



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 1 February 2017

Session 5



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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

4th Meeting 2017, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

*Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

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

*Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 1 February 2017

[The Convener opened the meeting at 11:30]

Education and Culture Committee Recommendations

The Convener (James Dornan): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the fourth meeting in 2017 of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind everyone present to please turn their mobile phones and other devices to silent mode.

We have received apologies from Tavish Scott. The only item of business today is consideration of a letter from the Scottish Government. The committee asked for an update from the Government on all live recommendations from our predecessor committee—the Education and Culture Committee—that are relevant to this committee's remit, as that would give us the opportunity to follow up or keep a watching brief on the issues that the predecessor committee highlighted and to provide continuity of scrutiny.

We now have a copy of the Scottish Government's response. It is worth noting that today is the first occasion since the response was received at the end of November on which the committee has been able to give this substantial document space on our agenda. I suggest that we touch on each of the Education and Culture Committee reports on which we asked for an update on the recommendations. I would particularly welcome input from those members who were also members of the predecessor committee.

I have two comments to make. The first concerns the recommendations in the predecessor committee's report, "The draft national Gaelic language plan 2012-17", which are covered on pages 1 to 3 of the table of recommendations and responses.

My second comment concerns the recommendations in the report entitled, "The Educational Attainment of Looked after Children", which are covered on pages 3 to 6 of the table. I draw members' attention to point 5, on page 5. I understand that the United Kingdom Government will limit tax credit claims so that only two children can be included in a claim. A recent announcement highlighted some exceptions to that, one of which relates to kinship care. Although there are exceptions for some non-looked-after

children who are in kinship care, there is no exception for formal kinship care of looked-after children. In the context of the UK Government's consultation, the Scottish Government states that it

"will be responding to ensure that kinship carers are not disadvantaged in any way."

I suggest that we write to the Scottish Government to ask what the effects of that change will be on kinship carers in Scotland, and whether there will be a policy response.

In addition, I suggest that we add to our future work programme consideration of the annual report from the commissioner for fair access. We may, of course, hear from the commissioner before his first report is issued, but I want to ensure that there is continuity of scrutiny.

Those are my only substantive comments, but a number of other important areas of the Education and Culture Committee's work are detailed in the response. I ask other members for their comments. In particular, I would like to know whether there are any areas in which members wish to seek further information from the Government, its agencies or stakeholders, or whether there is any legislation or other work detailed in the response that they consider may merit further work from this committee in the future. I start with those committee members who were members of the predecessor committee. Liz Smith can go first.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I agree with your comments, convener. With regard to the Gaelic language plan, I thank the clerks for providing us with an update on teacher numbers. A central issue in the effective working of the Gaelic plan is the need to ensure that the right number of teachers are available. As members will know, there have been problems in teacher training in that area, so it would be helpful if we could keep an eye on that. Although there is a lot to commend the Gaelic language plan—of which we have been very supportive—it is important that there are enough teachers, especially in areas in which there are indigenous Gaelic speakers.

As members will know, most of the issues that are highlighted in the table were at the centre of the scrutiny work by our predecessor committee and the committee that preceded it. It is very good to see that there will be on-going scrutiny of the areas that our predecessor committees decided were major issues, and of the conclusions of those committees.

I welcome the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee's invitation to cross-reference much more with its work. The Parliament has sometimes been criticised because its scrutiny has

not been adequate enough, and there is good work happening in that regard.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I agree with what the convener said at the start. As a member of the predecessor committee, I think that there are one or two areas that we should look at again. One area concerns decisions on taking children into care; we have not really got a grip on that issue yet. We have seen various projects—the committee went to Glasgow and looked at various systems and so on—but we have not got our hands round the matter yet, and there is a lot more work to be done in that area.

Another such area is the attainment of looked-after children. Again, we had people in to talk about that and we spent quite a bit of time on it, but there is a lot more work to be done there. There are a lot of priorities in that area that we have not yet dug into.

In addition, we should focus on college regionalisation. I have not yet got my head round how some aspects of that are working. We have focused on individual colleges, but we need to have a wee look at how the regional structure is operating.

The Convener: Do any other members have comments to make?

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I want to follow up on the point about colleges. I was struck by the mention in the Scottish Government's response of the national strategic forum for further education, which was set up by Michael Russell in 2012 and had its second meeting in 2014. I am interested to know whether the forum has ever had a third meeting, and what its purpose is.

One challenge is that many people were in some sense sceptical of why regionalisation was necessary in the first place. Given that it has taken place, we should look at whether it is adding anything or whether it simply creates extra layers. I am interested in that area.

On the issue of looked-after children, the convener mentioned kinship care funding. One of the big issues for kinship care families is the extent to which they are unable to access the resources that looked-after children may be able to access. One of the predecessor committee's recommendations refers to social work support for young people in care and for looked-after children. The Scottish Government says in its response that it is for local government to manage its own budgets.

I am interested in the extent to which that is actually happening, and I would like to know whether it is happening at all for children in kinship care. There is a thread running through all the

work on looked-after children that relates to kinship care. Campaigning groups make an argument about payments, but another point is that, if there are two young people who go through the same trauma, and one ends up being looked after in foster care while one is in kinship care, they will not have equal access to things like educational psychologists or any extra support that might be available.

I would be interested to know whether there is support for children in care at all and the extent to which support is working its way through, and whether there is a particular need to test the system to see if there is access to such services for children in kinship care.

I am also very interested in exploring the issues around colleges.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I have a supplementary on the point about colleges. The predecessor committee mentioned college regionalisation, and this committee has touched on that process with regard to how outcome agreements function and how the relationship works. It is certainly worth looking at that area, although any work by the committee may of course be overtaken by events, given what may or may not happen to the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council. Nonetheless, it is worth keeping an eye on, and giving some thought to, the subject.

The Convener: Are there any other comments?

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The predecessor committee highlighted as an issue the number of qualified teachers for young people with sensory impairments. I have some issues with the Government's response, but I am hopeful that we will be able to pick up on those when we look at additional support needs more generally. A large range of specialist staff are needed to cover additional support needs—for example, a young person with autism has wildly different needs from someone with sensory impairments. That issue comes up quite regularly.

The Convener: As there are no more comments, I thank members for their contributions. The clerks and the Scottish Parliament information centre will ensure that our decisions and discussions feed into the committee's work programme. The clerks will also seek annual updates from the Government on all live recommendations.

At this point, I formally close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 11:38.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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