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Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 8 February 2023

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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CONTENTS

EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
5th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
*Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP)
*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)
*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
*Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Mike Corbett (NASUWT)
Louise Storie (Donaldson Trust)
Anne-Marie Sturrock (Colleges Scotland)
Dr Fiona Whelan (Universities Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 8 February 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:15]

Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Convener (Sue Webber): Good morning, and welcome to the fifth meeting in 2023 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. The first item on our agenda this morning is evidence on the Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill. We have one panel of witnesses joining us today, whom I welcome. Anne-Marie Sturrock is vice-principal for student experience at Borders College and is representing Colleges Scotland. Mike Corbett is a national official for Scotland at the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers. Dr Fiona Whelan is assistant director for accessibility and inclusion in student services at the University of St Andrews and is representing Universities Scotland. Louise Storie is safeguarding and practice lead at the Donaldson Trust. We have a lot of ground to cover today, so we will move straight to members' questions. The first group of questions is from Ruth Maguire.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Good morning. Last week, we heard evidence from witnesses about some of the challenges in supporting better outcomes for children and young people with disabilities. They spoke about availability of services, resources and capacity. I am interested to hear your reflections on what the key barriers are to getting better outcomes for disabled children and young people when they leave school. Anne-Marie Sturrock is nodding and making eye contact, so I will come to her first.

Anne-Marie Sturrock (Colleges Scotland): Good morning. I am quite nervous.

Among the main challenges are the anxiety that is faced by families during the transition process and getting the right service in place for the young person and their family. From the colleges' point of view, we try to go in at secondary 2 and S3 to have that discussion. We also have school-college partnerships to try to ease the transition. It is a deeply personal experience for the young person and their family. Each person is different from the next, so getting individualised support to help with the transition is key, and having a contact person for the family is really important. The key challenge is in dealing with what comes next, with people asking, “My young child has gone through school, and I have had a key contact, but what is next in the big, bad world out there?” We, in the college sector, try to ease that anxiety.

Ruth Maguire: Okay. You spoke about key contacts in the colleges. Do Colleges Scotland members have people in the colleges specifically for young persons coming in and their families?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Each college has a student guidance and support team. During the application process, if a student has not come in through the school-college partnership, we invite them to put on their application form whether there is disability and whether they would like a conversation with a guidance and support team member to ensure that the process and the transition into college are smooth. There is a lot to get through. Provision can range from being very small to very big.

When I came in here this morning, there was a fire drill, and a person with a disability may need additional support during a fire drill. Things to consider could be as simple as that. We need to establish what the additional support needs are so that reasonable measures can be put in place. The phrase “reasonable measures” is bandied about, but we need to address individual measures. Everybody who comes through with a disability is different and has different needs, so getting it right at the application stage and at the transition stage is very important. That is what happens when a young person comes in, but there is also the transition out of college on completion of their course.

Ruth Maguire: We will talk more about that in a wee while. I ask Mike Corbett to talk about the key barriers to getting better outcomes.

Mike Corbett (NASUWT): First, there are probably too many competing policy drivers. There are responsibilities around additional support needs. There is also getting it right for every child—GIRFEC—and mental health and wellbeing, which is now promoted much more, and rightly so. There is already the right to have co-ordinated support plans, and we will also have what is in the bill.

All those are admirable individually, but the various initiatives that come in at different times do not seem to be coherent. Sometimes, they have come in and are not fully acknowledged by the time that we come to the next new initiative. That is one issue.

Ruth Maguire: I am sorry to interrupt. You used the word “competing”. Are the policy drivers competing, or is it more the case that everything is a bit cluttered?

Mike Corbett: It is about things being cluttered. Let us take co-ordinated support plans as an example. They are statutory; you would think that because there is statutory force behind them that they should be clear and should be in place, but we have evidence to the contrary—in particular, as a result of an issue that we had a couple of years ago with a special school, in which one would expect a significant number of co-ordinated support plans to be in place. When we initially got involved in that school, there was a co-ordinated support plan for a single pupil. That shocked us, because there is no way that that should be the case. That is just one example.

Ruth Maguire: I totally understand what you are saying about the complexity of policy and guidance and that perhaps adding to them might not be helpful. What is it about the complexity of policy specifically that gets in the way of there being better outcomes for disabled children and young people?

Mike Corbett: Talking purely from the point of view of schools and teachers, I can say that what tends to happen in practice is that, when there is no clear overarching framework for, or coherence to, the variety of policies that are in place, local authorities often put downward pressure on schools and teachers to make the decisions in order to make things work at the local level.

It came out quite clearly in Angela Morgan’s report that what ends up happening is that teachers at the sharp end are doing their best in difficult circumstances. They are trying to juggle all those different things without the appropriate resource and, crucially, without time—which is the crucial resource—to devote to all the existing things. That is why sometimes things fall through the cracks and why some young people might not be getting the support that they need and deserve.

Ruth Maguire: As well as that resource and capacity, is it also about leadership, if you are talking about “downward pressure” on front-line workers?

Mike Corbett: I think so. I am not saying that it would be simple or easy to look at all those different areas and to try to bring them together through a coherent approach. However, the lack of such an approach and things being left to the local level, which becomes leaving it to schools and teachers, certainly causes some difficulty.

Ruth Maguire: Is it the view of you and your members that something needs to change but that that should not mean another layer of difference or complexity?

Mike Corbett: Yes—and that is one of the reasons why we are a bit disappointed with the response to Angela Morgan’s report. A lot of people saw it as saying, “Right, this is where everything that comes anywhere near being under the banner of additional support needs will potentially be brought together and a co-ordinated approach taken.” It was partly to do with the fact that, when that report was published, at the height of Covid, it perhaps did not quite get the attention and commitment that it deserved. We are disappointed that it was not the signal to try to bring all those things together.

Ruth Maguire: Thank you. I now come to Fiona Whelan.

Dr Fiona Whelan (Universities Scotland): On the barriers to the transition to higher education, I understand what Anne-Marie Sturrock was saying about timings being quite critical. Our goal would always be to put in place an appropriate support plan for a student at the point at which the student starts with us.

However, there are challenges with that, particularly around the time at which students declare a disability to us. At that point, we can really start to engage with them. There is a window in the summer when there is a lot of pressure on disability teams in universities to reach out to students, to do needs assessments and to help them to apply for the disabled students allowance so that, on day 1 of their course, they have the support that they need. However, we know that students struggle with that and that they will experience delays in getting the various supports that they might need.

One critical area is the disabled students allowance. Universities and their disability teams work with and support students to apply for their disabled students allowance, but to some degree that is outside our control, particularly around the Student Awards Agency Scotland and delays in getting things in place for students. Communication can also be a bit of a barrier. SAAS, for example, does not tell the university when a student has got their award, so it is left to the student to navigate complex administrative structures. The process could be joined up better so that we can get supports in place for students as quickly as possible.

Ruth Maguire: Fiona, can I just make sure that I heard you right? Did you say that universities will begin working with a young person in the summer before they attend in September?

Dr Whelan: We can be in touch with students once they apply. In my institution, if a student declares a disability on application, we can start that conversation. Obviously, we are conscious that students might not be sure exactly which institution they will be going to, which is why there is a window after the student gets their offer during which we ramp up our communication with them.

Ruth Maguire: In your experience, who is supporting young people and their families before they get to the application stage? Obviously, there is some work involved there.

