



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Public Audit Committee

**Wednesday 7 May 2025**

**Session 6**



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba



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**Wednesday 7 May 2025**

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**PUBLIC AUDIT COMMITTEE**  
**14<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2025, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

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

\*Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)

\*Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Joanna Anderson (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Laura Caven (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Clair Henderson (Scottish Government)

Suzanne McLeod (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Neil Rennie (Scottish Government)

Stella Smith (Scottish Government)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Katrina Venters

**LOCATION**

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)



## Scottish Parliament

### Public Audit Committee

Wednesday 7 May 2025

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]*

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Richard Leonard):** Good morning. I welcome everyone to the 14th meeting in 2025 of the Public Audit Committee.

Under the first agenda item, members of the committee are invited to decide whether to take agenda items 3, 4 and 5 in private. Do members agree to take those items in private?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Additional Support for Learning

09:30

**The Convener:** Our principal agenda item this morning is further consideration of the briefing, “Additional support for learning”, which was prepared jointly by the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission. I am pleased to welcome representatives of the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

From the Scottish Government, I welcome Neil Rennick, who is the director general of education and justice; Stella Smith, who is the unit head for additional support for learning; and Clair Henderson, who is the team leader for additional support for learning. Alongside them, from COSLA, are Laura Caven, who is the chief officer for children and young people and the co-chair of the additional support for learning project board, which we might have some questions about over the course of this morning; Suzanne McLeod, who is a policy manager in the employers team; and Joanna Anderson, who is a policy manager for the local government and finance team.

We would like to put a number of questions to your teams this morning but, before we do so, I invite the director general to make a short opening statement.

**Neil Rennick (Scottish Government):** Thank you, convener. I welcome the opportunity to provide evidence on behalf of the Scottish Government in relation to Audit Scotland’s briefing on additional support for learning. I am pleased to provide that evidence alongside colleagues from COSLA.

In Scotland, we have an inclusive education system that focuses on getting it right for every child and overcoming barriers to learning. The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 is intended to meet the diverse needs of all pupils. The legislation reflects the reality that additional support needs can arise in the short and the long term and can form a variety of circumstances. The definition of additional support needs is purposefully wide.

As Audit Scotland notes in its briefing, over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of pupils who have been identified as having additional support needs. The reasons for that growth are complex and varied. Although progress has been made in implementing the 2004 act, we fully acknowledge that challenges and barriers remain, and we are now responding to a very different context.

In partnership with COSLA, we have been working to deliver the recommendations in response to the Morgan review through the ASL action plan. The actions at both national and local levels are focused on addressing the challenges and supporting the necessary shift in culture, leadership and delivery.

In our most recent action plan progress report, which was published in November, we reported that 40 of the 76 actions had been successfully completed. Since then, a further 13 have been completed. The jointly chaired project board is focusing on the delivery of the remaining actions before the end of this parliamentary session, with a particular focus on communications, the national measurement framework and consulting on a refreshed code of practice for the legislation.

The Audit Scotland briefing makes two recommendations: the first is on improving the quality of data on ASL, and the second is that the national Government and local government should review how ASL provision is planned, funded and staffed. We accept both those recommendations and are working to take them forward, alongside the remaining commitments in the action plan.

I want to close by acknowledging the important role that parents, carers and children and young people themselves play in engaging with professionals to inform the many thousands of individual decisions that are taken to translate the principles of the legislation and guidance into reality. I look forward to discussing those important and complex issues with the committee this morning.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much indeed. You have told us about the recommendations that have been taken forward and have acknowledged the findings of the briefing by the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission, but, for the record, does the Scottish Government accept its findings, conclusions and key messages?

**Neil Rennick:** Yes.

**The Convener:** I will ask Laura Caven the same question. Does COSLA accept the briefing paper's findings, recommendations and key messages?

**Laura Caven (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities):** Yes.

**The Convener:** Key message 1 is about the context in which you are operating and delivering the services. It talks about an "eightfold increase" in the number of pupils receiving additional support for learning, so there has been a huge rise in the scale of demand for such support. The gender breakdown shows that boys are more likely than girls to need additional support in our school system, and there is a contrast between the least deprived areas and the most deprived

areas—the requirement for additional support in the most deprived areas is twice as high as it is in the least deprived areas. Again, to confirm, do you accept those findings as being an accurate assessment of where we are?

**Neil Rennick:** Yes, and I am happy to cover in more detail the underlying reasons for those findings.

**The Convener:** Sure—we will get to those.

We will get to other areas, too, but I just want to get on the record whether you accept the key messages at the start of the briefing. We will get into the criticisms from the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission in more detail later, but key message 2 says that there are

"inconsistencies and gaps in data recording."

Do you accept that that is a deficiency in the way in which things are working at the moment?

**Neil Rennick:** Yes. Again, I am happy to cover in more detail the complexities relating to the data associated with additional support needs, but we accept that there are gaps and inconsistencies.

**The Convener:** Do you also accept the conclusion that it is

"difficult to assess whether the Scottish Government, councils and their partners are planning for and providing the appropriate support to meet pupils' needs, in line with their rights"?

**Neil Rennick:** Yes. Again, we can get into that in more detail, but that is true not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom and internationally. There are significant challenges relating to the growth in additional support needs and to assessing the right outcomes and the right responses to that.

**The Convener:** You are describing an international phenomenon, but the briefing is about the Scottish Government and its responsibilities. Key message 4 says:

"the Scottish Government has not planned effectively for the potential impact of this ... approach to ASL."

How do you respond to that?

**Neil Rennick:** The Morgan report concluded that the circumstances have changed significantly since the 2004 act was implemented, and that we could not have predicted the scale of change in relation to the levels and recording of need and the wider context in which we are operating. Similarly, the Education, Children and Young People Committee's report on additional support for learning said that many people did not predict the scale of change that we would experience over that time. I accept that the level of change has been different from what was anticipated when the 2004 act was introduced.

**The Convener:** Do you therefore accept the criticism that has been levelled at you that you have not effectively planned for that change?

**Neil Rennick:** Yes, I accept that it has been very hard to plan for the scale of change that we have seen over the past decade, particularly since 2010, when the criteria were updated. I accept that that has made planning incredibly challenging, but that does not mean that action has not been taken nationally, by local government and by individual schools.

There has been a huge amount of activity and lots of positive progress. The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, the Education, Children and Young People Committee and the Morgan review have all identified examples of good practice in responding to the needs of young people. Therefore, I do not want to say that progress has not been made, but there is still a significant scale of challenge that we are responding to.

**The Convener:** We will get into more detail on this, and I will bring in Colin Beattie in short order, but I just want to be clear on one point. One of the fundamental criticisms that is levelled at the Scottish Government and, I guess, COSLA in the briefing is about the gaps in data. In order to plan, you need evidence, and you need to be able to follow that evidence and to make sure that the resources are being used in the right way.

I presume that data collection, which we will get into in some detail, is entirely within your gift. You could produce data in a way that is consistent across local authorities, which would allow you to form a national picture and understand where the £8 billion-worth of public spending in education services ought to go.

**Neil Rennick:** Yes. As you said, there are variations, and sometimes there are reasons for those variations. For example, there are reasons why certain local authorities have higher proportions of pupils who have English as an additional language than other local authorities do. Some of that variation is understandable but, with some of it, it is less clear why it exists.

Colleagues from COSLA and from our team can talk about this in more detail and with more expertise, but the data on additional support for learning is collected by individual teachers in schools, who record information on the SEEMiS system for thousands of individual pupils and for a variety of interventions for them. A complex set of information is being collected, so it is understandable that there are variations, but the scale of those causes concern and is an issue that we have been working to respond to, in terms of recording the need, the interventions and, crucially, the outcomes from those interventions.

**The Convener:** The SEEMiS system is the Scottish education management information system, is it not? It is the data collection system.

**Neil Rennick:** Yes.

**The Convener:** Okay. I now invite Colin Beattie to put some questions to you.

**Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** I will start with a question about tribunals. There has been an increase in the use of the additional support needs tribunal by something like two thirds in recent years, which is an awful lot. As I understand it, there is no requirement for mediation to take place, so the parents or whoever can go straight to the tribunal. Is that an efficient approach? Should there be a requirement to first seek mediation before going to the tribunal?

**Neil Rennick:** Again, I am happy to bring in others if the committee is happy with that.

There has been growth in the number of cases that go before the tribunal, although, thankfully, it still accounts for a relatively small proportion of the total number of young people with additional support needs. However, our view and the view of the system would certainly be that, as much as possible, it is much better to resolve issues at a much earlier stage and not have them go to the tribunal. There is a requirement on local authorities to have mediation and other arrangements in place, and there is clearly a strong incentive for individual local authorities and schools to have such arrangements in place.

We would much rather not have cases reach the tribunal, if that is possible, but that involves a range of work to provide confidence to parents. One key theme in the action plan is about improving communication and engagement between schools, parents and carers.

I do not know whether COSLA colleagues want to say more about the tribunals.

**Laura Caven:** That issue comes up consistently at our children and young people board, which usually involves the convener of each education committee in local authorities. They recognise and are concerned about that increase.

