OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Economy and Fair Work Committee

Wednesday 22 May 2024

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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ECONOMY AND FAIR WORK COMMITTEE
16th Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

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

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)
*Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
*Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab)
*Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
*Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)
*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Tracey Francis (Association for Real Change Scotland)
Dr Charlotte Pearson (University of Glasgow)
Anne-Marie Sturrock (Colleges Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Anne Peat

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Economy and Fair Work Committee

Wednesday 22 May 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Disability Employment Gap

The Convener (Claire Baker): Good morning, and welcome to the 16th meeting in 2024 of the Economy and Fair Work Committee. Our first item of business is the fourth evidence session in the committee's inquiry into the disability employment gap in Scotland. This morning we will focus on the support that is available to help young disabled people to transition from the education system into employment in adulthood.

I welcome Tracey Francis, who is the policy and development worker for the Scottish Transitions Forum and the Association of Real Change Scotland; Anne-Marie Sturrock, vice-principal for student experience at Colleges Scotland; and Dr Charlotte Pearson, who is a senior lecturer in social and public policy at the University of Glasgow. Thank you, everybody.

If members and witnesses could keep their answers as concise and precise as possible, that would be helpful. The committee has undertaken this work because the Government has a target to halve the disability employment gap by 2038 and we want to see whether we are on target to achieve that. We are interested in what the key remaining challenges are to closing the disability employment gap in Scotland. You will have a chance to expand on many of the issues that I might ask you to address briefly at the start.

I will come first to Tracey Francis, to talk about some of the remaining challenges in closing the disability employment gap.

Tracey Francis (Association for Real Change Scotland): The young people whom we work to support are between the ages of 14 and 25—people who are moving from children's services to adult services when many changes are taking place. I can talk a lot more about that later.

The transition from school into the world of adulthood and the world of work, and trying to work out what you want to do and who you want to be, is so complex. At the moment, the support for young people is pretty inadequate. Many young people face a very difficult task in getting the support that they need in order to think through what life might be like and how they might make things work for them. People who have additional support needs—the clue is in the name—need extra support to be able to make that transition: they will not make it without that support. If the support is not there and is not doing the right task, those young people will be on a track that is taking them in the wrong direction.

The situation should be looked at holistically. At the moment, we are not set up to do that because support structures and planning are not in place and the help that would guide young people towards positive outcomes is not there. That is probably the biggest single challenge that they face.

The Convener: I will come to Anne-Marie Sturrock next. I will ask you a similar question. What are the remaining key challenges to closing the employment gap? What barriers will make that difficult for us to do?

Anne-Marie Sturrock (Colleges Scotland): The answer varies, depending on the individual. There is a very complex landscape out there. In a previous life I was a job finder and job coach for people with learning disabilities. In my experience, the answer is about having a good support network and having the services to support individuals into employment.

Transitions are key. Across Scotland, there are various arrangements for transition—into employment, into college and out of college and into employment—and various support services for people to get into employment. Provision is based very much on individual needs. For some people whom I have supported in employment it took two weeks to train the individual into their role, whereas for other people it could take six months, depending on the complexities of the job. It takes time.

There are key principles of supported employment for people with learning disabilities and people with autism. There are five steps associated with that. We had a discussion in the corridor just before we came in, in which we said that one of the most important aspects is that we spend the time with the young person and their family doing what is called a vocational profile, to understand their needs. Sometimes something can be missed in support: we could, for example, get the right job for the right person at the right time, but then find out that the individual is not an independent traveller.

From my experience, what is needed is a multi-agency approach to support employment for people with learning disabilities and people who have autism. No one department or agency can do it. Also, if you get the golden apple and secure employment for a person, long-term support is needed thereafter. Previously, funding was year on year. There was a great support network for getting people into employment, but if the funding stopped the support stopped, when long-term support was needed.

We should, through the process of supported employment for people with learning disabilities, try to empower the social model of disability rather than the medical model of disability.

Situations are complex and very individualised and the needs and wishes of the young person must be taken into consideration. For me, the most important step, based on my experience, is completion of the vocational profile with the parents, the young person and the services that support the young person—they might be in residential care—in order that all their needs are assessed prior to their going into employment.

Thereafter, we look for employers that match the wishes of the young person, then we support the young person in the role, and we are there for the employer and for the individual once they have become independent in the role. There should not be a short-term fix: we need a long-term solution to address the employment gap for people with learning disabilities and people with autism in Scotland.

The Convener: Are the majority of people who need that support accessing that support?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: No.

Tracey Francis: No.

Dr Charlotte Pearson (University of Glasgow): No.

Tracey Francis: I am sorry, Charlotte. I know that you have not had a chance to answer yet. Through ARC and through the Scottish Transitions Forum, we have over 1,000 members who include professionals, young people, parents and carers. I run the parent and carer network for the forum. The anecdotal evidence that is coming through is that it is not happening: people do not have the support. It is a real challenge.

I should say that, for me, the matter also has a personal dimension. I have a daughter, who is a young woman now, in her 20s. She is autistic. At the moment we are struggling with precisely this: we are trying to find a workplace for her and it is proving to be incredibly difficult. I work in the field and I know what I am doing, but it is proving to be incredibly difficult to crack. I can well believe that lots of families across the country will be really struggling.