Dr Whelan: That is a little difficult for me to answer, although I certainly know that our admissions teams work closely with and do outreach in schools, but I do not know whether it is guidance counsellors in schools who provide that support.

Ruth Maguire: I would be really interested in hearing about that, so perhaps you could send us a note after the meeting.

Dr Whelan: Absolutely.

Ruth Maguire: Louise Storie, can I come to you now?

Louise Storie (Donaldson Trust): To follow on from what Fiona said, I note that the challenge is sometimes that not everybody recognises that they have a disability, so they do not acknowledge it. They want to fit in and not express that, and they do not recognise that their condition brings a host of challenges and differences that make the barriers a little bit more complex for them. That is a challenge that also applies to people who are undiagnosed and people who are going through a process of diagnosis at the point of transition, and are going into a service. How does the process work for somebody who is going through the diagnostic process at the point of a transition but does not yet have confirmation of a diagnosis?

We need also to identify needs at the appropriate time to enable a more aligned and person-centred transition. That is about collaborative working among agencies and partners in order to recognise needs. Sometimes, health services are quite involved. It is perhaps not about social work and education services at certain points in a person’s life, when their mental health or other health needs might be more pressing. How do we involve those people in the processes?

The other thing that can be quite challenging is the fact that the transition is as much a transition for parents as it is for children. It is challenging for parents to find out information about what the future holds at the same time as a transition process is going on, because they are processing that as well as thinking about how to prioritise the needs of their child. Do they need to be in a forum on the transition while they are trying to process what it means? They will think about whether they are making the right decisions on behalf of their child. Perhaps it would be helpful to look at how we might involve parents in a different way in respect of what the future holds, and engage them at the right time in the transition process.

Ruth Maguire: Thank you. That is helpful.

I would like to ask about transitions within university and college and on leaving, which Anne-Marie Sturrock started to speak about. Can you say a bit more about how young people are supported in college? We heard some evidence about the need for flexibility, for example, when young people start a course that is not quite for them. What can colleges do to support them in that situation? You started to speak about the transition out of college and into the world of work or university.

09:30

Anne-Marie Sturrock: There are different transition arrangements for students because there are different disabilities. For students who come through with additional support needs, there is a firm transition arrangement between the school and the college. If the student has been on a school-college partnership programme and is doing a foundation apprenticeship or similar course, there is a transition with the guidance team; when students start at the college, they have a point of contact in the guidance team. They are the go-to person who is the point of contact between the curriculum and the needs of the student.

Provision is personalised and individualised. Some students need one-to-one support throughout their college experience. Some people need help with their personal care. Provision varies depending on the young person who is transitioning. Colleges have student guidance teams that are similar to those in universities. If the support needs are not identified through the school-college partnership, they are identified on application, when there is an opportunity for the student to speak with our student guidance staff.

I echo what Louise Storie said, which was that quite a lot of students who come to us might be going through a period of diagnosis or might have gone through school and not have been identified as having a disability. When I say “identified as having a disability”, I mean that they might not have been diagnosed. Sometimes the colleges—I cannot speak for universities—have to undergo that process along with the young person. That is where there is a bit of a gap; having identified need, we start the process over again. It could happen in the middle of an academic term that the whole support arrangement for a young person needs to change.

Ruth Maguire: Do you have any information on the outcomes for young people who come in on the various routes? You spoke about beginning work with people in S2 and S3, the school partnerships and people just applying. The numbers might make it impossible to do so, but would Colleges Scotland look at that?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Colleges Scotland looks at the outcomes. Education Scotland looks at our equalities data when it does progress visits. Our funders—predominantly, the Scottish Funding Council—look at our equalities reporting mechanism. People with disabilities have better outcomes than our care-experienced students, but we have students who have multiple disabilities.

Ruth Maguire: My question was about the outcomes for young people who come in by the various routes. For example, some students might have had support since school, where there is a school-college partnership, but others might have come through a different route. Do you disaggregate numbers in that way?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I can get that information.

Ruth Maguire: That would be really interesting to know.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I know the overall outcomes for people with disabilities in the college sector. That data has been released for 2020-21, but I do not have the data on who has come through specific processes.

Ruth Maguire: Okay. You spoke about the transition out of college. Do you want to say a bit more about that and about how colleges support young people?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: For the transition into college, the bill will firm up and set up a framework and process to ensure that nobody slips through the net. The transition out of college is a bigger challenge. A young person could start university or college at 17, but the bill includes people up to the age of 26. The transition would be either to employment, to university or back to a service. That is an important process for the young person who is reaching a stage of their life when they might want to move out of their mother's and father's house or carer's house and set up their own little abode. The transition out is also critical.

Ruth Maguire: What is happening now in that regard?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: It differs for individuals. For people who come under the umbrella of having learning disabilities, we continue our links with social work throughout the process. We do not want people going to university or college and finishing a course—or maybe not completing a course—then becoming lost. During the process, therefore, we constantly keep up with our social work partners.

There are also physical disability services, and we work with the health boards, but, for our students with other disabilities, it is about making sure that their transition to university goes ahead or, because employment is the big thing, that they move on to employment agencies.

Dr Whelan: The situation is very similar in terms of the transition in and what we can provide to students. There are two layers of support that a university can offer students. First, there are the individual internal adjustments that we can make for students, including adjustments to their teaching, learning environment and exams, and support with accommodation. It is important to some of our disabled students that they can stay in halls of residence, for example. That really helps with their transition to independent living, which is a big transition.

The transition is not just about the step up in learning to higher education; for many of our students, it is about leaving home for the first time and the loss of the one-to-one personal support that they might have had at home. The layer on top of that is for students who are eligible for the disabled students allowance and the extra support that that can unlock for them. That might be through assistive technology or non-medical personal helpers who can provide things such as mentoring or study skills support. As I said, getting provision in place as quickly as possible helps to set the transition up for success.

All universities have a team of disability advisers. They might set support up in slightly different ways, but students can always access support from their disability adviser throughout their studies. As we have discussed, that might result from disclosure pre-arrival, but it might also be that a student wants to explore a diagnosis with us.

A student's status can change at any point during their time with our institution. We offer support with diagnostic assessments because the disabled students allowance, for example, requires evidence. That is one of the barriers that cause delays. Students who might have had support in place in school on the basis of need are required to give documentary evidence, which can cause challenges. We support students throughout their studies with us.

As we have discussed, there is then the transition out. The support that students need can be multifaceted. We have talked a little about multiple disabilities, but there is also intersectionality. Students who are disabled might also be care experienced and have particularly complex needs when they leave us. For example, at my institution, we talk a lot about "leaving university well" and what that means for students. We work closely with our careers service to provide bespoke information to our disabled students.

We also work closely with our money advice team. Students might want information about accessing the personal independence payment, for example. There is also involvement with social care, housing and other services, so that students are not afraid of what comes next. Anecdotally, we know that they are afraid. We did a joint survey at the University of St Andrews with the disability team and the careers service. In some respects, we were really pleased by the survey, in that students said that they felt very supported by the university, but they were also afraid that they were facing a cliff edge and wondered about what that meant for them. We have very much taken that on board, and I know that the sector has as well.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): Good morning, panel. I go back to something that Fiona Whelan touched on. Universities Scotland, in its written evidence, highlighted a specific issue for students in the pre-arrival period, particularly when they have a conditional offer and it is therefore relatively late in the day before they know, and the university knows, that they are coming. It suggested that there are issues around timing. A returning student's needs may already be known, so they are almost ahead of the queue in trying to get the resource that they need, but that may be frustrating for new students. How significant a problem is that for universities?