The first stage is for parents or children to engage with the school and then perhaps the education authority. There is then the option of mediation, which we would encourage. The number of tribunal cases has increased. However, given that the recorded number of children and young people with additional support needs has also increased significantly, it is almost understandable.

One of the key concerns of local government relates to the costs and the time associated with

those tribunal hearings, because if people are preparing for them, they are not able to do other things. We would always encourage parents, children and young people to engage with the school in the first instance.

09:45

**Colin Beattie:** Neil Rennick said that there is a requirement for local authorities to provide or make available mediation, but there is no requirement for that as part of the process. If the parents or whoever want to go straight to the tribunal, they can do that. Is that the most efficient way to do it? Surely mediation should be a requirement before going to the tribunal.

**Laura Caven:** Ideally, yes, but people have to be willing to go into that process. We would always encourage that, and we are working on communications around that. One of the key actions that we are focusing on right now is communications with children, young people, families, school staff and others to promote such options, but it is voluntary. Forcing people to mediate is not the most effective way to reach a conclusion, but the option is there, and we promote it as much as possible.

I do not know that you could make going through that process mandatory, because people have to go into a mediation process willingly.

**Colin Beattie:** It is a bit like a complaints process, is it not? You have to go through the steps, and mediation could logically be one of those steps. It will not work for everybody, but surely greater use of mediation would take some of the strain off the tribunal. We might not be talking about a huge number of people, but the tribunal process takes up a huge amount of time and cost. Mediation frequently works.

**Neil Rennick:** The Enquire service—which is the advice service on additional support for learning—makes clear in its advice that the vast majority of disagreements or disputes can be resolved without having to go to a formal tribunal process. That is the advice that it gives to parents.

**Colin Beattie:** However, there is no intention to make mediation a mandatory step in the process.

**Neil Rennick:** I am not aware of that being the case.

**Stella Smith (Scottish Government):** To be clear, we would need to change the legislation to make it mandatory.

**Colin Beattie:** It is not a train smash. It can be done, if that is the right thing to do.

**Neil Rennick:** The principle is right in that it is about doing more to better share information and understanding of what services are available and

what support young people need. That is a much better way of resolving issues, if that is possible, than having them reach the tribunal.

**Colin Beattie:** I get the impression that there is not great enthusiasm to make mediation a mandatory step.

**Laura Caven:** I am happy to pick that up with the project board. We have representation from parents organisations on it, so it is a point that we could discuss with them there. I am happy to follow up in writing once we have had that discussion with them.

Mr Beattie is right that mediation would greatly lessen the burden associated with tribunals; “burden” is not the right word, but you know what I mean. However, I come back to the fact that it would be incredibly difficult to force people to go into a mediation process.

**Colin Beattie:** I will move on to the definition of ASL, which we have heard is very broad. Neil Rennick said at the beginning that it is deliberately wide. I am interested to know why its being deliberately wide is a good thing.

**Neil Rennick:** The roots of inclusive education and education for all are long established internationally, going back at least to the Salamanca declaration by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 1994, and even before that.

It is a long-running aspiration to make education as inclusive as possible and to focus on supporting all young people to learn. Rather than focusing on a deficit model or a health-based model, it is about focusing on a model that reflects what needs to be done to support all young people to be educated.

That necessarily requires a wide approach to responding to needs. That was reflected by the Parliament in the 2004 act, and it has been added to over time through further legislation and the criteria that we use for measuring additional support needs. As far as I am aware—colleagues can come in on this—the international evidence from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, UNESCO, the UN and so on still supports that inclusive model of education.

**Colin Beattie:** I am looking at a chart from one of my local councils, to which I will refer when talking about definitions, rather than the actual figures, interesting though they are. I am looking at a whole spectrum of categories that the council uses in data collection. Given the breadth of all those, is it possible to train a teacher to be able to cover all those points? They include: dyslexia, English as an additional language, family issues, hearing impairment, interrupted learning, learning



disabilities and mental health problems. That is a lot for a school to deal with.

**Neil Rennick:** I will bring my colleagues in if that is okay. The important thing to say is that responding to additional support needs is not an add-on to what teachers do; it has always been part of what they do. Over time, the training that teachers receive in their initial teacher training and the codes of practice that they follow have focused on taking an inclusive approach in responding to the needs of all children and young people. That has always been the case in classes.

You are right that the recording and recognition of additional support needs has expanded significantly in the past decade and more—I do not deny that—which is bringing challenges not just to our teachers but to our school leaders, local authorities and us in the Government, and we are responding to those. I would much rather be in the position in which we recognise and acknowledge those needs than not.

Stella or Clair, do you want to say any more about protected teacher training and support?

**Clair Henderson (Scottish Government):** The point that it is good to remember is that the purpose of the act, and what we are trying to achieve through inclusive practice, is to remove barriers to learning, which can appear for a range of different reasons. The lists that Mr Beattie has read out today include some of the challenges that we are seeing. There has been a change in the complexity; there are new things that we are aware of, such as carers and children who are care supported. Those are all things that we have learned about and developed, and schools are recognising them in a teaching capacity.

The General Teaching Council for Scotland sets standards for teachers on the content on inclusive practice that they should learn through initial teacher education and continuing professional learning as part of their probation, and how they might consider and adapt that their career. There is a wealth and range of modules that they can dip into and out of to learn about specific needs. If they come across something that they do not have a particular depth of knowledge about, they can follow it up—local authorities and schools encourage that.

**Stella Smith:** We have also allocated £29 million in the most recent Scottish Government budget to support the recruitment, retention and training of the workforce.

**Colin Beattie:** Are all those categories laid down by the Scottish Government? Are they in guidelines, or are they set in legislation?

**Neil Rennick:** As I understand it, they are categories that are recorded on SEEMiS, so they

are not restrictive because there are other categories. They are intended to cover the needs of all children and young people, so there is no limitation. Those are the ones that have been identified, and additional ones have been added over time.

I will bring Stella Smith in shortly, but I want to go back to your earlier question. I want to be absolutely clear that I am not in any way understating the challenges that our teachers face in responding to those needs. When I go around schools and speak to teachers and school leaders, they say that there has been a genuine change in the level and complexity of needs that they face, and that they are having to be imaginative in how they respond to that.

**Stella Smith:** Local authority colleagues might want to come in and speak about SEEMiS. It is primarily a school and local authority data management system, and it is used by all local authorities for operational purposes.

During the next year, we are planning to scope a data project, and the categories can be considered in that context.

**Laura Caven:** The categories are important, but more important is identifying the need and the barrier to learning. Many of the categories will have the same need; the need to overcome the barrier to learning or the support need will be the same for some children although they are in different categories. It is about how we respond to the need rather than the categories, although those are helpful and important.

On how the teaching and school workforce are able to support such a range of needs in schools, that is where the importance of partnership working with our third sector, national health service and wider public sector colleagues comes in. We need all the professionals who support children and young people to be involved in advising teachers and supporting them and the wider school workforce. There is good, innovative work going on in local authorities, in which health boards and schools are working together on training models and things such as that, so that the school can be an inclusive and supportive environment.

**Colin Beattie:** There is one category that our local authorities would like to change, and that is autism. The spectrum is wide and it would appear that there are huge differences from one end to the other, and in the intensity of support that is required. Given that that category is one of the areas of most intensive support, would it not make sense to have a better breakdown and a better understanding of what is in it?

**Laura Caven:** One important thing to note is that you do not need a diagnosis of anything to

receive support. Support should be available in schools regardless of whether someone has a diagnosis.

The other thing to note is that teachers cannot diagnose. They provide support as the child presents themselves in the classroom, but they cannot provide a diagnosis; that is not for them to do. Therefore, any further categorisation within any of the health-related categories—although that is arguably not a health-related category—would not be for teachers to do. That would be quite difficult.

The “other” category is often the one where we know that there is a need for support, but we do not know what the reason for the need is. However, knowing the reason is less important than supporting the need and ensuring that the child has support for their learning.

It is a really tricky one. However, the important thing to emphasise is that there is no need for a diagnosis in order for support to be provided. The need should be identified in the classroom, the school and the wider child’s plan.

**Colin Beattie:** Surely, if we drill down to understand where the more complex cases are, that allows us to plan ahead and to allocate the resources that are needed. If we just have one big, amorphous figure, it is difficult to know what resources are needed.

**Neil Rennick:** I am certainly more than happy for that differentiation to be picked up in the data work, if local authorities are raising that issue. I also recognise that, even when we have that differentiation and classification, that might not mean that any two young people will require the same inputs. Individual young people might require different inputs, even though they have a similar need, depending on their individual circumstances.

**Colin Beattie:** Does having such broad categories not lead to a certain amount of uniformity in the approach—a one-size-fits-all approach?

**Neil Rennick:** That is not the intention, and it is not the way that I have seen schools operating. What I have seen schools do is to try to respond to the needs of individual children.

10:00

**Laura Caven:** Schools would be responding not to the diagnosis or the category but to the need that presents itself. We have an individualised approach in schools and classrooms—GIRFEC is the national approach to supporting children holistically. Regardless of what any of the categories are, there would be individualised support.

