in whatever form it is delivered, be delivered in the areas that fall outwith the area-based approach that the Government has taken? I

am talking particularly about island areas, where I suspect that additional costs are incurred in the delivery of more specialist support.

Dr Allan: Throughout the process, the Government has acknowledged that there is a balance to be struck. We have to recognise that there are seven local authorities with an exceptional level of social deprivation and all that goes with that but, as you rightly pointed out, it has also been acknowledged that pockets of poverty exist in other local authority areas that, overall, are affluent. The Government is working hard with local authorities to reach the affected groups, and the First Minister and others, including the cabinet secretary and me, have acknowledged that we need to do more and to ensure that no one in Scotland—not least the young people with disabilities about whom we are talking—is left behind.

Liam McArthur: Does that mean that elements of the £100 million that you mentioned will be available as targeted support outwith the seven local authority areas?

Dr Allan: The project as described is addressing the attainment gap in seven local authority areas. However, other approaches with a focus on raising attainment, such as attainment advisers, apply not only to those areas but to the whole of Scotland.

Liam McArthur: No budget is attached to that. I understand that that is all about redeploying in local authorities people who might be employed in schools at the moment.

Dr Allan: There will be a duty on local authorities to provide people in those posts and an onus on them to ensure a focus on attainment in their areas. Moreover, as I said, that approach will apply outwith the seven local authorities that I mentioned.

Liam McArthur: No cash is attached to that. It is a duty rather than something that is backed by resources.

Dr Allan: It is a duty. Education authorities have certain duties with regard to education.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): On workforce planning, we have heard evidence that in mainstream schools specialist teachers of the deaf and visually impaired are available only for limited amounts of time, partly because the specialist teacher workforce is ageing. Given the lack of new teachers who are becoming specialist teachers, what steps is the Government taking to tackle the issue?

Dr Allan: This is an interesting area on which we need to gather information, and the Government is working on that. The numbers are small—I am sure that we can point to them. For

instance, the total number of teachers who had as a main or other subject hearing impairment was, I think, four in 2014. Have I got that right?

Colin Spivey: I think that the figure is 58 for visual impairment.

Dr Allan: Is that an increase of four?

Colin Spivey: Yes.

Dr Allan: The figure is 58 for the whole of Scotland.

Colin Spivey: I think that there are 58 specialist teachers of visual impairment and around 80 teachers of hearing impairment. As Gordon MacDonald said, the number has decreased on the hearing impairment side, but it has not decreased on the visual impairment side.

Dr Allan: The numbers are relatively small. An interesting question with regard to hearing impairment is whether we need to evaluate some of the medical and cultural changes that have taken place because of, say, cochlear implants. I do not mean to take away from the importance of and the need for specialist teachers, but it would be interesting to establish whether local authorities are changing their practice as a result of that situation or for any other reason. There is no evidence that local authorities are struggling to find teachers or that qualified teachers are not available, but we need to think about whether the changes are being reflected in what local authorities are doing and what they make of those matters.

Gordon MacDonald: The Scottish sensory centre highlighted in evidence that it, along with its partner organisations, has introduced a range of training options, including a mentoring scheme in which senior staff can pass on their specialist knowledge to younger members of staff, professional development opportunities and online learning demonstrations of best practice.

The centre said:

“There is no point in the Scottish sensory centre”

creating such opportunities

“if local authorities do not allow their staff to access the courses”

or

“release staff to take them up.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 12 May 2015; c 25.]

What can the Government do if local authorities do not give teachers the opportunities to take up the training?

Dr Allan: My strong view is that local authorities would be wise to allow people to take up the training opportunities. There is an increased cultural understanding that all teachers must have

an awareness of the issues around deaf and visually impaired children, even if that is only at the level of awareness.

I am sure that the committee has had the same experiences as me in that a number of deaf young people have pointed out to me that they wish that more of their teachers were aware that, in order to be understood, the teachers should not speak to the whiteboard but must turn around and speak to the class. That is not a flippant example; it is an example that deaf young people brought to me about the importance of local authorities engaging their staff in basic awareness raising as well as training.

Gordon MacDonald: Given the small numbers of specialist teachers for the deaf and visually impaired that you highlighted a couple of minutes ago, should we be incentivising teachers? We heard evidence about the absence of any reward, although an award existed a number of years ago. There appears to be no recognition in the profession for specialising as a teacher of the deaf or the visually impaired. Should we address that?

Dr Allan: I defer to Colin Spivey on the career pathways and the promotion incentives.