Dr Whelan: To some degree, it can be a resourcing issue in the teams. If they have sufficient capacity, they should be able to manage that. One of the challenges is that, in August, we hit an embargo period when we cannot communicate with applicants, which slows us down. There is no reason why we could not be in touch at that point with students who have a conditional offer, in order to start the conversation. They might feel comfortable sharing with us any documentation that they have. When the embargo hits, we cannot communicate with them. It is a short window of one or two weeks in which—

Graeme Dey: Sorry—what is the embargo?

Dr Whelan: There is an embargo, through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, in the period when universities are tacitly aware of students' results but those cannot be communicated in any way. It is specifically to ensure that universities do not accidentally indicate to a student whether or not they have an offer. Communication with applicants has effectively to shut down—that comes from UCAS. That is another barrier that we face in communicating with students. We do as much as we can before that period, but there are students who do not want to declare a disability at the application stage. Over the past five or 10 years, great strides have been made in changing the perception that declaring a disability is a taboo and that, if someone declares a disability to a university, their offer will be revoked. However, that perception still exists among some students, which is why we get late declarations.

Graeme Dey: If the convener will indulge me, I will probe that a bit more. Your written evidence refers to the issue of schools being closed at that point. To what extent are you permitted to explore with a school the specific needs of a student who may be coming to you?

Dr Whelan: By and large, we communicate with the student; we do not have much, if any, communication with the school. My experience from my service is that our dialogue is with the student and—if it is appropriate, and with the student's consent—with the parents. We rely on the student more than the school to communicate with us, but there is potentially a role for schools in helping students to understand the administration that is needed to get the support put in place for when they join us.

Graeme Dey: Thank you. That is useful.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I have two quick questions. Mike Corbett mentioned policy conflicts. I suggest that the area of policy is cluttered; it is often hard to discern exactly how policies work together, and sometimes they do not. Will the bill add to that clutter or facilitate an understanding of policy implementation among practitioners?

Mike Corbett: For us, it will add to the clutter and, potentially, to the workload of teachers, ultimately, if there is not better overarching co-ordination, which has to come from outside schools.

Stephen Kerr: That is clear.

Anne-Marie, you said that you felt that the bill would firm up arrangements for transitions out of college. That is interesting. How did you come to that conclusion?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: It was from reading the bill and the questions that were asked of the panels in previous sessions. I always look at it from an end user's point of view—I agree with my colleague that those who will use the bill are people with disabilities and their families and carers. We are the implementers of the bill; let us keep it simple and make sure that it interconnects with other aspects.

When I was talking with my colleague outside, we said that the difference with this bill is that it provides a framework so that every person who has a disability will get a transition plan from school to college or university. That is what I like about it.

We have the GIRFEC—getting it right for every child—framework, legislation on additional support needs and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in terms of how that filters down. In my view, the bill brings all of that together. However, I agree that it could be complex for a parent who may be worried about their child moving on and what the next stage will be. If they want advice, they might get the information from GIRFEC or they might look at the bill. We always have to ensure that parents and the people with disabilities whom we support know what their rights are according to the bill. Communication, and imparting information on the bill, is important.

Stephen Kerr: That is the situation now, is it not?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Yes.

Stephen Kerr: What will the bill, as it is currently drafted, actually change?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: We were talking about that in the lobby as we waited to come in. We discussed the question of what is unique about the bill. First, it is legislation, so there is a right to what it provides, but there is also a framework for parents and young people to work within.

Stephen Kerr: Right—okay. Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you, Stephen, for asking that selection of questions. Bob Doris has a supplementary on that subject before we move to questions from Michael Marra.

09:45

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): For once, convener, it is just a supplementary.

I will go to Anne-Marie Sturrock first. The committee is trying to wrestle with what you and Mike Corbett have talked about. Mike said that, although a statutory right to a co-ordinated support plan exists, those plans are not produced consistently or regularly.

Anne-Marie, you suggested—I hope that you are right—that the framework means that there will be a more consistent, streamlined approach to ensuring that all young people get all the rights and transitions to which they are entitled. If that is not happening with co-ordinated support plans, however, why would it be different under the bill?

You do not have to answer to that; I am simply reflecting a point that the committee is wrestling with, which is why I want to give you the opportunity to say a little bit more about it. That is all.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Over the years, the process of capturing people with disabilities in the education sector has evolved. When we report to the Scottish Funding Council, we now include the numbers of students with disabilities that we have. With some people, however, we do not realise that they have a disability until they actually come to the college or university. It is difficult to capture everything, which is what the bill sets out to do. Its purpose is to get better outcomes for people with disabilities in Scotland.

Bob Doris: That is helpful. You want more consistent capturing of those with disabilities. We will talk more about that later.

The Convener: Does anyone else want to respond?

Louise Storie: I think that the bill clarifies what is required. The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 provides for reporting information about co-ordinated support plans and identifying needs. The bill also talks about identifying needs; it will be interesting to see whether the provisions on identification of need in the bill correlate with the additional support for learning statement of need. It is about the extent of the bill's reach over those who will be accountable and who will have responsibility under it. Under the additional support for learning legislation, we look at education and the period of a person's life up to the age of 26. Whom does the bill capture as the audience that will have responsibility and accountability under its provisions?

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): My question follows on from that reasonably closely. It is about the gap between the implementation of policy and duties. Following the discussion that we have just had on policy, whether we speak about clutter or a search for clarity, do the witnesses recognise that the outcomes are not currently good enough?

Mike Corbett: Absolutely. That comes back to the fact that too many decisions are not left to those at the local authority level but are pushed down to schools and teachers. Pastoral teachers give guidance, but most schools do not have a consistent approach regarding the time that those teachers get to devote to that side of their work. From one local authority to another, each will have a different policy in that respect. That is a huge challenge, and it is one of the reasons why we end up with different levels of support at the school level.

Michael Marra: That is useful. I will come back on some areas. I am interested in how we bridge the gap between implementation and experience, and in longer-term planning, given that the bill deals with young people from the age of 14.

Anne-Marie Sturrock, what proportion of young people with disabilities entering college do so through a school-college partnership? Do you have any information on that?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Yes, I do. In colleges across Scotland just now—or rather, in the previous academic session; we do not have the figures for the current session—32,987 students with disabilities were identified. That represents 15.4 per cent of the student population of Scotland's colleges. Of those students, 9,612 identified as having multiple disabilities. Of the 15.4 per cent overall, 12 per cent came from schools. We also offer education to adult learners, but quite a high proportion of students come through the school system.

Michael Marra: Is that though a school-college partnership programme?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Yes—it operates across Scotland.

Michael Marra: Do you have any indication of how many young people who seek to access college defer entry owing to a lack of support being in place?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I do not.

Michael Marra: Does Universities Scotland have that information? I have been told that a significant problem for young people who are trying to make the transition that we are talking about is a lack of the type of support package that they require.

Dr Whelan: I do not have that information to hand, but we will try to provide it to the committee later.

Michael Marra: That would be useful.