**Colin Beattie:** I come back to the basic question: if you do not know where the greatest need is, how do you know where to put the greatest resources? How do you do that if it is all in one big pot? You are relying on schools to somehow handle that locally.

**Laura Caven:** The local authority will know who is coming into the school from health visitors and early learning and childcare centres, so they will be able to plan for those children. Moreover, it is not just about the schools; as I have said, the wider partners have a role to play in this, too.

I recognise the complexity that you are identifying, but the issue is not just for schools, for teachers or for local authorities alone. There has to be a whole-system approach to supporting the child and the family.

**Colin Beattie:** You might have all the information at local authority level, but does the Scottish Government not have a role here, too, given that it is allocating the funding at the end of the day, and it needs to know that that funding is going to the right place? How can the Scottish Government be absolutely sure that the funding is going to the right place, and in the right quantity, if we do not have disaggregated figures?

**Neil Rennick:** It is a long time since I worked in local government finance, but the distribution arrangements are agreed jointly between the Scottish Government and local government. They tend not to link with specific subjective assessments in terms of additional support needs—that is not one of the factors that is reflected in the distribution formula. However, a range of other factors is, including deprivation, pupil numbers and so on.

**Colin Beattie:** There are other things that can affect the funding, such as whether the need is long term or short term. All those need different resources.

**Laura Caven:** Joanna Anderson might want to comment on the arrangements for local government funding distribution.

**Joanna Anderson (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities):** I am happy to come in on that. The local government settlement is extremely complicated, with lots of different funding lines, each with their own distribution methodologies, and then there are processes for agreeing those methodologies. The director general referred to the fact that we have joint governance groups—for example, the settlement and distribution group and the joint local government and Scottish Government group—and any new funding lines that come through or any proposed changes to existing funding lines will go through a particular process. There will be an assessment of the best fit of specific funding with policy intent, and any

consideration of distribution methodologies will be guided by underlying principles, the key principle being that things will be driven by underlying data and needs.

Quite a live discussion is being had about ASN distribution and the link with, say, deprivation; the issue was discussed just recently at the settlement and distribution group, with some consideration given to whether a deprivation element needed to be added to the distribution of the £28 million of ASN funding. It was concluded that there needed to be more consideration of the data. I hope that that reassures you that those discussions are ongoing and that more thought is being given to the issue in considering the available data. It is very much on the group's radar.

**Colin Beattie:** Okay. I will move on.

Mainstream ASL provision has an impact on other pupils who are getting education. Has there been any evaluation of any impact on the learning outcomes for pupils who do not receive ASL?

**Neil Rennick:** As I have said, there is lots of international experience and evidence. There is huge variation in how services are delivered across the country, and there has been a range of research on the impacts of that. The general view is that it is beneficial for young people—all young people, not just those with additional support needs—to be in inclusive education environments, and the evidence on the performance of our pupils and the number going on to positive destinations suggests that their education outcomes continue to be positive.

**Colin Beattie:** We hear about circumstances where some pupils who receive ASL can be disruptive, at times, in the classroom. Is there any evaluation of what impact that has overall on the educational outcomes of those who do not receive ASL?

**Neil Rennick:** We recognise that disruption both by pupils who have additional support needs and by those who do not has a significant impact on the operation of schools and on other pupils. We have been taking forward joint work with COSLA on behaviour, relationships and consequences in schools to try to reflect that and make sure that we are considering the needs of all children. One of the issues that we discuss is the extent to which, if we do not respond properly to additional support needs, that may be a factor in behavioural and other issues. It is important that we make sure that we are identifying those needs early and responding to them as much as possible to prevent those issues from arising.

I do not know whether any of my colleagues wants to add to that.

**Laura Caven:** The additional support for learning project board works closely with the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools. There is quite a lot of crossover in membership, and that group is also a joint Scottish Government and COSLA group. We make sure that the work that SAGRABIS does crosses over with the work of the additional support for learning project board, because it is important that they are working in tandem.

**Colin Beattie:** I suppose that it is worth recognising that it is not just a small minority of ASL pupils who can be disruptive. Those who do not receive ASL can sometimes be a bit disruptive, too.

**Neil Rennick:** I was looking for an opportunity to say that I recently visited an after-school service in Perth that uses a model of having young people as volunteers. They include young people with additional support needs, some of whom were in that service previously as service recipients but are now acting as volunteers, as well as other young people without additional support needs. That is a fantastic example of young people contributing to their community and working with other young people with additional support needs. I am really keen that we promote such models and examples of our young people contributing, alongside addressing some of the genuine issues that we are facing.

**Colin Beattie:** Is there any assurance that the needs of those pupils who receive ASL are actually being met? The Scottish Government has a policy of inclusivity, which is quite right, but how do we evaluate whether the ASL pupils' needs are being met and that we have the best possible outcomes?

**Neil Rennick:** Both the Morgan review and the Education, Children and Young People Committee's review concluded that there are really positive examples of additional support needs being met and of innovation in responding to young people's needs. Some of the inspection results, which we can talk about, provide some examples of good practice. I am sure that, as MSPs, you visit schools in your local areas and see good examples of that as well.

There are lots and lots of positive examples of young people's needs being met, but we also know that parents and carers raise concerns and that teachers raise concerns about their capacity to meet those needs. It is a complex picture. There are some really positive examples and there is some positive progress, but there are also some continuing challenges in responding to the needs. That is the honest answer.

The results show that the number of pupils with additional support needs who go to positive

destinations is still relatively high, but they are behind pupils who do not have additional support needs, although the gap has narrowed. There is certainly more that we can do to ensure that all children and young people get the support that they need.

I do not know whether Laura Caven or others want to come in.

**Laura Caven:** Clair Henderson might want to say a bit more, but work has been on-going and is intensifying on the national measurement framework, which aims to ensure that we are capturing the outcomes of children and young people who receive additional support in the school setting. That work has been informed by professionals, including directors of education, as well as Education Scotland and others on the ASL project board. I know that that is one of three areas that the project board will focus on this year.

**Clair Henderson:** The national measurement framework has been a priority for some time. It has been particularly challenging to develop and implement. As you would expect, it requires cross-policy, cross-sector collaboration in order for us all to be content that what we are trying to achieve is practical, helpful for local authorities and, importantly, will support self-improvement in schools. It also needs to demonstrate the achievement and success for all children and young people.

This year, our focus is on working specifically with our analysts to build a platform for the national measurement framework, which will sit under the national improvement framework. The first iteration will bring all the ASL data together in one place. I am not an analyst, but the data will be broken down to inform what we know about additional support for learning. There will be two further iterations of the platform that will build on that, so that we can look at individualised success and achievements and understand whether we are having the impact that we would like. The ASL project board will be focusing on that for the next year as well as the coming years.

We need to be mindful that Audit Scotland's data recommendations will be being implemented at the same time, and both need to happen in parallel so that they can inform each other. It is really positive that we have got to that place. I know that the inspectorate—Education Scotland—and local authorities have been involved, and it is good that we have all signed up to that.

The director general, Mr Rennick, mentioned inspections, which are critical for us in trying to understand whether we have been successful and whether the education system is responding to people's needs. This year, there is a commitment to have a particular focus on ASL and, more

broadly, on attendance, behaviour and curriculum development in order to support a more informed understanding of the performance of our schools and to get into the detail of whether we are meeting the outcomes for all children and young people. That commitment is also really positive.

**The Convener:** I will go to Stuart McMillan, who has a question about an earlier point.

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** My question is for Joanna Anderson. You mentioned £29 million, I think, and the further dialogue that would take place about the funding. However, at the start of the session, in response to the convener's question about whether they agreed with the key recommendations of the briefing, both the Scottish Government and COSLA indicated that they agreed with those key recommendations.

To go over the point again, the first key recommendation notes that the proportion of pupils receiving ASL support in Scotland's most deprived areas is almost double that in the least deprived areas. I do not understand why there has to be further dialogue on the distribution of money when the briefing is very clear and both the Scottish Government and COSLA have already agreed with its recommendations. I seek some clarification on that.

**Joanna Anderson:** The discussion was brought to the settlement and distribution group because there is an understanding that there is a link between ASN and deprivation. The proposal was brought to the SDG to consider whether deprivation needs to be included in the distribution methodology, because the proposal would need to go through our governance structures.

Although we know that there is a link in theory, the data that was presented as part of the discussion did not show that there was a clear correlation. The issue was with the data that was presented and the data that was available. Much of it looked at spend—there was a regression analysis on spend in comparison to deprivation. Some of that was not clear, but there is a barrier to using that for considerations about distribution, because councils will be limited in their spend and will spend money where they have it.

There is a commitment to bring the issue back to the group and, as I understand it, that will be this month or next month; the group will consider what further data is available. There is an understanding that the link exists, but it is about having the data to evidence it. We are working towards being able to demonstrate that; it is just about providing the evidence.

10:15

**Neil Rennick:** Other sources of funding exist in addition to the general local government grants. For example, several schools that I have spoken to about the Scottish attainment challenge have said that they have used their pupil equity funding, which goes directly to schools, for services that not only respond to deprivation but specifically benefit children and young people with additional support needs. Similarly, several local authorities have used their whole family wellbeing funding for projects that are linked to additional support needs. Therefore, other sources of funding reflect that support.