Colin Spivey: Gordon MacDonald is right that there are no specific incentives for teachers. The interesting point is that there are two sides to the numbers—the supply side and the demand side. As the minister suggested—I think that Education Scotland would back this up—we are not hearing noises from the system, including local authorities, that not enough qualified teachers are coming into the system. Obviously, the committee has heard evidence that suggests that there may be a bigger picture.

The minister has agreed that it would be useful for us to have a conversation with the people involved—the local authorities as employers, the NDCS and other officials—about the supply and demand position and whether there are enough teachers in the system. It is important that we properly understand the full picture. Officials are meeting the NDCS in June to discuss the matter and a range of other issues.

Gordon MacDonald: To be clear, are you saying that you are confident that we have in place the right number of teachers or are you saying that you have no idea whether we have in place the right number?

Colin Spivey: We are saying that no evidence is coming back from the system, either through inspection or what we hear centrally from local authorities, that there is a teacher supply shortage. However, the numbers have gone down, and we need to understand whether that is because there is less demand and whether that is having an impact that must be looked at.

We are aware that the delivery of training changed some 10 years ago to a modular approach. That was with the good intention that teachers would not need to take time out to get the necessary qualification. We perhaps need to understand more fully the impact of that approach and to see whether there have been any unintended consequences. A conversation with all the parties—those who employ qualified teachers in those areas and the groups that represent children and young people with sensory impairment—would be useful for us to get a fuller understanding of whether there is an issue and, if there is, what that issue might be.

Dr Allan: What Colin Spivey and I were trying to get across is that there is no indication that local authorities feel that they cannot find teachers. There is a debate to be had about whether the right number of teachers is in the system, but there is no evidence that local authorities cannot find qualified teachers.

Mark Griffin: While we are on the subject of investing in the skills and qualifications of the workforce, I would like to put a question to the minister that I have put to the previous panels. Do you think that it is appropriate or acceptable for deaf pupils who use BSL as their only language to be taught by teachers who have only a level 1 qualification in that language?

10:45

Dr Allan: I understand the point that you are making. The more that can be done to promote BSL in schools—your British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill is relevant to that—and to promote the wider understanding and use of BSL, the better and the more likely we are to see standards going up.

It is small scale at the moment, but the potential for hearing pupils and teachers to learn BSL in the wider one-plus-two language movement in schools is a healthy thing. There is a potential for the third language in schools to be BSL, where there is a willingness in a school to make that happen. If those cultural changes can be brought about, qualification levels will start to rise.

I understand the point that you are making and I understand why a pupil who feels that they are more fluent in their language than their teacher might have issues with that.

Mark Griffin: As things stand, a teacher of a spoken language must have higher English, which is a level 3 qualification. As the workforce becomes more qualified, will it be the Government's intention to equalise that in any way so that the minimum requirement for a teacher of the deaf will be a level 3 qualification, just as it is for a teacher of a spoken language?

Dr Allan: The first issue with BSL is increasing the pool of people from which teachers can be drawn. Although I am sympathetic to and understanding of what Mark Griffin is saying, the reality is that we need a much wider pool of people who are learning BSL from which to draw.

The Convener: I appreciate the point that you make, minister, and I do not disagree, but the qualification bar is set at level 1, which has nothing to do with the size of the pool. The bar could be set at level 3. I presume that the Government could change that.

Dr Allan: Talking about bars and pools is typical ministerial mixing of metaphors, but my point about the size of the pool is that the problem about setting the bar high when you have a small pool is that you may find yourself constrained. We have to increase the number of people who are learning BSL for there to be people who can meet that bar.

I understand the point that is being made. Again, having met and spoken to deaf young people, I can understand the frustration that is experienced by someone who is more fluent in their language than their teacher.

To go back to the point that I made about deaf awareness among teachers, we must recognise that there needs to be much broader deaf awareness and training among secondary teachers, because in mainstream education a young person will have seven or eight teachers in a day. There is much more that we need to do on that. I do not take away from the point that is being made about the need for fluency.

I will ask Colin Spivey to add his views.

Colin Spivey: I am not sure that I have much more to add on that. The central point is the size of the pool. The approach that we are currently taking is one of expanding the pool, rather than seeking to place constraints—

The Convener: I am sorry—I do not want to misunderstand what you said. Did you say that you do not want to place constraints on the recruitment of teachers—I presume that you were talking about teachers of the deaf—by increasing the qualification bar?

Colin Spivey: I am saying that, at the moment, there is no intention to change the qualification level.