The Convener: I will come to Charlotte Pearson now. Good morning. It will be interesting to hear your reflections on the progress that is being made towards 2038 and what you think the key challenges are in achieving a halving of the disability employment gap.

Dr Pearson: Not to repeat the points that were made about structural barriers by Anne-Marie Sturrock and Tracey Francis, the point that I would add is about attitudinal barriers for young people. Both Anne-Marie and Tracey have emphasised the importance of early intervention. It is critical that we have conversations about employment expectations and aspiration, and that we have them really early in the process.

From the young people whom we have spoken to in our research, it is very clear that that is not happening and that there is not a huge amount of support within school systems. There is an expectation that many of the young people whom we have spoken to will not be in employment—that it is not for them. The message is, “That will not be your life course.”

People leave school and, quite rightly, Governments are concerned about the employment gap, so they push and say that they need to think about employment, but the conversation has not happened until they are 15 or 16, at the earliest. As Anne-Marie said, integrating vocational profiling and careers discussion should be done earlier on, for support. We need to start that conversation and dialogue at a much earlier stage.

The Convener: The Government target is to halve the gap. In terms of Government policy or drivers or levers, do you think that enough is happening? Is what the Government is doing to try to reduce the gap clear?

Dr Pearson: I think that it is clear, but there is a real problem with key services and key policy areas not being joined up. When children are leaving school, the age range of defined adulthood in different policy areas can be very arbitrary and can be changed, which can be incredibly confusing. Health and social care services might be provided to one age cohort but much less so for others. That is incredibly difficult. Policy needs to stop working in silos and we need to think about how it can join up and achieve the target.

In terms of employment, there are policies such as access to work. When they work well, they are great. It is an innovative policy, but research suggests that there are delays in people getting it. Young people—particularly young disabled people—might not have the information. They might be unaware of access to work and the provisions in equalities legislation for reasonable adjustments. There is a range of issues.

In many respects policy exists, but the questions are whether it is enforced and whether attitudes are conducive to making it work. There is not a blank canvas, by any means. There is a network of transition support; the question is whether it is working effectively.

The Convener: I will bring in Colin Smyth to be followed by Colin Beattie.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I am just trying to work out why that support is so important for those young people. You said that there is a network of support already there, but it is not functioning correctly. Is the support there and the issue is the way it works, or is the support not there? I am trying to work out what the gap is and why that support is so important for those young people.

Dr Pearson: The support is there on paper. Whether individual young people are accessing it is the question. I would probably say that they are not—certainly the people whom we have spoken to are not—or not doing so consistently. It goes back to that point about early intervention. As Anne-Marie Sturrock says, the ideal approach would be to have vocational profiling—to get that started in school and have those conversations and have that network of support then. For example, if you have education support but you do not have your social care package, that is a gap. Some of the parents whom we have spoken to have not even heard of self-directed support or the functions of social care in Scotland. There seems to be a real problem not only with getting the support out there but with getting information.

Colin Smyth: Anne-Marie, you also said that it is not joined up effectively. How do we join it up? You said that it needs to be personalised to the individual. How do we change policy so that we are not working in silos and we are bringing people together to make sure that it is personalised? What is missing at the moment to make it personalised?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Policy is one thing, but the services to back up the implementation of the policies are another. At Colleges Scotland, we run Project Search, so do some universities, for people with learning disabilities and for people with autism. The project is a year long, but it is about getting people employment at the end of it. A finite amount of people get on to the course, because we can take 10 a year. The services are disjointed. There are not enough services for people with learning disabilities for supported employment.

I think that Skills Development Scotland or the Department for Work and Pensions do quite well, but when we have a policy, we need to ensure that we have the services for young people to be able to meet the outcomes of the policy. The services to back up those policies are so important.

Colin Smyth: Tracey, why do you think that it makes such a difference?

Tracey Francis: One of the big challenges that we could try to address is the fact that, when young people are moving into adulthood, they are moving from children's services into adult services. For example, a lot of policy advisory groups focus on children or they focus on adults. There are very few that come together and look at that bit where the two join up or do not join up. Those policy advisory groups could be brought together a little bit more. It does not have to be all the time but, every now and then, they could come together to recognise that it is about a person's life—we are not in categories. We need something that will smooth that transition. That is one thing that could be done.

We know that, in a lot of local authority areas, the criteria for support in adult services are very different from the criteria in children's services. Again, there is a disconnect. There is something almost baked into the system that means that they will not match that easily, so it would be good if we were able to do something on that.

09:45

In the Scottish Transitions Forum, we did a pilot project a couple of years ago called principles into practice, which implemented what makes a good transition in local authority settings. We worked with 10 local authorities. One local authority employed a transitions co-ordinator for those two years. She was somebody who bridged that gap. She worked right the way through, following families through from when the young person was 14 or 15 up to their early 20s. The local authority has now decided on the back of that that it will employ more people in that role or to support her role, because it has made a difference. That is not about employment specifically; it is about transition experiences. However, as we were saying, if the transition experience is smooth, it is a lot easier to have conversations about employment, because people have the bread and butter in place. They have the essentials.