**Stuart McMillan:** I acknowledge that point about the additional sources of funding as well as the point that you raised, Ms Anderson. However, at the very beginning of this meeting, in response to the convener's questioning, both the Scottish Government and COSLA said that they agreed with the recommendations in the briefing. With that on the record, I would expect local authority areas with a higher level of deprivation and more children with additional support needs to start to get additional resource to help them to deliver the services that are required to help those children and their families.

**Laura Caven:** I suppose that there is a complexity—the whole area is complex—but the cost does not necessarily correlate with the need, if you know what I mean. I think that one of the definitions relates to bereavement. Such support is very important in the short term, but although the level of support is high at the point of recording, the cost to provide it could be relatively low. It is probably not the best of examples.

You would have to dig deep into the reasons for support and the type of support that is being provided to know its cost. It gets even more complex when you think about the role of health or any other organisations. However, I take on board your points and am happy to consider them.

**The Convener:** Before we move on, I go back to a fundamental point that the Auditor General made when he gave evidence before the committee on 19 March. He said that there had been

“an almost eightfold increase in the number of children and young people who need additional support for learning.”

He added:

“However, that is not reflected in how councils are funded for their education service.”—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 19 March 2025; c 7-8.]

Do you accept that criticism, director general?

**Neil Rennick:** As I have said, the way in which funding is allocated to local authorities is agreed jointly with COSLA. Although there has been that

eightfold increase in the number of children who need additional support for learning, part of the picture is the needs that were always there and always reflected, and the other part is new needs that have emerged and been identified over that period.

The important thing to say is that majority of young people with additional support needs will receive the main part of that support from their classroom teacher. Young people will receive a range of other supports to different degrees. The fact that they might have additional support needs does not necessarily translate into additional costs. It will for some, but not for others.

Some of those needs will be short term rather than long term. For example, in primary schools, there is a significant need for English as an additional language, but we know that schools—particularly primary schools—do a lot of work to address that and to ensure that people are better prepared as they move into secondary school.

Obviously, we committed to looking at the issue in relation to not only funding but the training that is available for staff and how services are delivered. In accepting the Auditor General's recommendations, we are committing to looking more broadly at how additional support needs are reflected and supported.

**The Convener:** I am not sure whether you grasp what I took to be a fairly fundamental criticism of the funding arrangements. In part, that perhaps reflects Mr McMillan's point that the briefing is clear that there is a direct correlation between areas with high levels of deprivation and the requirement for additional support for learning in those areas.

Are you satisfied that the current funding arrangements meet the challenge that is created by deprivation, inequality or, for example, the issue of English not being a person's first language, which you have mentioned a couple of times this morning? Do you think that the funding arrangements properly address that?

**Neil Rennick:** My take would be that, over the past few years, the current Scottish Government has put significant effort into responding to the deprivation-linked attainment gap. That has been a key priority in what we have done. In broad terms, Scotland spends more per pupil than any other part of the UK, and we have lower pupil teacher ratios than any other part of the UK. That is not the same as saying that there are not children and young people whose needs are not being met or that we are not having to respond to that.

With regard to how we are responding, the situation is encouraging from the point of view of many of the input elements, but I would not want

to say that that does not mean that there is not more for us to do in relation to how those needs are met and what resources are required to meet them.

**The Convener:** If you will forgive me for saying so, there is a bit of an air of complacency about what you have said. On 19 March—just a few weeks ago—the Auditor General also said:

“there now needs to be a fundamental review of how the system is operating and whether it is meeting the needs of children and young people”.—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 19 March 2025; c 23.]

That sounds like a pretty fundamental challenge to the way in which the provision of additional support for learning is being funded, how the funds are being distributed and the extent to which the monitoring and data collection process is working properly. Do you accept that criticism?

**Neil Rennick:** I am really glad that you raised that, because I do not want the committee to get the impression that there is an air of complacency on the matter at official or ministerial level. I do not think that there is any complacency on the part of local government, either.

As I set out at the beginning, we have seen massive positive increases in the identification of young people's needs, and there are lots of positive examples of schools that are innovating and responding to the needs that are identified. However, I do not think that anyone who read the Morgan review in 2020 or the Education, Children and Young People Committee's report last year would say that there is not significantly more for us to do in responding to the needs that exist. That is partly reflected in the work on the action plan, but we recognise that there is more to do beyond that, and that the issues are complex ones that we need to keep working through.

I assure the committee that the Government is not complacent about the situation. There are thousands of young people whose needs we are trying to respond to.

**The Convener:** Okay. I will move things on by inviting Graham Simpson to ask you some questions.

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** I will continue on the same theme, if you do not mind, convener.

Here are some figures. Just under half—46 per cent—of pupils from the most deprived areas receive additional support for learning, whereas just over a quarter—27 per cent—of pupils in the least deprived areas receive such support. Do you have any idea why that should be? Maybe it is obvious, but have you delved into the reasons for that?

**Neil Rennick:** I will bring colleagues in on that. It is complicated. There are more variations behind the numbers than those that are purely to do with deprivation. There are variations in the types of need, too. For example, last week I visited South Ayrshire, which has relatively high levels of dyslexia in comparison with other local authority areas. As I mentioned earlier, in the Glasgow City Council area, there is a high level of English as an additional language, and there are other driving factors that are additional to or linked with deprivation. It is not simply the case that there is a binary connection between the ASN figures and the level of deprivation—it is a more complex picture than that.

Local government or Scottish Government colleagues might want to add to that.

**Stella Smith:** I would like to comment on the complexity issue. I will give an example. Our current data shows that while Glasgow and Inverclyde have high levels of deprivation and high levels of ASN, and East Dunbartonshire and East Renfrewshire have low levels of deprivation and low levels of ASN, Orkney has high levels of ASN and low deprivation. Therefore, there is not a perfect correlation.

**Laura Caven:** Where areas have done work to promote the idea of young carers or to identify young carers, they will perhaps be recorded more than in areas that are not focusing on that so much.

Last week, I spoke to a local authority that has done a big campaign about what a young carer is, so that people can recognise that in themselves and see that it is okay to talk to their school about it, because that is safe and there is no risk to involvement in their caring role. Where there is a focus on a specific area or issue, you get higher levels of recording. It is important that local authorities work together and share what they are doing so that they can learn from one another on issues such as young carers.

**Graham Simpson:** Is it a concern that we have such wide variation between councils? The figures are quite stark. In 2023, the proportion of pupils receiving ASL ranged from 20 per cent to 49 per cent between councils. That is quite a big gap, is it not? Stella, you mentioned that you are doing a project on data. Is that the kind of thing you are looking into? We really need to know why that is so that we can target the resources.

**Stella Smith:** Yes—exactly. We are planning to scope a project on data that will have national and local levels. The aim is to look further into exactly the areas that we are discussing. What more can we do with our data at national level as it is? At the same time, can we, along with our colleagues in COSLA, consider some of the local issues around

consistency in recording and identification of need?

**Graham Simpson:** What is your timescale for that project?

**Stella Smith:** We will be scoping realistic timescales as part of that project, but I do not have a firm—

**Graham Simpson:** That was not an answer.

**Stella Smith:** No.

**Graham Simpson:** How long will it take to do it? That is not a trick question. I am not trying to catch you out. Will it be one year or two years—what do you think?

**Stella Smith:** It is likely to be iterative. Sorry—that is the wrong word. It is likely to be a staged process because, obviously, it is a very complex issue. In the short term, we have committed to publish the first iteration of the national measurement framework this year. In the programme for government yesterday, it was announced that, during the year, we will hold a data summit with all local authorities to begin to explore the issues of consistency and data gaps that we have discussed. Those would be the first steps.

**Laura Caven:** One thing that I am keen to do but that has not yet been discussed with Scottish Government colleagues—apologies, this will be a surprise to you all—is that quite a lot of work is being done on data, not just on additional support needs and schools, but on wider children's services, health services and in other areas, and we do not want a situation where we have different definitions being used. For example, that happens just now in schools—when a child accesses another service, there are different definitions.

We are trying to join up that data, which will take a bit of time. Internally within COSLA, we are connecting health and social care, the digital side, and the children and young people side to try to make sure that we do not take a siloed approach that means that things are different in education and when people access support elsewhere.

It is important that children and young people and their families understand the situation. It is complex for us to understand, so I can only imagine how complex it must be to navigate that as a parent. We are trying to connect the dots. That will take a bit of time, but the work is under way—in COSLA, anyway—and we are keen to connect that with the work that we are doing on ASL.

**Graham Simpson:** Does there need to be greater consistency between councils on how they measure that?

10:30

**Laura Caven:** That work is on-going. As Neil Rennick said, a lot of it comes down to individual school staff recording. What one class teacher records as an additional support need might be something that another teacher is confident in providing, so they would not see it as an additional support need. Work is going on between councils to try to understand how the system is working. At the end of the day, the way in which the current system works comes down to the individual judgments of teachers or school staff, working with partners and the local authority. A bit of professional judgment will always be involved, and we have to trust that those professionals know what is best for the child.