The Convener: I am rather taken aback by that comment, because I cannot think of any other subject in which we would accept that the teacher was less able than the pupil in terms of their ability to communicate with each other. I cannot think of a parent of a child in the public sector education system anywhere in Scotland who would find it acceptable that their child was more able than their teacher. Frankly, it seems bizarre to suggest

that ensuring that teachers are adequately qualified to teach those children would somehow place a constraint on the recruitment of teachers.

Colin Spivey: The one thing that I would say is that we are not aware—Education Scotland might have more to say on this—that large numbers of pupils are being taught by teachers who are at level 1. Therefore, that is not necessarily the standard situation.

The Convener: How many teachers of the deaf who use BSL are at level 1 and how many are at a higher level?

Colin Spivey: We do not have that information; we do not collect it.

The Convener: Will you collect the information and provide it?

Dr Allan: Yes.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you very much, minister.

Chic Brodie: This might be indirectly associated with what we have been discussing. I read a magazine article this week regarding deaf and blind language interpretation skills. The United Kingdom Government had announced that it was delaying putting into place a national register of those who can use BSL. In fact, it outsourced that capability for the whole pool—1,100 people, I think—who had the capability at a higher level. Clearly, now that it has been outsourced, the company involved might reduce the standards because of the costs involved.

Can we have your assurance that, were you empowered to do so, under no circumstances would you consider using any outside bodies to bring subcontracted teachers into our education system to teach BSL? Would you consider having a national register of BSL teachers of the requisite level who meet the desired standard?

Dr Allan: The main point to make is that, to be a teacher in Scotland, it is necessary to be registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland, so there is no question about the standards or the professional expectations around that.

Chic Brodie: But in terms of teachers' capability and ability to disseminate—

Dr Allan: Are you talking about the training of teachers?

Chic Brodie: The standard is BSL 3. Are you saying that that is the standard that all teachers must adhere to?

Dr Allan: The standards are the ones that we have just talked about. Obviously, there has been a discussion about whether they are high enough,

but I am not sure that I understand your point about franchising.

Chic Brodie: That is what is happening down south and around half the members are considering leaving the BSL interpreter organisation. Might that have a knock-on effect?

Dr Allan: I do not see any evidence—although I will check—of that situation being mirrored in Scotland. We do not have any evidence that the same situation has arisen here.

Chic Brodie: Okay. I just wanted an assurance that that will not happen here.

The Convener: It might help the minister to know that we have the article that Chic Brodie referred to. We will give the minister a copy at the end of the meeting so that his officials can have a look at it.

Dr Allan: I do not have any evidence of the situation that has been described, as I understand it.

Liam McArthur: When it comes to the model of education provision, there is a presumption of mainstreaming. Intuitively, I think that we would all support that and expect to see it happening but, in the evidence that we have had, concern has been expressed that the way in which that presumption is being interpreted or implemented is resulting in those with hearing impairments and sight impairments not getting the support that they need at the right age or stage. At the stage at which they might need habilitation skills, the focus of the education system is on something rather different.

Without suggesting that we should move away from mainstreaming, are there things that the Government can do, working with local authorities, Education Scotland or whoever, to ensure that that presumption is working flexibly enough for the needs of those specific groups to be catered for effectively?

Dr Allan: You are right to point to the legal basis for mainstreaming. The law makes it clear that although mainstreaming may be described as the default option, it is certainly not the only option, and if mainstreaming is not in the child's best interests, it should not be the chosen option. Local authorities know that and they work within the law.

The real issue is that when a child in a mainstream school has any additional needs, we must ensure that those needs are met. We have come a long way, and we have changed. For example, there has been a transformation in the number of deaf children who are in mainstream as opposed to specialist education.

I come back to the point that has quite rightly been raised again and again, particularly with regard to secondary school, where a child meets a

number of teachers in a day: how many of those teachers understand what that child's needs are?

Liam McArthur: I agree with what you said, although the problem that was identified to us was not simply in relation to specialist subject teaching at secondary level. One example that we received related to the earlier years in primary, when the development of habilitation skills and confidence among those with hearing or sight impairments is fundamental in giving those children the tools that they need in order to assimilate other learning in due course. Mainstreaming those children throughout primary schooling, even if that is buttressed a bit, does not adequately allow them to develop those skills in such a way that they can get the most out of their learning later on in primary school and in secondary school.