Colin Smyth: That is a very interesting point, because when we had a group of young people up from The Usual Place in Dumfries, one of the staff made the point that the organisation often slips through the gaps in funding because it is not education and it is not employment, but it bridges the two. Every time it applies for funding, it is told, "Sorry, that is education," or, "Sorry, that is employment." I am just trying to work out what is the barrier. It sounds like it is about silo working, but is it because we do not put in place the bridge? We are not funding the bridge; we are funding the two things separately. Is that a fair reflection?

Tracey Francis: That is a really good point. We need to build bridges between those areas. I have seen this represented in a visual image as a series of cliff edges that you can fall off—I am sure that you have probably heard that term before. However, if there is a bridge between two cliffs so that you can walk across, you are less likely to fall down through the cracks. If we could focus on where the bridges are and how we can support those and build those, that would make a big difference.

The Convener: Tracey, you mentioned a personal experience. According to figures that we saw last week, people with autism have a lower employment rate than any other group with a health condition among 16 to 64-year-olds, and autistic graduates are twice as likely to be unemployed after 15 months as non-disabled graduates, with only 36 per cent finding full-time work in that period. I do not know whether you want to say a wee bit more about that. We are talking about transitions, but it is not always about school leavers. Sometimes we are talking about people who are very qualified and who are graduates but who find difficulty, because of their condition, in finding employment. Is there any support for young people who are that age?

Tracey Francis: Again, I think that there is support for them on paper. There is Skills Development Scotland and Enable Works, and there are other agencies that work with those young people. A lot of the time, the communication is not there, so young people are not hearing who can help. Crucially, it feels to me that families are not hearing who can help either. We did a piece of work a few years ago called “Facing the Future Together”, which involved interviews with families and young people about what their expectations were for transitions. Something like 86 per cent—it was a very high percentage—of young people said that they expected to get information about the future from their parents. They were not looking to schools necessarily—that was the icing on the cake—but they did expect to get that from their parents, and the parents were telling us, “We do not know. We cannot find this information. It is not being targeted towards us.”

When somebody is not within the school system—this could apply equally to people who are out of school for a whole raft of reasons; they could be home educated or they could be people who have a health condition that means that they cannot attend—they are not plugged into that school network, so how do they find out about what could help them and where they can go?

Even though someone might be very highly educated and very well qualified—for example, they could have a PhD, as there are plenty of autistic people out there who have very high levels of academic qualifications—navigating the social landscape is one of the things that autistic people find challenging. If they have to work their way through this labyrinthine system, they will be overwhelmed and they will to find that very challenging. Making the information very clear and direct and targeted to the young people and their parents and carers would be very helpful.

The Convener: What about employers—where do they fit into this when we are talking about graduates? Does more need to be done? We have had some discussion on the committee and in this inquiry around how people apply for jobs and the recruitment process—do there need to be changes there? What about the role of employers?

Tracey Francis: It feels to me as if a lot of employers would like to make a change. They would like to have a more diverse workforce around disability. There are challenges for them. There are employers who are a little bit afraid about that, because they do not know what to do. They do not want to get it wrong. They want to be able to support somebody, but they are not quite sure how to do it. There are obviously the implications of how much time it might take to support somebody. Anne-Marie Sturrock was talking about job coaches and continuity, with people continuing with support for six months or a year of work, so that some of the pressure is taken off the employers. That would be beneficial.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): We had the benefit of hearing from some young people who had been through the experience of getting support and so on. They came here and we had the opportunity to speak to them and get their views, which was really valuable. The ones I spoke to were very scathing about what support they received at school. Subsequent to that, as they transitioned on, they were fairly scathing about the jobcentres as well. They felt that the jobcentres did not know what to do with them.

I also had the opportunity in the past week to visit a couple of schools in my constituency. I have one high school that has 49.5 per cent additional support needs and I have a primary school with 54 per cent additional support needs. That scale is huge. How do we address that?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I think that colleges play a huge part in that in terms of the transition. It is about getting in there very early, working with a young person, working with their family and looking at what their needs are. Did you say 49 per cent?

Colin Beattie: It is 49.5 per cent.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Is that primary or secondary?

Colin Beattie: Secondary. For the primary school it is 54 per cent. These are not unusual percentages in my area. I know that my area’s figures are slightly higher than some.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I live in your area and I have a daughter, probably in one of the schools that you mentioned, who probably falls under that 49 per cent because of a medical issue. I will shout this until somebody listens to me: it has to be done individually. Percentages are one thing; the people behind that percentage are another. It is about getting in at a very early stage and spending time as a multidisciplined agency. Colleges play a part in that and the schools play a part in it. Skills Development Scotland for sure has careers officers in the schools and assigns more time to work with these people, including my daughter—who you have met, by the way—to look at what they want to do and what steps are needed to help them get there.

I keep saying in my notes that this is not one agency's responsibility. This is a collective responsibility to get the best outcome. We are talking about children and young people here, but I have worked quite a lot with adults transitioning, too. Let us say, they have their tenancy and then they go from their tenancy into employment and they have a purpose in life. It is different. It is about working together as a multi-agency group—the colleges, SDS, developing the young workforce and the schools' learning support teams—to get the right transitions. We keep going back to the right transitions—transitions out of school, maybe transitions into college and transitions into employment. If there is an issue in employment, it is about supporting the employer and the young person. A multi-agency approach is needed to address that.