**Graham Simpson:** That takes us back to the point that Mr Beattie raised and his very interesting table. He did not say whether it is publicly available, but it is from East Lothian. The interesting thing for me is that the table lists 25 categories of reasons for pupils getting additional support for learning, and individual teachers are expected to pick up on all those things.

**Neil Rennick:** Individual young people might have relevant needs in a number of those categories, not just one.

**Graham Simpson:** Absolutely. There is a range of needs—as you said, Mr Rennick, a need might be short term because of bereavement, for example, which is one of the categories, or it might be longer term because the pupil has autism or something like that. In high school or even in primary school, youngsters might struggle in a particular subject but be brilliant at something else, so things can be very complex.

**Neil Rennick:** Your questions and Mr Beattie's questions have illustrated the complexity that we are trying to work through, with the intention of ensuring that children and young people get the right support to be able to thrive in school.

**Laura Caven:** I come back to the point that meeting a need is more important than identifying the reason for the need. There is no need for diagnosis before a need is met. The key priority in schools is overcoming barriers to learning.

There is one thing that I am quite keen that we consider through our data work. As I said, people often like to collect more data, but no one likes to stop collecting data or take things away. We should think about how useful some of the data is compared with the data that we might need on the support that is being provided.

**Graham Simpson:** There is no point in collecting data for the sake of it.

**Laura Caven:** Yes—100 per cent.

**Graham Simpson:** A project needs to have an end result, however long it takes. It needs to lead to something.

When we talk about this subject, we always assume that we are talking only about youngsters who are struggling—let us put it that way—but one of the categories in the table is more able pupils, and we never talk about them. They also need extra help, but for a different reason.

**Neil Rennick:** That is very deliberately reflected in the aim of the 2004 act. Since then, we have tried to support all pupils with the additional needs that they might have. A range of circumstances are reflected; we do not use a purely deficit model.

**Graham Simpson:** I would like to ask about a couple of other things. Exhibit 3 in the Auditor General's briefing shows that there has been a huge rise in the number of pupils needing extra help—there has nearly been an 800 per cent increase in 20 years—and the number just continues to go up. More than 40 per cent of pupils now need extra help, and I read this morning that the figure in Glasgow is more than 50 per cent. Those are astonishing figures. You would hope that the increase would, at some point, slow down. Do you see any prospect of that happening?

**Neil Rennick:** The Morgan review concluded that the growth at that time reflected both growth in the recording of needs that had always been there and genuine growth in need.

There have been changes. You will see a big increase in 2010, when needs that were only temporary were included in the recording, and over time a number of different categories have been added that were not there before. You have mentioned bereavement, but family issues, risk of exclusion, et cetera, have been included, too. The increase partly reflects the growth of new categories.

I know from speaking to teachers and school leaders that they will say that there have been genuine increases in some areas, including autism spectrum, which Mr Beattie mentioned earlier, and there has also been a genuine increase with regard to behaviour and neurodiversity issues. However, it is not always clear what the drivers of that have been. Covid is part of it, but there was growth prior to Covid, too.

I do not know whether Stella Smith or Clair Henderson have anything to add.

**Graham Simpson:** Mr Rennick might want to bring you in, but you do not have to come in.

**Laura Caven:** I am happy to come in, even though Mr Rennick did not want me to.

Some of this reflects the more inclusive society that we have now. It is not just about recording, but about recognition of need, too. Ten or 20 years ago, we might not have recognised some of these challenges and, as a result, might not have provided support or looked at how we overcome the barriers. Instead, we might simply have looked at other options for children. Now, we have a much more inclusive society as well as an inclusive approach to education. There is an element of that in this, but I agree with Mr Rennick that teachers, school staff and local authorities are saying that they are seeing increasing challenges.

It has been raised through COSLA with our board and with me personally that there is some discomfort about the use of words such as "behaviour", because there are lots of reasons for children not being able to act in school in a way that is conducive to learning. We are really keen to consider the language of The Promise and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in this space, and we feel that the negative connotations around words such as "behaviour" and "consequences" are unhelpful when we think about how we support children to learn.

**Neil Rennick:** One of the issues that schools raise with us is the importance of the school environment, including school buildings—for example, having the space for nurture spaces or alternative spaces that young people can go to, even just for a short period, and then come back into the mainstream class. It is important to think of the school environment as well as the other types of support that young people receive.

**Graham Simpson:** Finally, I want to ask about the ASL project board. Laura, I think that you are the co-chair of that.

**Laura Caven:** I am.

**Graham Simpson:** I have read that the board is not due to report until 2028. Is that correct?

**Laura Caven:** Partly. The board reports annually on progress against the actions that emerged from the recommendations of the Morgan review. The date of the most recent report escapes me; it was sometime towards the end of—

**Neil Rennick:** It was November.

**Laura Caven:** It was November last year.

**Graham Simpson:** I am sorry—what was that report?

**Laura Caven:** It was the update on progress on the action plan. That was in November; the report is updated on an annual basis, and it sets out the progress that has been made against actions since the last one as well as highlighting examples and evidence of, I suppose, the actions being



delivered. It is really helpful for local authorities, for Government and probably for yourselves, too. I am happy to send you links to previous reports to let you see examples of how things have been taken forward.

I recognise that there are still many actions in the plan that we have not delivered on yet. One of the challenges with any big programme of change is that you are having to run a system while, at the same time, trying to change it. You almost need double capacity if you are to be able to change the system that you are also delivering.

**Graham Simpson:** The Auditor General's briefing paper says:

"In November 2024, the ASL Project Board considered a high-level approach to improving data recording and reporting by 2028".

To me, that sounds like quite slow progress. Do you accept that, in general, the board has been making slow progress?

**Laura Caven:** I come back to the point that we are trying to maintain the system, which is under pressure, at the same time as we are trying to change it. Since the Morgan review, we have had the disruption due to Covid, so there have been challenges.

On the 2028 date, I would need to go back and check some of the wording and what it refers to. I am happy to follow that up in writing, unless Clair Henderson can comment on that.

**Clair Henderson:** I reiterate that the action plan responded to the Morgan review, as I think you are aware, so it was much broader. It was not specifically focused on data; it was about a host of different things around changing the culture, the expectations and the outcomes for children and young people. We had 76 actions. Our updated progress report in November last year showed that we had completed 40, and we have since completed a further 13. The remainder of the actions are what we will be focusing on for the rest of the current parliamentary session. We will then need a bit of a stock check to figure out what is still required, whether it is still relevant and necessary, and whether we will need to adapt given what has come from Audit Scotland.

I am not sure about the 2028 date, but I wonder whether it is tied into the national measurement framework, which has three phases, the first of which will be completed this year. We would need to double check that for you.

**Laura Caven:** We will consider the content of the Audit Scotland briefing as a project board. We had an initial discussion on it. In fact, I think that we have had two discussions at project board meetings, but we are also considering wider reports. There is the Education, Children and

Young People Committee report, which contains recommendations, and the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland published a report quite recently.

We cannot look simply at the Morgan recommendations, which were made at that point in time. We have to adapt and, as Clair Henderson said, see whether they are still relevant, whether there is more that we need to do and whether there are actions that we need to prioritise and put more energy behind. That is why we are focusing on the national measurement framework, communications and the code of practice as three key areas over the next year.

**Graham Simpson:** So you will check the 2028 date for us and come back to us.

**Laura Caven:** Yes.

**Graham Simpson:** You have completed 53 of the 76 recommendations, so you still have a way to go.

**Laura Caven:** We do, and—

**Graham Simpson:** Will you manage to complete the rest of them by next year?

**Laura Caven:** I have every confidence that we will. I recognise that I will be back here in a year's time and you will tell me how confident I was, but yes—I am. There is a great team behind that work and everyone on the project board is absolutely committed to it. They are there on top of their day jobs and, as I said, we have parent representation. We also have a wider ASN network, which has an even wider membership, and members of the network advise the project board as well. I am therefore very confident that there is a lot of enthusiasm behind this.

The briefing from Audit Scotland, the report by the Education, Children and Young People Committee and all the other attention that is being paid to the area is massively helpful because it means that we are able to prioritise it as officials and officers. It is a political priority for us all across local government and the Scottish Government. As much as sessions such as this one can be a challenge, we really welcome the focus on the area, and I know that parents, children and young people do as well.

**Neil Rennick:** Clearly, the work is not going to stop next May. It is going to carry on. We are talking about 40 per cent of the young people in our system, or potentially more than that if we have greater consistency. This is the education system that we have, and we have to continue working to improve it.

**Graham Simpson:** I am delighted to hear that, Mr Rennick. Whoever is on this committee in the

next session of Parliament will be able to see how you have done. I will finish there, convener.

**The Convener:** Okay. Thank you.

Two members of this committee at this time still have questions to put to you. I will move straight along and invite the deputy convener, Jamie Greene, to put his questions to you.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD):** Good morning. My first question is for the director general. Given the content of the Audit Scotland briefing, do you believe that the Scottish Government is currently getting it right for every child?