Dr Allan: It is certainly true that a child who faces barriers to learning who is in a mainstream school should not have the same day-to-day educational experiences as other children. The school must tailor things to the needs of the young person. That might mean providing more one-to-one time with a specialist teacher in the school, bringing in someone to assist the teacher or a range of other options. We should be clear that the fact that a child is in a mainstream school does not mean that that child does not get the specialist attention that they need to give them the same opportunities for learning that other children have.

Colin Spivey: The focus of additional support for learning is the individual needs of the child. Quite often, a range of conditions and barriers affect the child: there may be visual impairment and other factors as well. Local authorities are required to look at the individual and very specific needs of each child to devise the appropriate interventions that need to be made. In its inspections, Education Scotland will look at the types of interventions that are made and whether they are appropriate.

Lesley Brown: As Colin Spivey says, when it comes to following up on inspections, we have some specific examples of cases in which we have worked very closely with schools and authorities to support them to improve their practice in those areas. Primary is one example. That is very much the work of our team: we go in to build capacity, to look at what is happening and to put in place specific interventions and support.

11:00

Liam McArthur: In response to the earlier question about the demand as opposed to the supply, the message coming through from local authorities is that there is not a lack of specialist teachers in the system. In response to Mark Griffin's question, we heard that the level of

qualification that is achieved by those with BSL skills who deal with children whose main communication is through BSL might be inadequate in some areas, but we just do not know to what extent.

Given the evidence that we have heard about the problems that emerge at key stages, I am not entirely clear about the effectiveness of the challenge function that is provided through the inspection regime that Education Scotland undertakes and the follow-up to it. There are clearly problems there, which might be a result of local authorities saying that they can make the necessary provision with some additional specialist support in schools, because the consequence of not doing that is that they would have to go down the route of having a specialist resource unit, which could be more costly and problematic for them, but it might be in the best interests of the children concerned and might be exactly what they need.

Dr Allan: Mr McArthur makes some valuable points, but I keep coming back to the fact that there is no reason for us to be complacent about the fact that an attainment gap exists. There is no reason why we should not be seeking to do everything that we can—indeed, we are doing everything that we can—to ensure that that is addressed. One of the areas that we have been working to address is transitions. I have mentioned a couple of times the transition from primary to secondary and the importance of ensuring that the environment that a child goes into is one in which people appreciate that they might face obstacles. The other transition that we have talked about a number of times, quite rightly, is the transition from school. Improvements are necessary, particularly in access to employment and to higher education.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I want to explore with the minister one or two issues about the learning environment. A number of organisations that have submitted evidence, including the Scottish sensory centre, have talked about the issues for children with sensory impairment who are concentrating more on academic attainment. Most of them are doing relatively well on that, but necessary life skills such as building confidence, effective communication and social skills are seen as secondary. There is a feeling that perhaps there should be more emphasis on life skills and a little less on formal academic qualifications. How do you feel about that?

Dr Allan: One of the things that has come through from the Wood commission and from many other examinations of our education system is the importance of core skills—not just life skills but the transferable skills that contribute to employability—and that applies to young people

with a disability just as much as it does to anyone else.

I appreciate the point about the importance of giving young people with a visual impairment or who are deaf the confidence to apply for a job and to believe that they can get on in life. There are an awful lot of things being done from very early years to instil that confidence, but I agree that core skills and life skills are central to what we need. Colin Spivey may want to say more about that.

Colin Spivey: All I will add is that part of the curriculum for excellence's fundamental approach is to build rounded individuals with life skills.

Dr Allan: The other thing, of course, is that role models are important not only for young people with disabilities but for young people from lots of groups in society where, for a whole host of reasons including poverty and historical social deprivation, they may need a role model to show them that they can get a job in a certain sphere. That may be particularly true for people with the disabilities that we are talking about, because there is no evidence to suggest that they are any less able than anyone else when it comes to getting on academically, but we need to ensure that they are confident and are given the same choices about their own future as everyone else is given.

Colin Beattie: If we look at the built environment, in England and Wales there are statutory building standards, such as for acoustics in schools. Do we need to legislate or bring in guidance to improve the environment in our schools? There is a considerable building programme for new schools, and it could be an opportunity to incorporate such improvements.

Dr Allan: The Government is aware of the issue of acoustics in schools, which are of obvious importance for deaf people. While it is true to say that the legislative regime is different in Scotland from in England, there is best practice that is adhered to in buildings. Building bulletin 93 has guidelines on acoustics in schools. Scotland operates under a different statutory regime from the one in England, but that bulletin has been used in many of the new schools that have been built in Scotland. It has informed much of the design of our new schools.