Colin Beattie: I do not disagree with anything that you say. Everything is individual, each person responds in different ways and you have to build the support around that. My concern is the scale, which is worrying. How do the resources get put in place for this? It is not just a question of money. It is people and the support that people can give to these young people. How do we do it? That is an impossible question.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: The scale is not something that concerns me, because I think that every person, irrespective of whether they have a disability—a learning disability or a medical condition—should have a good transition out of school, a good transition into college and a good transition into work. In the long term, that will save money. If we do it right when children are young, we save in the end.

There is an investment required, sitting down and having a dialogue with a young person, just listening to the young person about what they want and listening to parents. I know that Tracey Francis, Charlotte Pearson and I had a discussion about that. Parents are a key part in this, or it may be that a young person is in residential care. Getting the whole profile and getting it right at a very young age is costly, but it is worth it.

I cannot answer your question, because I do not have a magic wand, but I think that early intervention is better than trying to pick up people who have fallen through the system. One good thing that works is the further education partnership agreement that the colleges have with SDS. We know the number of young people coming through who may not have a positive destination. We know the number of young people coming through who may have a learning disability and may have to go into supported education, so we can work our curriculum around that in advance.

Colleges work quite well. We work shoulder to shoulder—it is an Irishwoman saying that—with Skills Development Scotland and the schools to make sure that the transition is the right for the individual.

Dr Pearson: I suppose that this touches on the additional support learning inquiry, which reported last week about the position of additional support needs in mainstream schools. The argument there is around whether mainstreaming is the right approach for this. Most people would argue that there is no reason why disabled children should not be in mainstream schools, but it comes back to the point that you have to have the support there. The numbers in Colin Beattie's constituency are high. There is not an answer without putting the support in place to put in the resource and the understanding.

It comes back again to attitudes. Have some understanding. Have some training and have some conversations around disability in schools for teachers and other children, and make that environment more supportive for learning. As Anne-Marie Sturrock says, there is not an easy answer. A lot of it is resource driven, but it is also about having a culture change within mainstream schools.

Colin Beattie: Do the resources exist to be able to provide that level of support for the sort of percentages I talked about? I know that additional support needs are a whole rainbow of different needs. Some of them are very light touch and some of them are very intensive but, nevertheless, all of them need resources. At those percentages, how do we allocate the resources? Where do they come from? As I say, it is not just about money; it is about having people available to be able to give that support.

Dr Pearson: I keep talking about attitudes as well as resources. The easiest thing for me to say is, "Well it is about resources, so you need to put in extra support teachers and extra specialised disability advisers." However, I think that you also have to work with the school populations that you have. We have spoken to young people who have asked for reasonable adjustments to be made around exams, because they find the exam environment difficult. There was one student who could not physically deal with the demands of the school uniform and she was told no—what she wanted could not be done. That change could be made very easily, but that comes from someone not having an understanding of diverse needs and issues around disability. I think that, as Anne-Marie Sturrock says, it is a resource issue but it is also a cultural issue in schools.

10:00

Tracey Francis: I would completely agree with that. Teachers do an incredibly difficult job. We ask an awful lot of them. As with social workers and so on, they are overwhelmed. However, we fall into the trap sometimes of thinking that we have to put a service in place to be able to meet a need. We do not always have to do that. Exactly as you say, there are relatively simple adjustments that could be made if we approach the topic in a slightly different way.

One of the key things is listening to young people and listening to families about what they are saying that they need. Within that figure of nearly 50 per cent that Colin Beattie quoted there will be a huge range of need. Some people probably only need a light touch. They might need something like an adjustment to school uniform or being able to wear noise-cancelling headphones. That will help. There will be other people who need a lot more intensive support.

If you can respond to people who are saying, “This is what will help me and this is what I need. I need this information. I need this adjustment,” maybe you can free up a little bit of time, energy and resource to help the people who need more intensive support.

The Convener: The Government is committed to a national transitions to adulthood strategy by 2026. Are you involved in discussions around that? How important do you see that being? Tracey, is your organisation involved?

Tracey Francis: Yes, we are actively involved in that. We are on the executive group for that. I am in the process at the moment of running a series of consultations among parents about the national transition strategy and how that will work.

The Convener: Thank you.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): In some ways, my question follows on from your conversation with Colin Beattie. You have spoken in different ways about the need to change culture and we have heard in previous sessions about people being afraid because they do not know what it will mean to have a disabled young person in their employment or in their education setting and how to support them. One way to overcome that fear and address some of the culture change issues—although it does not tackle them completely—is to show good examples. Could you talk through some clear examples of when it all works? What does “good” look like? You have talked about vocational profiling and about multi-agency approaches. When it works, what does that mean for the people providing the support, for the families and for the young people themselves? Perhaps Anne-Marie Sturrock could start.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I could give it to you from a college perspective, if that is okay.