**Neil Rennick:** As I said earlier, the evidence from the Morgan review, the committee review and the Audit Scotland review is that we need to do more to have the confidence that every child is getting the support that they need. In saying that, I do not want to in any way belittle the fantastic work that individual teachers, schools and local authorities are doing to respond to those needs.

10:45

As we have said in answer to all the questions, we know that there is more that we need to do when it comes to recording what is happening and looking at the nature of how we support young people. A lot of necessary innovation is happening, but that means that we also need to look at what is working effectively and what is not, which is why the work on the measurement framework is particularly important.

**Jamie Greene:** You said that there is more that “we” need to do—who is the “we”? If we work on the assumption that teachers and pupil support assistants are working flat out and are doing their very best—they are at capacity, in the sense that there is nothing more that they could do to help to get it right for every child—where does the gap lie? Where is the missing link?

**Neil Rennick:** The “we” has to be everyone in the education system, as well as people beyond it, because the work also involves health, social work and other services. We all have a responsibility in relation to additional support needs. Part of our nervousness about talking about timescales is that it is not simply a matter of changing the practice in Government or changing the approaches that are taken at COSLA; consideration also needs to be given to how we inform and support individual teachers and schools in what they are doing.

The Morgan review concluded that school leaders were—rightly—spending an increased amount of time responding to the issue, and we need to support them on that. We need to ensure that the support in education that is available for teachers prepares them for the needs that Mr

Beattie mentioned earlier. That is why so many strands of work are linked to the work in this area, such as the work that we are doing on the curriculum, qualifications, attendance, attainment and the school estate. One thing that has been helpful in the discussions on that has been connecting all the work that we and COSLA are doing.

I am sorry—that was a very long-winded answer, but the responsibility is everywhere.

**Jamie Greene:** No, that was helpful—thank you.

The point that I will go on to make in my line of questioning is that many issues that are categorised as additional support needs are non-educational. They might be related to health or wider society, or they might be domestic or related to substance abuse, family or bereavement. Teachers can do nothing or very little about many of those things, in the sense that what happens inside the classroom will not affect what happens outside the classroom.

Is that a scenario in which you will never be able to crack the nut? Given that so many other public agencies and bodies are involved in tackling those wider societal issues that are resulting in poor outcomes for young people, what happens in the classroom will never be able to fix that.

**Neil Rennick:** That is a really good question on an issue that I have been thinking about as well. Earlier, Laura Caven made the really important point that a young person does not necessarily need to have a diagnosis in order for schools and teachers to be able to recognise a learning need that needs to be responded to and adjusted to. Even when a diagnosis is not available, schools should be responding to such needs.

You are right that school is not a sealed-off thing that exists away from the rest of society. All those young people who pass through the education system move on to other positive destinations, such as colleges, higher education and work, so we need to ensure that society is responding to that as well.

To answer Mr Beattie’s question, that is partly why it is beneficial for our schools to consider how young people who have additional support needs impact on pupils in the same classes who do not. That reflects the world that we are all living in and will live in.

**Jamie Greene:** Members of the Scottish Parliament often do school visits. Sometimes, we get asked to host a class for an hour or two, which, I find, is usually to give the teacher a break. When we observe classrooms across our various regions and constituencies, it is interesting that a proportion of pupils in them are clearly disruptive.

When teachers have to deal with that, it is to the detriment of the learning of those pupils who want to get on or are particularly gifted in certain subject areas. That can be observed even in passing on short visits to classrooms, and I presume that that is a mainstream issue.

How much work has the Government done to look at the negative effect that the presumption of mainstreaming is having on exceptional pupils or pupils who are categorised as being “more able”?

**Neil Rennick:** I reassure you that I have never been asked to look after a class.

**Jamie Greene:** You should try it.

**Neil Rennick:** Absolutely. One of the things that I think is really helpful—you will have seen this when you have visited schools—is that when we talk about “mainstream education”, people might have in mind a traditional classroom, but within mainstream schools there are specialist units, spaces where young people can go for a short period of time, individual interventions and pupil support assistants or learning assistants who provide that support. When we talk about “mainstream education”, that can mean a mix of different things that involve responding to additional support needs that are not purely about being in a traditional classroom.

It is partly a case of responding to those issues by asking what helps young people to learn best. That does not always involve sitting in a traditional classroom for all the classes; the arrangement for some classes might be different from that for others.

**Laura Caven:** On the impact on the wider class, we know from the international evidence that it is beneficial for everyone in the classroom if there is a presumption in favour of mainstreaming and having a diverse mix of children and young people in a classroom learning about how other people live, acceptance and all that side of things. There is evidence to show that mainstreaming is beneficial on the citizenship side of things.

In response to your question about what additional support school teachers and staff can provide, given that they are working flat out, I mentioned earlier that we need to think about the wider system and how we better use the professionals who are in schools, such as speech and language therapists. We know that those services are under pressure but, at the same time, there is probably work that we can do to work together better on the needs of children and young people so that they can be better supported in school.

Children and young people are in school for a relatively small proportion of their life, their weeks and their year, so a lot that happens outside the

classroom impacts on their learning, as you said. That is a point that we consistently make when we talk about issues such as teacher numbers, the importance of youth work and family support workers and the importance of not having ring-fenced funding, although that is probably a debate for another day. The wider support that can be provided, for example through youth work, is important for certain groups of children and young people, for whom school might not be working at a particular point in time.

**Jamie Greene:** Is that not an interesting point? I am looking at the table that Mr Beattie provided, which relates to just one council. I appreciate that every council will have different pressure points, but young people who have a social, emotional or behavioural difficulty make up the largest group in the ASL category. One can only assume that the steady rise in that percentage in the past five to 10 years—it is probably a long-term trend—has taken place because, when there is a decline in discipline outside the school environment, in the home environment in particular, that behaviour translates into the school environment.

Pupils who are experiencing wider societal or emotional difficulties in the home environment or in social environments are bringing that into the classroom. There is only so much that a teacher can do in that respect. If public agencies or touch points of public services are letting those families down, are we not fighting a losing battle in the education environment? That is the point that I am trying to make.

**Neil Rennick:** It is important that we think about all the different interventions and support that are available for children and young people. There are variations in that support and what is available, and we are aware of that.

**Stella Smith:** It is also important to remember in all of this that the behaviour in Scottish schools research—I cannot quite remember the date, but it was post-Covid—showed that most pupils are actually well behaved. I mention that to provide a bit of balance.

**Jamie Greene:** They are, but 27 per cent of pupils in East Lothian are designated as having additional support needs because of behavioural difficulties, and we know that violence in classrooms is on the increase and has been for a number of years. I appreciate that the majority of pupils go to school and behave well, and are brought up well—I understand that. However, in this case, we are looking at ASL, and there is clearly a category of people who are struggling.

That leads to outcomes, the work on which by Audit Scotland I am intrigued by. We know that pupils with additional support needs have lower attendance rates and higher exclusion rates, and

there is a 20 per cent gap in curriculum for excellence level outcomes, as well as lower positive destination rates. Those pupils are performing poorly on a number of metrics, and that cannot be acceptable, can it?

**Neil Rennick:** There is a range of factors behind that. There has been positive progress in reducing some of those gaps—for example, there have been positive outcomes and an improvement in the proportion of pupils with additional support needs who are achieving higher passes. There are positive signs in there, but it is an issue that we need to continue to work on. Part of the aim is to try to deal with the inequality of outcomes between pupils.

**Stella Smith:** The work on the national measurement framework is also relevant in that context. Our current metrics measure traditional academic attainment, and that may not be realistic for all pupils with additional support needs. Part of the purpose of the national measurement framework is to capture the wider achievements of children and young people with ASN who may not achieve in the traditional academic sense.

**Jamie Greene:** Yes. The Morgan review picked up on that—it said that other vocational destinations should be seen as positive outcomes as well when measuring like for like. That is a very good point.

Mr Rennick, your department covers education and justice, I believe.

**Neil Rennick:** Yes.

**Jamie Greene:** Has the Scottish Government done any analysis of what percentage of young people exit the education system and go into the criminal justice system, and what percentage of those would have been identified as having additional support for learning needs while in secondary education?

**Neil Rennick:** Yes. Thankfully, far fewer young people now enter the justice system than was the case 10 or 15 years ago, either through being referred to the hearings system on offence grounds or by going into the adult justice system. I do not have the data in front of me, but the last time I looked, it was something like a 70 per cent drop.

We—sorry; I mean local authorities, the police, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and others—have made really good progress in diverting young people away from the justice system. However, we know that a higher proportion of people who end up in prison, for example, have a care background, learning disabilities or other forms of need. Adverse childhood experiences in particular are reflected in the population of those who end up in prison. We

know that the more we can do to support additional support for learning needs at an earlier stage, starting in the very early years and moving all the way through the system, the more we will—we hope—support people into positive destinations.

Again, one of the positive things in the past few years has been the progress on positive destinations for all young people, including young people with additional support needs. Nevertheless, I am keen that we continue to work on that, and on the small proportion of pupils who leave school with no qualifications.

**Jamie Greene:** That is very helpful. Laura, did you want to come in?

**Laura Caven:** I just want to add that the Hayward review and its recommendations are important in that regard. I am keen to link to those, because that review is about routes involving less traditional qualifications.