Reflecting on school-college partnerships, I understand that the challenges for universities around acceptance points are being explored. Do universities run that kind of programme as part of a school-university partnership for children with disabilities?

Dr Whelan: I cannot say definitively whether that happens across the sector, but many admissions teams have bespoke outreach teams that work in different areas, such as widening participation and disability, so they will have bespoke programmes for supporting our applicants. Universities Scotland is currently running a pilot project on supporting disabled students through the admissions process. Some key principles for how we can make the process smoother and clearer for students will come out of that, which is quite exciting.

Michael Marra: There is no real longer-term plan for students with disabilities. It sounds as though there is a real rush, in the period that is identified in the written evidence that colleagues have explored with you, to address the issues of application within a very contained timescale. Are you constrained by capacity, not in dealing with that process but in dealing with students with complex needs?

Dr Whelan: It will depend, team by team. Across the sector, there are concerns about capacity. It is a hard metric: the ratio of disability advisers to students is not an accurate or meaningful measure, because a student with dyslexia can be different from a student with multiple disabilities, and their needs are therefore going to be different. In the sector, we talk about resourcing, because there is the critical period at the start of an academic year in which we try to put in place support to meet the needs of new students based on the information that we have, and we can build on that. We always say to students that it is an on-going conversation as they adapt to life at university. They may find that other things will emerge to which they need to adapt, or which need to be added to their support plan. We often try to get the essentials in place and then build on those to support students throughout their degree.

Michael Marra: Is the concept of transitions embedded in the culture of the way in which disabled young people are dealt with across all organisations? It feels as if a lot of the words that you are using, such as adaptation and addition, are more about coping, rather than dealing with the transition phase, which has to start prior to arrival or acceptance. Does the sector understand the concept of transitions and see that as central to what it does?

Dr Whelan: Absolutely. One of the challenges for universities is that they are dealing with disabled students from multiple areas. We have Scottish students coming to us, potentially with support from their local authority but perhaps not. We also have students coming from England, Wales and Northern Ireland, where there are different systems that we have to work with, and many universities have a large cohort of international students. We strive to provide a consistent experience for students, irrespective of where they join the university from. That is not without its challenges; some students will be eligible for disabled students allowance and some will not, for example, which creates a two-tier system to some degree.

Across universities, there is a drive to recognise that, although there is a need to put in place individual adjustments based on individual needs, the sector can strive to be more inclusive by embedding inclusive practice and universal design for learning so that some of the main adjustments that we put in place for students will be accessible to all. The pandemic has shown us that some of those adjustments have been hugely beneficial for our students, such as access to online learning, access to open-book exams and more flexibility and choice embedded in their degree. All those adjustments have helped to improve the outcomes for our disabled students. We are trying to support all students, irrespective of how much support they have had, or not had, before they join us.

Michael Marra: I wonder whether Louise Storie has any comments on that, almost from an external view.

Louise Storie: You talk about transition being embedded. The witnesses who are sitting here today understand the need for that, as do the services in which we work and the people we meet. Our experiences probably vary greatly, based on what Mike Corbett has said about pressures and resources. In addition, the external agencies and partnerships that we work alongside in order to support a person have different views on priorities in transition. That is due to resource pressures and to understanding and experience. It is about understanding the broad diversity of people and recognising that, although some people need a bit of extra support, they might not see that. They rely on us to give that information and, quite often, to lead on the actions to implement a transition and take it forward.

That aligns with what Mike was saying about the additional pressures on people on the front line to embed that. They have the relationship at that point with that person, and they are the person who is, in some cases—based on the relationship—best placed to introduce a change and a concept of what life might look like. That is based on relationships. Part of making transitions is about building relationships and whom we identify as being able to come into someone's life and truly understand, and really get, what they need.

We understand that our experiences are varied. If there is variation in our experience as providers and as people who support transitions, what is it like for the people who are experiencing the transition, and how do they make sense of it?

The Convener: I will ask quite a curtailed question, which might help to bring in Mike and Louise. You mentioned that, although you understand the principles of transitions, experiences are varied. What specific reasons can you identify for the gap between the implementation of the policy with regard to the concept of transitions and the duties that exist, and what our young people experience?

Mike, I will come to you first.

Mike Corbett: At the sharp end, a lack of time for guidance teachers is certainly an issue. They do their best, but the time that they have available in which to do that, which is often called management time, differs from one local authority to another. As I said earlier, there is a lack of leadership outside the school as well. The difficulties in taking a joined-up approach were touched on; that aspect is important. Something as simple as a guidance or pastoral teacher trying to bring together a social worker and someone from the health sector can sometimes take a long time, because those other areas of the public sector are struggling with staffing. That also feeds into issues at school level.

Another point to make, given what was said earlier, is that school-college partnerships are more established, so there is perhaps better work going on there simply because those relationships already exist. However, that kind of relationship does not really exist between schools and universities. For the reasons that were outlined earlier, it is not as strong, because no one knows which university someone is going to go to before they have had their offer. That is a challenge as well.

Louise Storie: An example is the transition from children's services to adult services. Even in one local authority area, policy and practice can vary greatly across departments, which means that the transition from one department to another can be hugely difficult. In some cases, we support people who have no social work or support involvement, so when they are transitioning, they do so with no scaffolding around what the next destination is. The transition from children's services to adult services is hugely difficult. Working with one team in one authority, you might think that there is going to be a seamless move from one area to the other, but that is not the experience at all. A child may still be in education but also be receiving a self-directed support budget for support outwith school hours, which falls under adult legislation.

You are crossing the barrier between the two, so how do you support that person adequately and make sure that there is partnership working between departments and inter-agency working? That is hugely difficult, particularly in cases where a child is in the process of transitioning from one department to another and has not been allocated and is therefore somewhere in the ether. It is hugely difficult when someone has been discharged from children's services but has not been picked up by adult services at that point.

10:00

The Convener: Specific examples such as that are helpful.

Graeme Dey: I have three questions, but the good news is that they are mostly focused on universities and colleges, so you will not all have to answer. The first one concerns the independent living fund and the disabled students allowance. Fiona Whelan touched on the latter earlier. I am interested in exploring the extent to which those interact with the experience of the students and the support that is provided, and how effective they are in delivering what the students need to support them as they go through college and university.

Dr Whelan: I can speak about the disabled students allowance, which, for the students who receive it, can be hugely beneficial and can make all the difference. It is very much dependent on the individual need, the disability and what the needs assessment comes out with, but it can provide access to assistive technology or physical equipment that the student might need and, as I have mentioned, it offers the potential to access relevant one-to-one support, which could be study skills support, study skills co-ordination or mental health mentoring. That can be incredibly beneficial, because that category of disability types is the one in which we have seen the biggest increase in declarations.

Having the ability to access that support can be absolutely critical for students, but it is a challenging process for students to understand, particularly if they have gone through school and have been able to access support on the basis of need, not on the basis of evidence. Therefore, when they enter university, we provide support and guidance about what a needs assessment is and about the application for the disabled students allowance. To some degree, it is then left to the student to figure out what that means and what the recommended support package is. It can be delivered in different ways—some students will be recommended a suite of support that is paid for, while others will just have the money paid into their accounts and will not quite know what to do with it.

That is one of the key problems that we have at the moment. The issue is very specific to SAAS rather than the other funding bodies. As a university, we will, by and large, sign off the needs assessment for the student, but we are not allowed to know when they have got their award, so we cannot say to them, “Great—you’ve got your award, so let’s talk through the different support and how we can put that in place.” That means that some students get missed and we do not provide accurate reporting on the number of students in Scotland who have DSA.