Maggie Chapman: Yes, of course.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: In a previous life, I used to teach young people with learning disabilities and an example of “good” was when the service was aligned to the education service and the social work service. A good transition is when the social work department employs a transition officer and the college has a transition officer. An example of “good” is going in at secondary 2 and meeting the parents, the young person, the teachers involved, and looking at the—I do not like this word but I will say it—holistic needs of the young person: their educational, support and pastoral needs. That will include things like considering transport to and from college and asking whether a work placement is the best option when they come into college. That ensures that the transition into college is smooth and runs over a few years, so that the programme that is offered when they are in college is all about the transition out of college into employment or into some service that meets their needs.

Maggie Chapman: Is the transition for somebody out of college the same for employment or wherever they are going on to?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: The transition into college is critical, but I would say that the transition out of college is even more critical—I know that that is not good English. We want a very smooth process. I had experience of that when working in a college, where we were working with the schools, the teachers and the transition officer who was employed by the social work department and we aligned our curriculum in the college to match the individual coming through and the transition out to something that was age appropriate and had an opportunity. People with learning disabilities have to have a transition that is age appropriate, but also has an opportunity. There needs to be an employment service as well as a social work service that picks up the young person's support needs or things such as tenancies. That is a multi-agency approach.

I know that we are talking about employment but there is so much more involved. It is not just about employment, because you could give somebody with a learning disability 15 hours employment a week, which is a great outcome, but they also need housing. We also need to consider the social aspects—and the spiritual ones, depending on the young person.

I have experienced that approach, but it is not Scotland wide.

Maggie Chapman: It is not common.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: When it is there, it works. I know that I am boring the panel, but my point is about every agency aligning itself to key Government policies and having the services in place.

Maggie Chapman: And having the resources to deliver those services?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I said "services", but we also need the resources.

Maggie Chapman: That all comes as a package.

You were speaking about that transition from school to college and aligning the curriculum, which might strike terror into some college lecturers. Could you say a little bit more about what you mean when you talk about aligning the curriculum? What would that mean for people who have to deliver that? Are you talking about redesigning entire programmes and that kind of thing?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: No. In my experience, the curriculum involves confidence building—making people believe that of course they can get a job at the end of it—and updating skills, including work skills, being employment ready, learning how to build a CV, and life skills. I used to teach cooking and I am not the world's best cook but life skills help to prepare people for what will come next. It might also include residential skills and learning how to form friendships.

That is a curriculum, and people with learning disabilities and people with autism are entitled to that. It does not necessarily have to be a PhD, but should be a curriculum that matches their needs. What we need to do with any type of curriculum is allow the young person to practise the skill regularly so that they can retain the skill. Work placement is a huge part of the curriculum, as is liaison with employers. We are not suggesting a curriculum for every single person, but we can have a broad-based curriculum that meets the needs of the young person.

Maggie Chapman: That is really helpful.

Dr Pearson: In our research we have one young person who is what we would call the success story of transitions. Everything seems to have gone right eventually, although I am sure that there are areas that are difficult. The young person has an excellent social worker and his parents are really involved. We interviewed them as part of the study, and they did a course run by In Control called "Partners in Policymaking", which seems to be a very niche course that allows parents to engage and take on the role of the advocate for their children. His schooling was a positive experience, ultimately, and he had a work placement that has now translated into a permanent job. The job is only over the weekend and his parents have said that they would like him to have more hours. He lives on his own in supported accommodation. Everything is in place. He is absolutely the exception in our research but he is the one we talk about.

There are other examples of good practice with smaller packages. For example, one young person was given a package of support from the Glasgow Association for Mental Health where they spent three or four hours a week practising using the buses and sorting out how to use the bus network in Glasgow. That person can now access transport and get to work. That relatively small package has had a huge impact.

There is the bigger-scale example, where everything fell into place, but there are also the small examples of really useful packages that can absolutely change things.

Maggie Chapman: In that second example, there is the issue of making sure that the support is there consistently, because, say the bus timetable changed or something, the young person might need to go through that process again, but it should not be a defeating moment.

Dr Pearson: Absolutely. However, the three or four hours a week were put in over a year, so that is a success story in that sense.

Maggie Chapman: Tracey Francis, what are your views on what "good" looks like?

Tracey Francis: I have written down a few things but, before I come on to that, I want to share an example in relation to what I was saying about resources obviously being under pressure. Parents and carers are a massive resource that we do not tap into as much as we should, and are not listened to as much as they should be.

I am thinking about an example of a parent who I know, whose son now has a full-time job. Before he started that job, the parent offered to go into his workplace and talk to the team that he would be working with about the condition that affects him, how it impacts on him, what they could do to help, what to look out for and how best to support him.

That was very well received. I think that session went extremely well. That was crucial to being able to smooth those first couple of months of that placement; it gave people confidence that not only did they know how to cope with this young man, but also that they had that connection with the father, so that if something that they were not sure about were to arise at work, they could come and ask the question. That took no resource from anyone else whatsoever and it was something that the parent was able to do. I appreciate that not every parent is in that situation but that is something that we could do.

What does a good transition look like? I have written down the features with employability in mind. The first point is to have informed choice; it is important that the young person and the parents and carers are able to make an informed choice, rather than someone saying: "This is a job, it is there, it has money, go for it". That would not be sustainable. Who among us would want to do that? We want to do a job that we enjoy doing. The information needs to be there.