Representatives from the Scottish Youth Parliament came to COSLA's children and young people board, as they do quite frequently, and they were really keen that the education system is modernised to address the types of things that they want and need to learn, such as digital skills and other skills that they will need for the future. There is a link between how we modernise the approach to qualifications and to measuring achievement, and the approach to children with additional support needs.

11:00

**Jamie Greene:** Thank you for raising the Hayward review.

All three reviews—the Morgan, the Muir and the Hayward reviews—are helpful, but, next month, it will be five years since the Morgan review was published. There is therefore a sense of frustration that only 53 of the 76 recommendations have been implemented. It is taking a long time. The fact that we have also known that the problem has been on the increase for a long time has perhaps driven some of the lines of questioning this morning.

**Neil Rennick:** Yes. That reflects the fact that it is a complex issue, but it is one that we are working on. We are also responding to a moving picture, as the chart that was referred to earlier showed in relation to the growth in pupils with ASN.

There is work going on. A good example is the proportion of young people who are leaving school with technical and vocational qualifications, which is now around 35 per cent. The need to widen those opportunities for young people is reflected in

the wider work that we are taking forward. Again, I know that there is more for us to do on that.

**Laura Caven:** To be clear, we are not saying in any sense that children with additional support needs cannot achieve these things. The evidence shows that they are able to achieve highers and all of that side of things as well. It is a case of widening opportunities for all children and young people so that they can follow a diverse range of paths.

**Jamie Greene:** The one area that we do not really have time to address, but which deserves more time, is how we support teachers and schools to deliver on this agenda. We are very short on time, but I will ask Mr Rennick a question. In 2021, the Scottish Government made an explicit and overt commitment to increase the number of teachers by 3,500 by the end of this parliamentary session, and, in particular, the number of pupil support assistants by 500. Could you give us a progress update on that?

**Neil Rennick:** Yes. I am just looking for my statistics, which one of my colleagues can help me with.

In the past year, there were 17,046 pupil support assistants, which is a significant increase of almost 1,800 since 2020. We have more teachers now than we had in 2018. COSLA and the Scottish Government have also made commitments around teacher numbers for the current year.

Important issues that have been raised with me have been about non-class contact time, which can allow teachers to prepare for the needs of young people with additional support needs. Again, that is an issue that we are working with local government on.

**Laura Caven:** One of the challenges on the teacher numbers side of things is the fact that we have the highest pupil teacher ratio across the UK—or the lowest, I mix the two up: we have more teachers per pupil than the rest of the UK.

We have falling school rolls in many areas. Therefore, especially when we are thinking about additional support needs, we need a wider range of professionals around children than simply teachers. That is not to say that teachers are not important or that we do not need more teachers in certain areas. We know that there are recruitment and retention issues in particular areas, particularly north of the central belt. However, we need to think about the wider workforce and not simply teachers, who need the support of the wider system to support children, young people and their families.

**Jamie Greene:** Does every secondary school in Scotland have someone who supports children

with their mental health? Is there a qualified, dedicated mental health support contact—not a teacher—in every secondary school in Scotland?

**Laura Caven:** I believe that there is a commitment to access to counselling through schools. The counselling may not be 100 per cent based in a school if that school has only a few pupils, but there is access to that support, yes.

**Jamie Greene:** There is access.

We are very short on time. My last question is on page 3 of the Audit Scotland briefing, which gives a statistic for dedicated ASL provision. It is quite a low statistic, which is why I am asking about it. It says that 20 per cent of all schools—about 460—have “dedicated” ASL provision, to use the terminology of the briefing. However, that seems a very low number of schools when, presumably, the need for ASL is prevalent in all schools. Talk me through that.

**Neil Rennick:** Yes, it is an important issue. Every school has additional support for learning available, but there is specialist provision in a number of schools. I bring in Stella Smith on that point.

**Stella Smith:** It is worth bearing in mind in that context that 93 per cent of children with ASL spend all their time in mainstream classes.

**Jamie Greene:** So, a small proportion of schools have a separate, dedicated provision, rather than mainstreaming additional support for learning assistance.

**Neil Rennick:** Again, I think that the Audit Scotland briefing says that not every local authority has a special needs school or schools with special needs facilities, so there can be support within local authorities, or it can come from outside.

**Suzanne McLeod (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities):** The model of delivery very much depends on what is available within the learning estate. There are some special schools—107 is the number that is quoted in the briefing—but outwith those, there may be enhanced provision within the learning estate. Depending on what is available, there may be other staffing models—there might be outreach workers or other types of workers who are centrally based and visit schools. It depends on the type of buildings and on capacity, but everyone has access according to their requirements.

**Jamie Greene:** Convener, I am sure that a good follow-up to this evidence session would be to hear from teaching unions in response to some of the evidence that we have heard. Perhaps we could think about that.

**Neil Rennick:** The teaching unions are represented on the project board.

**Laura Caven:** They are on the project board and on the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools.

**Jamie Greene:** Good—thank you, convener.

**The Convener:** Just for completeness, Laura Caven, you are a co-chair of the project board. Who is the other co-chair?

**Laura Caven:** Alison Taylor, who is on holiday and, therefore, not here.

**The Convener:** Is she from the Scottish Government?

**Laura Caven:** She is from the Scottish Government.

**Neil Rennick:** She is the deputy director responsible for the area.

**The Convener:** Okay, right; thank you. I now invite Stuart McMillan to put some final questions to you.

**Stuart McMillan:** On the project board, I have not heard much said today about the voice of young people or the voice of parents with regards to any of the issues that we have covered. Can you provide me with a bit of reassurance that those voices are being heard and listened to?

**Laura Caven:** Yes. Parent groups are represented on the additional support for learning project board. Government colleagues will have to help me out with the name of the new representative group for parents that is on the board. In relation to children and young people's voices, there are inclusion ambassadors. They are not part of the project board, largely because we want to make sure that we are working with them in a way that works for children and young people. They would not want to come and sit at a meeting, so we engage with them in other ways.

COSLA engages with them through the children and young people board and through the SYP and other organisations, so there is engagement with children and young people, which is really important to us and to me.

**Clair Henderson:** Just to confirm, Connect is the new representative group for parents on the board.

To add to what Laura Caven says, all the organisations and partner bodies that are part of the project board—Children in Scotland, our unions, our Education Scotland colleagues and so on—have a commitment to engage directly with children and young people in any of the work that we do, so that anything that is fed into development and progress towards the actions is

brought back to the project board and discussed, and the same goes for parents and carers.

**Stuart McMillan:** That is helpful, thank you. Earlier on in the evidence session, Laura Caven, you highlighted that you do not need to get a diagnosis to get assistance. That point about diagnosis has come up in my engagement with parents in my constituency over the past year. Some of them have had challenges in getting assistance because there has not been a diagnosis or the information has not been passed on. I highlight the point that those information-sharing processes can fail, although I hasten to add that it is obviously not a universal issue. I am seeking a bit of reassurance that that element is also being considered. I appreciate that it is a small aspect of what is a hugely complex area. However, if that small bit can be guaranteed, it could have a positive impact on young people.

**Laura Caven:** A couple of days ago, I spoke to our Association of Directors of Education in Scotland member on the ASL project board about diagnoses and the importance of that element featuring strongly in the communications work that we do over the next while. There is also public-facing work to be done to raise awareness among parents, children and young people of the fact that, although a diagnosis may be required to access support in other areas of life, it is not needed to access support in the education system. We will be working hard to make sure that the education system is fully aware of that and to make sure that families are aware of it as well.

**Stella Smith:** It is also worth picking up on the fact that the issue will be front and centre of the refresh of the code of practice, which will be taking place over the next few months.

**Stuart McMillan:** Okay. When I was on the Education, Children and Young People Committee, I was involved in the production of its previous report. I am also the deputy chair of the cross-party group on dyslexia and the chair of the cross-party group on visual impairment. Through that experience and through this piece of work, and in the engagement that I have had with parents, particularly in the past 12 months, I have reflected a great deal on young people who I went to school with and all the people who I have met in my community who were failed by the so-called “world-class” education system that Scotland had in the past.

Some of the strongest testimonies that I have heard are from people who have dyslexia. There has been a great deal of improvement in helping young people with dyslexia, but there are still challenges in certain areas. Some people still do not want to recognise that dyslexia is a thing and that it exists. I encourage the Scottish Government and COSLA, when undertaking the work that they

are doing and when they engage with unions and others, to recognise that that aspect is hugely important. I have an example in my mind from just the past couple of years of somebody who had to move their child from one primary school to a different one because of the lack of acceptance of dyslexia.

**Laura Caven:** I am really sorry to hear that. I am happy to engage with the cross-party group, if that would be helpful, so that we can have a further conversation about the issues that have been raised. We can connect those conversations with the work that the project board is doing.

**Neil Rennick:** Visiting schools, people will often talk about the benefits that technology can sometimes provide in relation to adjusting how classroom teachers teach. They can use systems that help pupils with dyslexia to overcome the challenges that they face. Dyslexia is a good example of an issue where there are known interventions and methods that can help young people. I would be disappointed if there were examples of cases where those opportunities were not being taken.