Graeme Dey: Okay. What about the independent living fund? What is your experience of the impact that that has on supporting students?

Dr Whelan: I do not have much awareness of that.

Graeme Dey: Anne-Marie?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I am sorry. I do not have much awareness of that, either.

Graeme Dey: In that case, let us move on. You have identified the needs of the students and are supporting them. How do you monitor any changes in their needs? How do you monitor whether you have missed something and seek to provide that support?

Dr Whelan: That could be done in many ways. Most universities strive to have a very constructive and open relationship with students, so that they know that they can come to us if there is anything that they want to discuss, if the support in place is not working or if they need any adjustments. However, that relies on the student being proactive about that. There are other mechanisms that universities can put in place to spot students who might still be struggling or might need additional support.

Across the sector, it is quite standard to have staff in schools who have such a role. For example, at the University of St Andrews, each academic school has a disability co-ordinator. They are a link between the central team and the academic schools. As well as being a point of contact for a student in their school, they are a point of contact who can spot any issues and say, “This student is not performing in the way they had expected to, so can they come and have a conversation with you?” We will monitor students’ performance as a metric. It is not a perfect metric, but we try to track students.

There is a lot of discussion in the sector about whether the use of learner analytics could be a way to intervene earlier with a student who might be struggling. There is certainly a role for academic staff in being disability aware and feeling confident in supporting students and spotting issues. That might involve having a gentle conversation with a student and saying, “I’ve spotted something in your essay. Do you want to have a chat with the disability team?” That is another route that we can use to spot students who might be struggling.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: The situation is slightly different in colleges in that most students get a one-hour tutorial every week, when the student will meet their tutor and discuss their needs. For students with disabilities, that is an evolving process throughout the academic session. I have had experience of a student with a disability who went through the transition process with a one-to-one support worker. They quickly realised, “I’m not going to blend in if I have my shadow here,” so they asked for them to be removed and for the one-to-one support worker to be at a distance, because they just wanted to blend in. That kind of thing happens regularly throughout the process. In addition, we have the student guidance and support team, which is another point of contact for the individual. The individual could go to their tutor, or they might go to our student advice and guidance team.

The flow of information is really important. Information is recorded throughout the academic session. We have recording systems for attendance, and we look at early withdrawals, but we do not want to get to that stage. We just want things to flow. We do not want the approach to be data driven; it is very personalised.

Graeme Dey: My final question is about the preparedness of students to come to universities and colleges—I suspect that, in this instance, I am thinking, in particular, of colleges—and the extent to which careers information, advice and guidance prepares them for that and encourages them to look at courses that not only suit them but meet their ambitions.

I was struck by something that a college principal told me. The college in question runs land-based courses involving animal husbandry. It developed an attritional drop-out rate from those courses. It had a large number of students with mental health issues who had been encouraged or directed to take those land-based courses on the basis that it would be good for them to work with animals. Some students got to the college and found that those courses were not suitable for them as individuals. I will not suggest that that is commonplace, but is that something that colleges have to contend with?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Yes. It is a case of managing expectations all the time. That is not exclusive to people with disabilities. In colleges, we come across cases in which people have thought that they knew what was best for someone. It is a question of taking the wants and wishes of the young person into account, because they are the most important person in all of this. Parents and carers are important, but it is sometimes a question of listening to the voice of the young person on what they want. It should not be a case of, “This is where my dad works, so I’ll go there,” or “This is where the school suggested I should go.” Listening to the student is really important.

Colleges have experience of young people with disabilities going on to a course because that is what was suggested for them, but that is not set in tablets of stone. We are quite flexible. The individual might realise, within a very short time, that that is not going to work, as they just do not like the course. People might have said, “Oh, you’re really nice—you should go and work with children,” but it might turn out that the young person does not like children. [*Laughter.*] Perhaps it is not that they do not like children; they simply do not want to pursue a career working with children.

Graeme Dey: We get what you mean.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: We have mechanisms in place to transfer students to a different course. Colleges are working on setting up broad-based courses so that young people can make an informed decision about what course they want to do, rather than deciding on the basis of—I am not saying that teachers say this all the time—“This is what my guidance teacher thinks I should do.” We should work together and listen to the young person. There are pathways. If they do not meet the entry criteria at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 7, there are pathways at levels 6 and 5.

Graeme Dey: Is there a genuine issue whereby young people with disabilities are perhaps pigeonholed when they are directed towards college or university and an assumption is made about the limitations that they might have?

The Convener: Louise Storie is keen to respond to that.

Louise Storie: I think that you are right. That arises because of a lack of understanding of what people need and of how to communicate and express experiences and what those experiences might look like. There is probably a lot of work to do around supporting students to make an informed choice and to understand it, as well as around getting people to recognise that someone having an interest in something or a strength in an area does not mean to say that they will pursue that as their life’s journey.

There is work to be done around how we ask those questions. That is important, and it starts with the question of at what point in somebody’s transition we intervene. It is a question of gathering that information and allowing them to have their voice, and of their understanding what it means. What they think they like and what an experience might look like can be two different things. It is important for people to understand that, and there is a bit of work to do there.

From a policy and practice point of view, for some people, it is about identifying that someone has a destination to go to, but is that the right destination? Some agencies might achieve what they set out to achieve, but is it the right outcome for the person?

Graeme Dey: Thank you.

Mike Corbett: On that point, there has been a vast improvement in careers information and the information that pupils and students get via guidance and pastoral teachers, compared with the situation decades ago, but there are still some inevitable conflicts. Those conflicts are sometimes between the pupil and the parent.

Anne-Marie Sturrock touched on the most important point, which is that, nowadays, there is much more recognition of the fact that a decision that you take as a school pupil going on to college or university is not a final decision. If you do not make the right choice first time, colleges and universities are much more flexible about letting you move to something that suits you better.

The Convener: We spoke about the cluttered nature of the landscape, given all the legislation and the various strategies and policies that are in place. I have quite a direct question to put to each of you, starting with Mike. Is the bill required in order to create better outcomes for disabled young people?

Mike Corbett: Is it required? Do there need to be better outcomes? Yes. Will the bill, on its own, guarantee those outcomes? I am not so sure about that, for the aforementioned reasons and particularly because, although there is a statutory duty for co-ordinated support plans, that does not, in itself, seem to translate to best practice everywhere on the ground.

Louise Storie: I agree, to a degree, with Mike Corbett. Given the additional support for learning and education legislation and the age range that we are talking about, introducing legislation to take people through their lifespan might give more accountability to other agencies. For me, the issue is partly about how we pull other agencies into this area of responsibility.

I think that the answer is yes. The bill gives clarity. I go back to the point about clarity. When I went through it, the management of the plan was the huge bit. That is about how we are responsible, how we are accountable and how we monitor and evaluate it.

Dr Whelan: I do not think that, as a sector, we have a clear view on whether legislation is required. As Mike Corbett said, we need better outcomes, and the bill could be a tool that helps with that. From a university perspective, however, it would be beneficial to a smaller cohort of disabled students. As I said, we are looking at the bigger piece around all the disabled students who are with us, whether they are from Scotland, England, Wales or overseas. This would be a small piece for us, and it would need to fit in with all our other duties.