There may be an element of skills development in relation to the informed choice. The young person may require some time to develop the skills that they need in order to be able to move into a role. That will be different for everybody and could involve academic qualifications, social skills, or a whole range of things. Building in that element of skills development will mean that when the young person gets there then they can sustain that role much more readily.

There is also the element of time and taking things at the young person's pace. That is one of the things that is so difficult in schools, because people are under such pressure to do things within a timeframe that might not work for them for a whole host of reasons. We could have a little bit more flexibility around that and let the young person take the time that they need until they feel confident and able to go it alone—whatever that looks like for them.

Then we need to make the transition sustainable. We have talked about transport and the things that need to be in place for that job to work out. Once that has gone smoothly, the person is in a place that they have chosen or had some degree of choice around and they are feeling comfortable that they have the skills to do the role, we need to think about what comes next. We tend to look at getting a job as being the end of the road, but it ought to be just the start of a journey. For the rest of us, we expect to progress in our work life. We do not expect that to come to an end once we have the wage packet. We should build that into it as well because it is a really important part of it.

Maggie Chapman: That is really helpful. Thank you. I will leave it there.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Good morning, panel. Thanks for all your answers so far. Tracey, you said that employers are sometimes afraid to take on young people—there are issues with how they feel, they do not want to do a bad job and they do not want to get it wrong. What support do you think we could put in place to help with that?

10:15

Tracey Francis: The example that I just gave of the father going in to talk to the team is a really good one. It would be really helpful for employers to listen to people who know the young person well and who know their skills. Connecting employers with other employers who also want to make progress in this area is helpful. The Scottish Union of Supported Employment and other agencies bring employers together and help them to share good practice and realise that they are not alone with this. Anne-Marie Sturrock might want to come in to say what else might help.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I used to be a job finder in a previous life, working with employers. What worked well was the employer having a point of contact within the service supporting the young person, so that if anything needed to be resolved, they knew who to pick up the phone to talk to. That could be something minor. For instance, I supported a young gentleman with Down syndrome working in a cutlery factory, whose job role was changing. The employer did not want to dismiss him, but retraining was needed. Having somebody to come in and work with the employer and the young gentleman to make sure that he was retrained and kept a job was helpful. Having a point of contact in the service is critical as it allows problems to be ironed out as they arise. Such problems could be minor or major, but having that point of contact is crucial.

Getting employers engaged is also critical. I have written in my notes that modern recruitment practices have pushed people with learning disabilities further from the labour market because most recruitment is now done online. There is an assumption that people with learning disabilities have the digital capability to apply online.

The Scottish Union of Supported Employment has a great toolkit for employers to ensure that digital recruitment practices are fair and equitable. However, what works really well with employers is having an initial dialogue about how employing somebody with a learning disability or somebody who has autism would not have a negative impact on their output but, rather, would have a positive impact on their employees and their output. That dialogue would involve a job finder going in, speaking to the employer and the employees and, in some cases, the parent going in beforehand and being reassured that there is support for the young person in the workplace.

The letter to Mr Neil Gray—I do not know if he is here today—said that

> “employers find it easier to make adaptations to support someone with a physical disability, but it can be more complicated for someone with learning disabilities”,

and I think that having a key contact person either in the service, or a parent to contact, is key to the success of the person with the learning disability going into employment.

Evelyn Tweed: Thanks, Anne-Marie. Generally, what more can employers do to make recruitment processes and workplaces more inclusive? What more should employers be doing?

Dr Pearson: Our young people have expressed concerns about what happens when they go for jobs. There are issues for them with the format. Perhaps it would be helpful to get questions in advance so that they can prepare for the interview. Equally, if they are not successful, it would be helpful to get feedback afterwards so that they can understand why.

Policy might have been slightly unhelpful in this area. The disability confident scheme does not get a particularly good press. One of the issues that evidence has shown a year on is that, even with the highest level of accreditation, there is no requirement for employers to have made any changes or employed a disabled person. It might not end up being very helpful to a disabled person that an employer has disability confident accreditation if their practice has not changed in any positive or meaningful way.

The provision that every person who has a disability and who meets the minimum requirements for a role should be interviewed is also not always helpful if people are interviewed but are realistically never going to get the job. We have heard frustration about that from the young people whom we have spoken to. They psych themselves up to apply for the job and go through the process but then there is another brick wall because they know that the employer is not really interested in employing them. That is a particular issue when we are talking about autism and neurodiversity.

Tracey Francis: It starts with the way that jobs are described and advertised. A lot of employers will overcomplicate a job when they are advertising it. They might use a lot of language that does not necessarily relate to the role that they are trying to fill. I can see why they do that—they want to broaden the description and bring in the best candidates for the job. However, a young disabled person looking at that will be thinking, “I have never led a team. I have never excelled in—whatever it happens to be—and therefore I cannot apply for this job”. They could be eligible and could have the skills that the employer needs, but do not see themselves reflected in the description. That can be quite off-putting.

I would ask employers—especially for entry-level jobs, which are relevant to the young people whom we are talking about—to be very specific about what they are looking for and about what they can provide. Can they provide help to develop skills, for example? A young person may look at all the skills listed and think that they do not have them, so there is no point in going for the job, when, in fact, the employer might not need all those skills and might need to provide a job description that is a little bit more fine-tuned.