As you mention, we have a swathe of new school buildings in Scotland that have transformed the way that learning takes place in schools. It has also transformed physically the learning environment, which has become more open plan—particularly in primary schools, people are in shared areas. It is important that we get the acoustics right.

As I say, we have made use of building bulletin 93. The school premises regulations give certain

statutory requirements on school building design and on optimising the internal environment. That is intended to assist local authorities with some of the points that you raise.

Colin Beattie: Is there a case for legislating in this respect, as has been done south of the border?

Dr Allan: My impression is that building bulletin 93 has been helpful and has informed the design of buildings. If we were to start to legislate, we would probably have to work out where acoustics fitted in with other priorities such as ventilation, which—believe it or not—is a competing priority when it comes to a school building. We might have to rethink something that is already there and, to a large extent, is already being used.

Colin Beattie: On another facet of the learning environment, we have been talking to witnesses about the merits of a centralised teaching approach, in which a teacher who is qualified in BSL teaches a lesson that is transmitted to classrooms across the country. That might help to compensate for the lack of teachers with BSL. Has an evaluation of that type of centralised teaching been carried out? Is there any suggestion that it might appear on the agenda at some point?

Dr Allan: There has been some discussion of that kind of approach—in rural and island schools, for instance. It is difficult to attract specialist secondary teachers to many of the most rural parts of Scotland. The debate is a live one, although it is at an earlier stage with respect to the issue of visually impaired and deaf young people. I do not know whether Colin Spivey wants to say something about that.

Colin Spivey: I add just that glow provides a platform for delivering that kind of intervention. I am not aware that it is happening at the moment, but the technology is there to do some of this stuff.

Lesley Brown: Glow is available. I am not aware that it is being used in that area at the moment, but our teams are looking for good practice. I am happy to speak to them about ways in which the issue can be taken forward.

Dr Allan: Teachers—quite rightly—mention that they are busy people and need to be signposted to where materials exist, whether it is on glow, online or elsewhere. We need to work together to ensure that that material is easily found, particularly for secondary teachers.

Colin Spivey: We need to have some slight caution about the issue. While I can understand that there may be advantages in looking at that approach, we need to consider personalised learning and the individual needs of the child. Some of that might get lost if we take a universal approach. It is not a reason for not doing it, but it is

something that we need to bear in mind if we try that kind of intervention.

Chic Brodie: I want to follow on briefly from that. We take the point that there are issues, and we have received an email as a consequence of the conversation last week. There are caveats in terms of mirroring classroom studies. However, is it not worth while now to carry out a pilot to look at what needs to be overcome so that we might be able to expand on the approach nationally? It would certainly be beneficial at least to pilot it to explore the difficulties and, more importantly, the opportunities.

Dr Allan: If you are talking about a centralised—centralised is possibly the wrong word—

Chic Brodie: Using technology—

Dr Allan: If we are talking about using technology, the important thing is to recognise, as has been alluded to, that the needs of children and young people are going to be very different from child to child and from young person to young person.

There is a great deal more that we could do to make use of technology and materials that are available, or could be made available, online. I hesitate to use the word “pilot”, however, because that might imply that we would find some school whose approach could be applied on a blanket basis. What would be much more useful nationally would be to see how much of the material that exists online or could be brought online could be signposted to teachers around the country.

Chic Brodie: I understand that, minister, but we had an example last week of one council that is clearly well in advance in addressing the issue. Would it not be possible to consider discussing with that council the challenges and opportunities of remote technology use?

Dr Allan: Where there are examples of local authorities that are good at this work, what needs to happen—and what Education Scotland is busy doing—is to make sure that other local authorities know about it so that good practice is shared. That is something that I know the committee has been involved in and might want to say something about. That is probably the best way forward—to make sure that good practice is not hidden away anywhere in the country but that all 32 local authorities know about it.

Chic Brodie: I understand that, minister, but I am obviously not making myself clear, so let me try again.

We know that we have to share current good practice across councils. That came out quite clearly in the discussion that we had last week. What we are asking for is a means by which we

can explore the use of technology much more beneficially and, as part of that, secure the efficiencies that would come from centralised teaching. I agree that we should be sharing best practice as it stands today. What I am asking is for you to consider engaging with the particular council to run a test and exploration of the possibilities of technology for centralised teaching.

Dr Allan: I am very happy to learn from the experience of any local authority that can provide evidence of that kind.

The Convener: It is a wider question. As well as centralised teaching using BSL, for example, we have heard evidence on the lack of subtitling on programmes that are available for children in classrooms. There are a number of basic technological issues that would seem to be relatively simple to overcome but are causing problems.