The Convener: Anne-Marie, do you think that the bill is required?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Yes, I do. I think that there is a gap. We are talking about 14 to 26-year-olds, but there are also transitions from primary to secondary for disabled people.

The Convener: Thank you.

10:15

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): For absolute transparency, I should say that I am a member of the NASUWT. Mike Corbett is probably expecting more difficult questions, and I will try to be as non-biased as possible.

I will move on to whom the bill should cover. The bill defines a child as someone under the age of 18, but the age range goes up to 26, so that huge band covers school-age children and those older than that. We all know that, daily, teachers in schools face a wide variety of pupils and needs. Do teachers in mainstream schools routinely consider whether a pupil has a disability, as opposed to additional support needs, and how to meet those needs? There is a difference, as we know. I ask Mike Corbett to answer first.

Mike Corbett: In short, yes. They do, because there is clear information in schools that goes to teachers. We touched on the transition from primary to secondary. These days, much improved information goes between primary and secondary schools. Particularly in a secondary school, where it can be more of a challenge because a pupil is taught by so many teachers, information goes out to teachers via the guidance or pastoral team about what they should be aware of and the strategies that they can use for a disabled pupil or, indeed, a pupil with any additional support need.

Kaukab Stewart: It might be helpful to tell us about that, because that multi-agency work is complex and requires time. The teacher is at the heart of that, because they see the pupil regularly, whether that be for a single subject or for the whole day. How effective is that process at the moment? Is there scope to improve it through the bill? Other witnesses will definitely want to come in on that point.

Mike Corbett: You have touched on the major issue of time. That applies much more to the guidance and pastoral teams and sometimes to the link with deputy heads, who try to arrange things and, when things change or develop and more support is needed for a pupil, try to make sure that resources are available or that other teams are involved. That is where the biggest challenge lies. For the most part, classroom teachers probably feel that they get clear information that allows them to do their best for the disabled pupils in front of them.

Louise Storie: In theory, the answer to the question that you asked about the difference between disability and additional support needs is yes. However, in practice, there is not always streamlined communication. Information does not always come through as it should. With the best will in the world, information is shared but is not then disseminated to those who need it. An example of that relating to the transition from primary to secondary is that co-ordinated support from agencies was not in place for a pupil with type 1 diabetes. She landed at high school but the school was not able to support her. There was nobody there to monitor, manage and support her in accessing her learning.

I echo what Mike Corbett said in that teachers are, in pockets, made aware of what children need, and that information is disseminated, but information on reasonable adjustments and what might be required does not always filter through. From a leadership and culture perspective, it is about how people understand that and its importance. Again, it is about how policy makers expect schools to implement processes in that regard. We have very good people in schools who are doing their very best, but they need the support and resources to be able to provide consistent support. That is a challenge.

Kaukab Stewart: That is a good example of the transition issue.

Do the witnesses agree that everyone who meets the Equality Act 2010 definition of a disability should automatically have a transition plan, or should there be an element of self-identification and an opt-out process? In previous answers, it was said that young people, for whatever reason, might not want to declare that they are disabled. The equality guidance states that,

“In the vast majority of cases”,

it will be evident that there is a disability. That will not always be the case, however, so there is a bit of wiggle room, is there not? It would be good to hear your opinions on that.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I agree that everybody who is covered under the 2010 act should have a transition plan. As for a young person getting the services, Dr Whelan mentioned the DSA. Mental health comes under the 2010 act, so if a young person were to say that they had anxiety, that would be covered. It would be about managing the expectations from that. Am I making myself clear?

Kaukab Stewart: I think so.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: For example, if somebody had anxiety for six months, under the 2010 act, that could be termed a long-term condition and a disability. If the young person went to university or college and needed funding because of their disability, they might not meet the criteria in that way, but they would still get the service from the college or university. From a personal allowance point of view, perhaps not, but from a service point of view, absolutely.

Kaukab Stewart: Okay. Will the bill make that a bit clearer, or will it not alter the process at all?

Louise Storie: I am not sure that people who do not want to identify as having a disability would recognise it as bringing value. It is about the work that we do with people to help their understanding. I will give an example. Through a process, I have supported someone to attend university, but he does not want to identify as having a condition. His learning takes place online, and he receives benefits and support, but he absolutely does not want the university to know that he has a condition. He is academically capable, but he cannot manage the workload and his time or deal with the social aspect of university. It is overwhelming for him, but he will not allow us to engage with the university support team to find alternative arrangements or reasonable adjustments to support him.

For certain pockets of the population, the bill will absolutely help. However, when we work with people who require support but do not want it, it is very difficult. How do we support the university as well as the person to do that? He has withdrawn from his course because he cannot accept his condition. He views his life as a failure because he cannot complete a part of his course. That is a very real example of what things can look like. We can work with people to try to help them to understand how support could benefit them, but they might not want to be identified under that category or criterion. It is very difficult.

Kaukab Stewart: You have highlighted that every young person has an individual journey. The reason why I asked about and explored the bill’s scope is that the number of young people who come under the definition will have a direct impact on resourcing, and that will have financial implications.

Mike Corbett: The point about young people who are reluctant to self-identify as having a disability is important. That perhaps highlights an irony. Why is that? Teachers are sometimes fearful of declaring a disability because they feel that it will somehow count against them. It is the same with some young people. How do we address that? Having such a bill and having this discussion helps. At the top level, we need a very loud declaration that having a disability is nothing to be ashamed of, but that is still a challenge at an individual level for many young people, and even for adults.

Dr Whelan: There is absolutely a role for universities in disseminating information in order to normalise declarations of disability. At most universities, probably well over 20 per cent of the student population declare a disability, so we are talking about one in five students. It is not unusual. Often, when I have conversations with students and tell them the number of students who are like them, that tends to prompt them to make a declaration, because it is more normalised.

The flip point to what has been said is that we see a lot more self-declarations of disability that might not meet the criteria of the 2010 act. At my institution, for example, of the number of students who declare a disability, only about 60 per cent might have a formal support plan, so there is an issue relating to students wanting to tell us that. They might not need something and might never have had support at school, but they might want to let us know just in case something happens in the future. That is what is driving the increase in the number of mental health declarations within the disability numbers.

Kaukab Stewart: Thank you.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): My question is primarily for Mike Corbett, because he mentioned the Morgan review. Since then, there have been two revisions to the additional support for learning action plan, which includes at least half a dozen references to transition and improving transition. Have the repeated updates to that national strategy filtered through to schools? From your work, are you aware of them filtering through at local authority level?

Mike Corbett: That is one of the key issues. If you asked any classroom teacher about that, you would find that very few of them have that awareness on the ground. That is a real challenge.

Ross Greer: The point about variation between children and adult services within a local authority and variation between local authorities has been mentioned a couple of times. There are two schools of thought about what the bill could achieve. One is that it would force a level of consistency. The alternative point of view, however, is that the bill could result in more tension, because it is not about creating a consistent approach among children’s services in general across every local authority or among adult social care services—that is a different debate that we are having in relation to the national care service. There is a potential danger that the bill will add more tension, because the approach that a local authority takes to its children’s services will still be different from its approach to its adult social care services, but the bill will create a third element in relation to what is expected nationally. Do you have any concerns that, rather than create more consistency, the bill will just add a third approach, which the other two approaches—the local authority’s pre-existing practice—will have to wrestle with?