That brings me to a point about the language that we use. We have talked a lot about aspirations and how young people may be told, “This is not for you” or grow up thinking that something is not for them. So many of the discussions around getting support are in deficit-led language and are about what people cannot do, focusing on challenges and so on. When young people are applying for jobs, they have to sell themselves to some extent, but they do not have the experience of doing that because everyone has been telling them for so long about what they cannot do, and yet now they are having to ask themselves, “Well, what can I do?” That is a shift. It is almost as if we are creating a barrier by using that kind of language and putting young people in that situation, which does not serve them well when it comes to trying to get into the workplace.

There is something about job descriptions and something about having a bit of flexibility in how you interview people. Some people will want to send in a video for an interview. Some people will be happy filling in forms or answering structured questions. Again, it is about listening to what people say about what they need. If someone is asking for an adjustment, rather than saying, “We can’t do that because—”, why not just look at it and say, “Okay, is there a way we can make this work for you?” Very often—although not always—if you have that mentality, there is something that you can do.

There are things that employers could do to make the process a little more straightforward and a little bit easier, particularly for young people who do not have the experience to think, “I can fake it till I make it; I can do this”. Young people need to know that it is something that they can do before they go into it.

Evelyn Tweed: I have one final question, which I hope will be a quick one. From everything that I have heard from the young people who have come to speak to us and from what I have heard around the table today, school is the start of a good journey. We have spoken about what happens at school. Some young people said that they had amazing experiences; others had very bad experiences. Is school where we need to think about getting it right before the rest of their life journey starts?

Dr Pearson: Yes, 100 per cent. The conversations and the support must start early.

Evelyn Tweed: The other thing that I have picked up is about getting parents involved and thinking about aspirations. We have heard from young people that they have felt that they should not really even be thinking about having a life journey into work. School is the key to a whole good journey.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Working in partnership with agencies that can support a young person to transition is also important. I would not want to put all the responsibility on schools.

Evelyn Tweed: No, no—but that is where it should start.

Dr Pearson: Peer support is critical as well. The Glasgow Disability Alliance—disabled people's organisations working in partnership—has done some great work. If such partnerships could be improved and include schools and other communities working together, that would be very positive. Disabled people, like everyone else, need to see themselves in roles and having different life experiences, so peer support is critical.

Tracey Francis: I was lucky enough to spend a month in Finland in the autumn looking at how transitions are managed there. I came across a programme in schools called the TUVA programme—I cannot possibly tell you what that is in Finnish; it would not work. The programme is for young people towards the end of school, when they have finished the compulsory component of school, from the age of 16, and is particularly for young people who have additional support needs and need a little bit of time out to think about what they are going to do next. They can apply for the programme and get up to 38 weeks during which there is no pressure on them to go for qualifications or anything else; it is entirely focused on helping them to identify what needs they still have to fill. For some young people, it might be an academic thing such as literacy and numeracy; for others, it might be skills development.

The programme gives them space and time to work with guidance coaches to bring themselves to the point of knowing what they want to do next and how to get there. For some young people, that might be around getting work experience, trying things out and seeing how that works. It impressed me that the programme just allowed young people at that critical time in their lives to get breathing space and think about who they wanted to be, because they may not have had the chance to do that before.

I know that that is something that does not exist in our system at the moment, but there is something about having an approach that is centred on the young person, gives them that time and is individual to them. Having the chance to try things out is important, but a lot of young people are not getting opportunities for work experience or work placements before they are being asked to make decisions about what jobs they might apply for. The Independent Living Fund Scotland can be used to help people try things out. Volunteering and internships, for example, help people to work out whether something is for them.

It is very difficult for young autistic people to picture themselves doing something if they have not seen it and been there. Getting a chance to do so, even if for just a couple of days, can make a big difference and help people think what they might do.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Good morning. I will follow up on my colleague's questioning. A theme that I have pursued throughout the inquiry is that of employers being informed about the support that is available. We have talked about how to get young people into employment, but I want to look at the issue from the other side. How do we ensure that our employers are well informed about the support that is there to enable them to accept disabled workers into the workforce? I will come to Tracey Francis first.

Tracey Francis: It comes down to communication. We know that there are pockets of good practice and that the information is out there, but it takes a long time to track it down. Could we put some of that information into a central hub? I do not want give Skills Development Scotland another task, but an agency such as SDS might be a good one to do that, or perhaps SUSE could do it. If we could bring that information together in one place so that people could access it, would know where to go and would not have to search in lots of different places, that would be helpful.

Brian Whittle: We have heard that there is an underlying willingness and desire on the part of employers to have a diverse workforce, but there is also fear and a lack of knowledge. I understand what you are saying. The messaging has to be consistent across the country.

Tracey Francis: Yes, it has to be consistent. There is a link to a piece of work that ARC and other agencies are developing on lived experience training, which involves bringing people who might be autistic or have other conditions into the workplace and have them lead or be heavily involved in training for the workforce. Other organisations are doing similar work, and we are starting to develop that in ARC. That is one way of breaking down the barriers.