I agree with you that there is a wider debate to be had on those points. What concerned me was the reaction from the Education Scotland witness last week, who said something like, “Such suggestions are not currently on the agenda.” That was rather a flat no to the suggestion that technology has a role to play.

Dr Allan: As I indicated, if there are local authorities or others with good practice, I am very willing as minister to learn from it.

The Convener: Is there a possibility that suggestions such as this could be discussed in the advisory group that you plan to establish, assuming that the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill goes through and passes stage 3?

Dr Allan: As I have indicated to the committee already, one of the most impressive things about the bill is that the content of the plans—the part of the bill that will change things—will be very much in the hands of deaf and visually impaired people. They will have a big influence both over the national plan and, I hope, at a local level.

11:15

The Convener: Is there a possibility that ideas such as the one we have just discussed, and others, could end up in the national plan?

Dr Allan: If people bring forward ideas about ways in which Government agencies can improve what they do, that is obviously something that people would want to discuss on the national advisory board.

The Convener: Liam, did you have a supplementary question?

Liam McArthur: It is very tangential, but—

The Convener: When you say very tangential—

Liam McArthur: It is on an attainment theme, but not solely with reference to those with sensory impairment.

Minister, you will be aware of the concerns that have been raised about the recent higher maths exam—concern among pupils that the exam questions bore little or no relation to the coursework they had been studying in the run-up to it. I know from correspondence that I have had from constituents that this undermined pupils’ confidence in themselves. It has undermined the confidence of parents, staff and pupils in the exam system itself.

It would be helpful if you could offer some reassurance that pupils who sat the exam will not be disadvantaged as a result of that. If there are lessons to be learned that will ensure that next year there is not such a disconnect between the exams and the coursework leading up to it, reassurance on that would be very helpful as well.

Dr Allan: When the member talks about higher maths, I take it that he chooses the word “tangential” carefully. [*Laughter.*]

What I can say is that, quite rightly, ministers do not set or mark exam papers. However, the Scottish Qualifications Authority always looks carefully at all exams after they have been taken and at any evidence that in any given year an exam paper is more or less challenging than in previous years. The grade boundaries are always set by the SQA, independently, based on its understanding of what the fairest solution is. Every year the SQA looks at where grade boundaries should be set in order to make sure that the fairest possible outcome is arrived at.

Liam McArthur: Can I take it from your response that, as a result of this exchange and other representations that I am sure that the Government has received on the issue, there will at least be conversations with the SQA? They would be not just about this year—I take your point about the setting of grade boundaries—but about what appears to be a disconnect between the exam itself and the subject matter that was being taught.

Dr Allan: I have to stress that the SQA will arrive at these decisions completely independently of ministers.

The Convener: I agree with Liam McArthur on this one, being father to a daughter who has just sat higher maths and feels exactly the same as many pupils did—that in at least some questions it seemed to be a test of English interpretation more than a test of higher maths knowledge. That is one of the issues that I believe needs to be addressed by the SQA.

However, we are straying slightly from the point of the meeting and we need to move on, after what was a very personal intervention on my part. My daughter is sitting behind you, minister, and I can see her face now. Let us move on to the next question, which is from George Adam.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I would like to talk about multi-agency collaboration. There is good practice throughout the country, which we have heard about. However, the Scottish Council on Deafness has raised concerns that, although newborn hearing screening is positive at recording the hearing loss affecting young babies, the information is not always shared with the right agencies and organisations quickly enough.

Is there any way to improve information-sharing among the relevant agencies? The need to get that right for every child and to ensure that support mechanisms are made available for the parents and families as quickly as possible is one of the strong messages that has been coming from families dealing with sensory impairment.

Dr Allan: You refer to getting it right for every child, which is very relevant to the issue at hand. When Mary Scanlon was talking about families I raised the issue of deaf children in hearing families and the need for different agencies to work together to ensure that the families do not feel isolated and to provide them with sources of information. Despite all the controversy that has been manufactured in some quarters about the provision of named persons, I think that named persons will prove to be an important source of information to such families when they seek it.

The Convener: As there are no further questions from members, minister, I thank you and your officials for your attendance today. We are most grateful to you for taking the time to be at the committee meeting.

That concludes our evidence-taking on the inquiry, and we will publish a report of our findings and recommendations later this year. I now close the meeting to the public as we move to agenda item 3, which will be taken in private.

11:20

Meeting continued in private until 11:24.

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