Louise Storie: Potentially, but it is key that local authorities be able to work that out through interdepartmental partnership working. The key is that consistency remains for the person who is in transition. How local authority departments work together to make sure that their internal practices work across departments is important, but the key is that there is consistency for the person who is having the experience.

How do we do that? That is the important bit. It is about interpretation, implementation, prioritisation, workload and recognising where things sit. I go back to Mike Corbett’s point about all the other elements of guidance and frameworks, such as GIRFEC. If this straddles adult and children’s services, adult services might look at it quite differently from how they look at GIRFEC, because they might think that GIRFEC does not apply hugely in their setting, although it does under the legislation in relation to how you define a child and when they transition. However, it might bring more consistency.

Ross Greer: That is useful.

Bob Doris: There was an interesting exchange near the start of the meeting when I asked Anne-Marie Sturrock whether the bill was required. Anne-Marie and Dr Whelan had mentioned that it will bring clarity and will more consistently identify young people with disabilities or additional support needs, irrespective of the current position with local authorities. What might the resource impact be on colleges and universities? If the expectation is that more young people will be identified more regularly and more consistently, will colleges and universities be able to support the planning process by taking part in meetings and ensuring that the agreed support is in place for students, who will come from multiple local authorities? I know that further education has more of a footprint in schools than higher education perhaps does, but are we anticipating additional workload? Has that been quantified? Is further and higher education in a position to deliver on the significant expectations in the legislation? Annie-Marie Sturrock, have you given any thought to that?

10:30

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Yes, I have given a lot of thought to it. The colleges, our guidance teams and the structures that are in place just now are resourced and bursting, because 29 per cent of people in Scotland’s colleges have a declared disability. If that were to increase, colleges across Scotland would be concerned about the resource requirement, because we are all about getting it right for every student and every student with a disability here. If there was a perceived increase, I would be concerned about what additional resource we would need to put in. The resource that we have in place just now is very good for people with learning disabilities and is excellent for people who have come through a school-college partnership, but what resource would be required for people who may have just declared something two weeks before they start college? We are running to make it right for people to start, usually on 19 August. I would be slightly concerned about what additional resource would be required.

Bob Doris: Before I bring Dr Whelan in, can I nudge you a little bit more on that? If the bill is required, surely many more young people will be captured, including transitioning students who are off the radar just now or do not have the plans that are required. Do you agree that, if the bill works, the figure of 29 per cent will go up quite substantially, so there must be significant resource issues?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Yes. The bill mentions a plan, so if more people require a plan, it will be about implementing the plan, disseminating the information to all the curriculum teams and making sure that there is support. The plan is one thing, but implementing the plan and reviewing it at regular stages is really important, as is meeting the expectations of the plan. Whoever wrote the plan would have to be part of the college process. You would write it in partnership with the transition teams.

Bob Doris: Okay.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Does that make sense? If the plan just came to the college, there could be a risk of misinterpreting it for the young person.

Bob Doris: That is incredibly helpful; I just want to make sure that Colleges Scotland and the further education sector have thought about quantifying what additional resource might be required from their end. Has consideration been given to quantifying that additional resource?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I would not say that that has been considered across Scotland. I am speaking on behalf of Colleges Scotland today. We would have to go back and look at the devil in the detail of the 29 per cent. I work in a college. I know that I would have to resource our guidance team with an additional individual who is trained in transition. There is a training need here as well.

Bob Doris: I am not remotely trying to be awkward. Just because additional resource may be required does not mean that it is not the right thing to do. I am just trying to tease out the realities of the legislation.

Dr Whelan, will you answer from a university perspective?

Dr Whelan: I suspect that the impact on resourcing in universities would be less than it would be in the college sector because Scottish students are a subset of our overall student population for most of the institutions. Year on year, we have been coping with an increased number of declarations. That puts strain on the service, but we can manage and adapt, and, to some degree, we are used to it. It comes down to the detail of what a transition plan looks like, what it contains and whether it is mindful of the context—whether it is college or university and how they might be different. It is about how that transition plan would help with a transition to a different environment, a different sense of independent living and a different learning environment.

There is another challenge. In the written submission, we talk about time and resourcing at that critical point in the summer, just before university starts in September. As I said earlier, we work with the student, and, at the moment, we do not have very much involvement with local authorities. We tend to work with 18-year-olds, whom we consider to be adults, so it is hard to predict, under this plan, how much liaison we would need with local authorities or how much of a co-ordinated approach we would need for individual students. It is not clear enough for us to say definitively.

Bob Doris: That is reasonable.

Louise Storie, I apologise if I am misquoting you—I have got mixed up with the scribbles in front of me—but I think that you said that schools will have different priorities in relation to transitions, young people with more complex needs and the resource implications and resource pressures. You are generally supportive of the legislation, but, if resources are finite, might that prioritisation mean that some young people have plans on paper without the resources to make them meaningful, and that other young people with more complex needs get a more significant transition? Do you have any concerns about that?

Louise Storie: Quite possibly. Again, it is that variable picture. The resource allocation across different settings looks different depending on funding availability. The current recruitment challenge across the sector needs to be taken into account: how to retain staff and get the right people into positions that can support this work. There are probably variances depending on need and on whether your plan on paper comes to life in a different way from that of someone else who might have more specific needs.

Bob Doris: Okay. I have one final question to ask. Mike Corbett, I will come to you first and will give everyone the opportunity to respond if they wish.

We know that most young people will come through a local authority route or an education route, but not necessarily everyone will. Young people going to university may have left school, and there is that flux during the summer, so local authorities might not always be best placed to take the lead. There is an expectation, however, that local authorities would take the lead in transition cases. Should that always be the case, or is more flexibility required?

Mike Corbett: From a school perspective, we hope and expect that local authorities would take the lead. That would be useful.

If I could rewind slightly to your resource point, resource is obviously crucial. There is currently a commitment to teacher numbers, which we obviously support because you need those teachers to offer this service as well as many others. We have found, traditionally, that additional support needs and similar areas often seem to be the softer areas in which to make cutbacks. That is a worry in the immediate future.

Bob Doris: Thank you for adding that.

Louise Storie: Is it okay to make a comment on resources?

Bob Doris: Sure.

Louise Storie: There is the resource need around direct support, but there is also the resource need around dealing with the families and the level of time that is required to engage with families when they require clarity and look for information. On the ground, in a school, while you are dealing with allocating the resource to the child, you are also allocating the time of another teacher—a pastoral or guidance teacher—to deal with the families, field the calls and follow up on what is required. That is challenging as well.

On your question about leading on transition, in some cases, health probably needs to be considered. What are the needs of the person at that time? Does health need to be involved in leading that transition? It goes back to those variances around mental health: understanding the condition, whether the resources are meeting the needs of that condition and, if they are not, whether that impacts on the individual's mental health.

Bob Doris: Thank you. That is helpful. Those are very reasonable points.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Louise took the words right out of my mouth. Health plays a part. If we were to say that it should be purely local authorities that lead, there could be a gap. There is a significant number of children with health conditions in school. They may not have a social worker. Health plays a key role in the transition arrangements for them. I agree with Louise.