**Stuart McMillan:** I will certainly be in touch with you, Laura, and I will speak to the convener of the cross-party group.

The deputy convener touched on the presumption in favour of mainstreaming. That issue has come up regularly in some of my work with parents. I undertook a survey, which was completed at the end of April. This is the first bit of information on the survey that I will put into the public domain, and I will get back to everyone who responded to it. We asked a question about the presumption of mainstreaming. A total of 29.49 per cent support it, while 70.51 per cent think that it is now past its sell-by date and want to do something different.

As the briefing indicates, there has been an increase of nearly 800 per cent in the number of ASL pupils since the 2004 act came into effect, and I have heard in various fora that the presumption of mainstreaming should be looked at again, potentially.

Has any work has been undertaken or has anything been looked at in that regard?

11:15

**Neil Rennick:** Again, I will bring in others. As I said, the international evidence suggests that the presumption of mainstreaming and inclusive education is still the right approach to take for education systems as a whole. Although the original legislation was passed in 2004, guidance was relatively recently published on the

presumption of mainstreaming in 2019, to try to help with reflecting and applying that.

The Morgan review emphasised the importance of communication with parents and carers and with children and young people, and part of that has to be about explaining what the presumption of mainstreaming looks like in reality. As I said, it is not about a traditional method of education, as you talked about—there is a range of options within mainstream schools, and a range of interventions that schools apply to try to ensure that the mainstreaming approach works for young people. A lot of that is applied through the actions of individual classroom teachers, but it can also be about the physical environment in the school.

Last week, I met a number of young people with fairly significant additional support needs who were in a mainstream school but received additional support within it. They emphasised the benefits that being part of the wider school environment gave them, such as taking part in clubs and visits. It is about recognising the wider benefits that are not purely about academic or education outcomes.

**Stella Smith:** Again, I emphasise that the presumption of mainstreaming is just a presumption; we all acknowledge that there will always need to be a range of provision to meet all children's needs.

**Neil Rennick:** There are still around 8,000 young people in special needs schools, and other young people are accommodated in specific provision in other schools or within mainstream schools.

**Laura Caven:** Local government remains committed to the presumption to mainstream—from our perspective, at this time, the principle is absolutely right.

**Stuart McMillan:** Paragraphs 46 to 55 and 59 and 60 of the briefing are interesting with regard to looking ahead and trying to deal with some of the challenges. As I said at the outset, I acknowledge that this area is hugely complex. Every child is different, so trying to do something that broad is very much a challenge.

The briefing mentions the situation with teacher training in ASL and the Scottish Government's commitment to considering options in that regard. I am keen to understand where the Scottish Government is on the issue of additional training. We have heard that the number of pupil support assistants has increased to 17,046, and that additional training is very much required.

**Neil Rennick:** Stella Smith mentioned earlier the £29 million that was included in the budget; a key focus of that funding, which is shared with

local government, is supporting the retention, recruitment and training of the ASN workforce.

The “National Framework for Inclusion”, which was prepared by the Scottish universities inclusion group—that is, all the universities that provide teacher training—provides guidance specifically on the expectations not only on new but on existing teachers regarding inclusion and inclusive education. It provides reflective questions that teachers can ask themselves as to how they ensure that they are providing that inclusive practice.

Over recent years, therefore, there has been work to ensure that we are supporting the teaching workforce, and the wider workforce, to be able to respond to the challenges that we have talked about. Clair Henderson or Stella Smith might want to say more about that.

**Clair Henderson:** I will come in quickly. There are different points in a person’s career, and they might be looking for different development and learning at different times. Consideration is being given to initial teacher education—ministers made a commitment to look at the ASN content of that. That work is on-going, and our colleagues in the Scottish Council of Deans of Education are considering it, so that we can provide an update once we have more content and understanding of that.

Recognition that there are different points in a person’s career is critical. We have specific work in our additional support for learning action plan on what is already available and what gaps are emerging in teacher training in response to changing complexities or context.

Our colleagues at Education Scotland are driving that work. It has an inclusion, equalities and wellbeing framework that has different levels of training that might be required on specific aspects. A spectrum of work is under way, and, as Stella Smith mentioned, the additional £29 million will support some of that.

**Suzanne McLeod:** I want to pick up on the points about pupil support assistance. Pupil support assistant roles vary across the country, as do the degrees that they have and the jobs that they do, which makes it very difficult to identify one solution for training and for supporting them in their role.

Quite a lot of work is being done jointly between the Scottish Government and COSLA, and a group is looking at training for that group of staff, including at whether a collective induction could be provided. It is also considering the accreditation and registration of those staff. A report on the potential options is due during the next couple of weeks.

**Stuart McMillan:** When that report is published, it would be useful if that could be sent directly to the committee. I was just about to ask a question about accreditation and registration, so that was very helpful.

I am conscious of the time. What else is the Scottish Government planning to do to improve the outcomes of pupils with additional support needs and to target the available resources in a better way? We touched on deprivation earlier, and there is a wide variety of other aspects, but if there is anything else that you would want to put on the record, that would be very helpful.

**Neil Rennick:** I am keen that we ensure that the needs of young people with additional support needs are reflected across the range of work that we are doing on curriculum reform, qualifications and the school estate. We need to ensure that it is embedded across all of our work, alongside the work that we are doing as part of the action plan. It is helpful that the briefing and previous reports highlighted that.

**Laura Caven:** That is a very good point. We should use the word mainstreaming in a different sense, and when we are thinking about policy development in other areas of education, such as the curriculum and the learning estate, we need to be thinking about ASL. We need to think about the needs of all children, particularly children with additional support needs, in other areas of education policy.

**Stuart McMillan:** That is very helpful. Colin Beattie cited East Lothian Council, which has a table setting out the range of reasons for additional support need provision. It would be helpful to have a consistent approach across the country, using that as an example. I am not saying that there is not a consistent approach, because I do not know whether that is the case. However, having a consistent approach to categorisation might assist with planning and considering different policies.

Earlier, Mr Rennick mentioned English as a second language in Glasgow. Clearly, that will not be an issue in other parts of the country. There will be spikes in needs, depending on the situation. However, a consistent approach to categorisation would certainly help with any future activity and planning.

**Laura Caven:** I come back to the point that that is important and helpful, but we also need to look at the need rather than just at the categories. You can have children in one category who all have different needs, and you can have children in different categories who have the same needs. When it comes to resource and training, we need to look at the need as much as we look at the reason for the need.



**Stuart McMillan:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** I will bookend the session by returning to the recommendations. Laura Caven seemed to hesitate a bit in saying whether she accepts the recommendation on having more consistent data nationally, which has been a theme of this morning's meeting and in the Audit Scotland and Accounts Commission briefing and recommendations.

When Stella Smith was answering one of the questions that Graham Simpson put to her, I was reflecting on the fact that, as well as recommendations, the briefing has suggested timescales for meeting those recommendations. Do you accept the timescales that the Auditor General and Accounts Commission recommend?

**Neil Rennick:** We were talking about that earlier among ourselves. That is the one part where we are slightly hesitant. That is not because there is no urgency around the issue—there clearly is—but because of the complexity, as we have talked about. As part of the work on the summit that ministers announced yesterday in the programme for government, and subject to COSLA colleagues' views, I would be keen for timescales to be one of the issues that we talk about. That is important not just for our systems. It is also important because the data that we have is made up of thousands and thousands of individual subjective decisions by teachers and schools, so we need to consider how we share the approach consistently across the systems that we have. I am certainly keen that part of the work on the summit involves looking at realistic timescales for our work on the issue.

**The Convener:** Would I be right to infer from that that you think that some of the Accounts Commission and Auditor General timescales might not be realistic?

**Neil Rennick:** It is good to have that challenge, but I do not want to—

**The Convener:** I will take that as a yes.

**Neil Rennick:** I do not want to presume that all those complexities can be dealt with within six to 12 months or whatever. I want to make sure that we properly consider the issue while giving it due urgency.

**The Convener:** You said earlier that this is not just about data; it is about the operation of the system. I will finish on a point that is often one of my refrains. Children are only five once, eight once, 11 once and 15 once, so there is no point in coming back in four years' time and saying that you have solved it, because, for that cohort of young people, it might be too late. There needs to be a sense of urgency about addressing some of

the challenges that are set out in the briefing that we have been considering this morning.

**Neil Rennick:** I am really glad that you raised that point. I hope that, between us, we have been clear that there is not an air of complacency. This is a hugely significant issue for our education system and for our young people. It is a key part of the work that we are taking forward and will have to take forward. We will continue to prioritise the work on that because, as you say, it is a reflection of the needs of thousands and thousands of individual pupils, and not just those who have additional support needs but those of their peers.

**The Convener:** That almost takes us to a full two hours. I place on record the thanks of the committee for your time and input. I thank Joanna Anderson—I apologise that your name was misspelled on your nameplate, Joanna—Suzanne McLeod and Laura Caven from COSLA, and I thank Clair Henderson, Stella Smith and Neil Rennick from the Scottish Government.

With that, I move the committee into private session.

11:29

*Meeting continued in private until 12:43.*



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