Bob Doris: Dr Whelan, you have spoken quite a lot about the real challenges for universities, such as the lateness of identifying which young person is going to which institution, the building of early transitional relationships and transitional plans being more difficult with higher education. Who should take the lead? This might be your opportunity to say that there is something that we could change, irrespective of the bill, to give universities more of a chance to build deeper, stronger, quicker and more meaningful relationships with young people before they go to university.

Dr Whelan: On the question of who should take the lead, it very much depends on the individual student's need. This is not in relation to disabled students, but I have supported students who are care experienced and had their social worker help with that initial transition and move to university. I have seen the value of that. However, that is very resource intensive.

I echo what has been said about mental health and resourcing the universities to—to some degree—plug some of the gaps, particularly around mental health support and counselling support. That is a big resource challenge for us. Sometimes, the health element of the co-ordinated transition support is missing. What can universities do to be more proactive? I really hope that the pilot project that Universities Scotland has done around admissions and supporting disabled students throughout the admissions process will be critical. Once that is published, it can be shared, and the pilot's principles can be disseminated across the sector.

Bob Doris: Could you come back to us on that?

Dr Whelan: Yes.

The Convener: We have heard a lot about transitions for people in the education system into colleges and universities. How do schools ensure that there is a suite of opportunities for disabled young people after they leave school that are not necessarily about the college or university sector but involve things such as work, apprenticeships or schemes through charities such as Enable Scotland?

Louise Storie: Through person-centred planning processes, it is helpful to identify the avenue that somebody wants to pursue. There is value in people recognising that there are other avenues to success and in opening those up to informed choice through Skills Development Scotland, apprenticeships and helping people to have experiences. It is about link-ups with the local community through things such as men's sheds and other practical experiences, and engaging in the community through community participation.

For people who do not want to go on to further education, there is a question about who leads on that. The support that is available is about filling in your application to university and moving on. Who supports people who do not want to do that? Who helps to identify what might be right? Is there a cliff edge, with people thinking, "If you're not pursuing college or university, what are you doing?" There is probably a gap in support for that and in how people access opportunities.

Mike Corbett: To follow on from what Louise Storie said, a lot of teachers are concerned about that, particularly if they have done all that they can to help a young disabled person into employment or an apprenticeship. They help them through the application process. If the young person is successful, that is the end of the school's involvement. As Louise said, who picks things up with that young person when they have moved into the apprenticeship, for example? There is potentially a gap there that needs to be addressed.

Louise Storie: With disabled pupils and students who are in mainstream schools and who are achieving and following their national 5s or 4s, there might be reasonable adjustments in place, from an assessment criteria point of view, that are limiting the ability of those people to access normal opportunities as per their peers. The assessment criteria to pursue that particular qualification might not fit the criteria of assessment for the governing body, which can be limiting.

The Convener: Do you have specific examples of that?

Louise Storie: Yes. One involves a pupil who has a disability and is pursuing a national 5 in physical education. She has the support of the school to do that, but the Scottish Qualifications Authority assessment criteria do not enable a reasonable adjustment for her to be assessed in a way that suits her needs. It has been suggested to her that she take up a disability sport, but she does not identify with it and is not interested in it. She is at a crossroads and is considering what she should do and what her family should do to support her. That is an example of where our systems and processes may limit opportunities.

10:45

The Convener: That has made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. That is concerning, and it shows the power of examples.

Louise Storie: If anyone wants other examples or further information on that situation, I can provide them.

The Convener: That would be very useful for us. Thank you.

Dr Whelan: For transparency, I should say that I am a trustee of the Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities, so this is probably a bit more of a personal opinion, but I think that there is scope to talk about who goes to university and who does not and about who gets included in those conversations. You mentioned Enable Scotland, which has had initiatives and partnerships with the University of Strathclyde, for example, on breaking barriers. Those provide opportunities that are linked to employment for students for whom higher education is not a traditional route.

There is scope to look to other best practice in the area. For example, Trinity College Dublin has the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, which marries up an academic qualification, whether at certificate or diploma level, with work opportunities and internships that often lead to paid employment. The benefits for the students, the institutions and the employers are vast. We have an opportunity to talk about who we consider has a route to higher education. We need to open up that conversation and look to whether there are opportunities to fund such initiatives. There is best practice elsewhere, and we can widen the scope of who gets to have that experience.

Louise Storie: I agree. We sometimes have situations where we do not recognise what somebody wants, and the limits in our understanding of a condition lead us to narrow what that person is able to achieve. People maybe slip through the net because others assume that they cannot pursue the career or avenue that they want to pursue.

Graeme Dey: We are all deeply grateful for your evidence this morning, which has been very thought provoking. If you will indulge me, I want to take the conversation off on a slight tangent. Today, understandably, we have been talking about the bill and what it sets out to do. Let us imagine that we invited you in not to talk about a bill; let us imagine that the bill did not exist and that we were simply asking you what one, two or three things we could do to change the existing practice and approach that would make a substantial difference to the experience of young people in the context of what you do or in the wider context. If we were not looking at a bill, what could we do to fundamentally change and improve a situation that clearly needs to be improved?

Mike Corbett: To repeat points that have been made throughout, I will say that we need better co-ordination of the various pieces of legislation and guidance that are there already. We need an absolute commitment to resource things properly and a stringent evaluation framework so that we do not just aim to do something but, at some specified point, we take a step back and judge whether it has worked and, if it has not, try something else.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: That is an interesting question, which I will answer from my experience of working with people with learning disabilities. The biggest challenge was the changes in staff throughout someone's life journey. There are shift changes, and we have recruitment issues in social services now. People go off sick, and teachers leave. We talk about a transition process and a plan, which is great if everybody knows what is in the plan. If someone leaves work tomorrow, who will pick things up from there? Who will make the journey really simplistic and smooth?

The convener is absolutely right that not every student with a disability wants to come to college. We would love them to, but they do not all want to. Sometimes it is very difficult to sit in a meeting with a parent in the school if the young person's voice is the quieter voice. We do not want to lose sight of whom we are trying to support, but it is about consistency for the family and the young person. It is about not having to say the same thing over and over again because of shift changes or because a staff member has moved to America. It just needs to be consistent for the family. The young person needs a point of contact—somebody who they can trust and who will listen to and understand them—and their needs should be at the forefront.

Graeme Dey: To support that would require perhaps one piece of documentation that explains all someone's needs and requirements and that is just picked up and run with.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Yes.

Dr Whelan: Consistency is the number 1 thing. As Graeme Dey said, documentation that is consistent throughout the transition is needed. At the moment, the approaches are not aligned, so what schools have is not sufficient for what universities require for the disabled students allowance. It is therefore about changing that approach and perhaps having something radical such as giving universities the autonomy to decide where the DSA funding goes, rather than requiring a diagnosis that burdens the student and the NHS with the need to provide documentation. That is one critical change that would make a huge difference for students.

The other is just greater choice. We need to provide more choice through universities, colleges and other avenues so that students get the choice that they want and the pathways that are meaningful to them, rather than something that it is decided for them would be a useful thing for them to do. The path that they want to pursue is their decision.

Louise Storie: It is about acceptance of difference—we need to accept that everybody is different. That is a cultural approach to do with values and understanding fundamentally why we say what we say about what people need. It is therefore about acceptance of difference and about inclusion.

Graeme Dey: Thank you.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses very much for their time. As ever, we have found it an informative session.

The public part of today's meeting is now at an end and we will consider our final agenda items in private.

10:52

Meeting continued in private until 11:44.

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