10:30

Often, if a person does not know someone with a disability and there is no one with a disability in their family, they can think, “I’m not quite sure how to talk to them. What can I do? What can I not do?” However, once they have met someone with a disability and got to know them as a person, they forget the condition and the barrier melts away. The more we can bring people together through things such as lived experience training, the more we will build up people’s confidence.

Brian Whittle: Anne-Marie, you used the words “early intervention”, which are my favourite two words to use in Parliament—I can hear everybody groaning.

I want to understand whether we have a sufficient understanding of the journey of those young people who are experiencing the transition into adulthood with the added factor of disability. Do we understand that well enough? You also talked about the long-term outcomes from early intervention. We need more resource, but has any work been done on what the impact would be as regards the requirement for resources further down the line if we were to focus resources on early intervention?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Early intervention is one thing, but there is also the issue of the number of people with learning disabilities in the country who are adults who do not have a place or a space and who do not have employment. They might not have a social worker because they transitioned out of wherever they were going. I apologise, because I am repeating myself, but, when it comes to early intervention, I think that it is a case of ensuring that the services are in alignment. I am talking about the services in health, social work, secondary education, colleges and employment, which might be provided by ARC, SDS or the DWP. If we get all that right, the support will be there throughout the young person’s life.

Early intervention is key in ensuring that someone does not get lost in the system, which could happen if someone transitions into college and then transitions out, but there is nothing there. Their social worker might have left and they might have to go on a waiting list for a few months before we can get that on track. Early intervention is really important.

I have worked in a college where social work and health were in alignment and there was a good multidisciplinary approach, but the situation is not consistent across Scotland. I am always cautious because, from my experience of working with people with learning disabilities and people with autism, I know that, if you come up with a model and you expect people to fit into that model, it might not work. However, I think that if we had a framework to work within, rather than things being set in tablets of stone, that would work well.

Brian Whittle: I completely understand your point that early intervention is not an option for those who are later in their journey. I recognise the need to support those people, but if we get early intervention right, in time, there will be fewer people who are in that position. That is what I am getting at with my question about whether we need to engage in early intervention and to resource early intervention more than we currently do.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Yes. That comes back to what your colleague Mr Beattie said. Let us say that 48 per cent of pupils in secondary school have additional support needs and we start a process of early intervention. We need to track and monitor that thereafter. It is not simply a case of engaging in early intervention; we need to make sure that the outcomes are positive for the individuals concerned. A positive outcome—dare I say it?—might not always involve paid employment; it could involve therapeutic employment or volunteering. We are talking about a package of services for the young person throughout their life. In my experience, early intervention is the key to success for the family and—most important—the young person.

Brian Whittle: You have led me nicely on to the question that I intended to ask Charlotte Pearson about data and data gaps. Do we have enough data to follow the pathway of the young people in question and how they cope on the journey to positive destinations? Do we have enough data and information to be sufficiently informed with regard to where we need to deploy the resource?

Dr Pearson: No, I do not think that we do. Tracey Francis is probably the person to speak to about the Compass innovation and the data that is collected through that. I am sorry to pass that over.

Tracey Francis: Yes, I can answer that.

I do not think that we have enough data and information in that area, but we have developed a resource around this particular group of young people. It is a digital tool called Compass, which was launched a year ago. It is intended to collect feedback from professionals, young people and parents and carers right the way through the young person’s journey, up to 25. It looks at things such as support but also at how the journey towards a positive outcome is going. It might be going quite successfully at one point, but, six months or a year later, it might no longer be happening. Perhaps something has dried up because the job or college place has not worked out.

Up until now, we have had nothing beyond the ability to say where someone has moved on to when they have finished school. That is the only bit of data that has been routinely collected. We are hoping that people will start to use Compass over time, which will enable us to track the situation and to see how things are going. That way, we will be able to see where the difficulties are and where more support is needed, and we will be able to evaluate the changes that come about as a result of making some of those adjustments.

It is early days for Compass. It has been out there for only a year. So far, we have 1,000 users. We are starting to collect robust data on that. Over the next two, three or four years, we hope that we will start to build up a body of evidence that will answer the questions about what is happening, how it is happening and whether it makes a difference when we make a change. We are not there yet, but we are on the way.

Dr Pearson: From the employers' perspective, that raises the question whether there could be a system of mandatory reporting for larger employers on the numbers of disabled employees that they have in the workforce and whether we can change the culture so that we can get information about the disabled workforce from employers.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Good morning. We have spoken a lot about the lack of co-ordination between services, and you have helpfully given us some pointers on how that situation can be improved. We have touched on the fact that the Scottish Government is developing its first national transitions to adulthood strategy, which is focused on five priority areas. Are the five priority areas the correct priority areas to be focused on? Those areas are empowerment for the young person; clear and coherent information; co-ordination of individual support; consistency of practice and support; and data to measure progress. Are those the right priorities for the strategy, or is there anything that you would want to change?

Tracey Francis: I think that they are good priorities. You could have a list of 10 or 20, but that would be impractical. For a strategy, you need to narrow it down.

We have been part of the group that has been discussing the issue and engaging with the Government team on it. I am conducting consultations with parents on the five priorities and whether they think that they are the right priorities and which are the most important. As part of that consultation, I ask whether they think that anything is missing. So far, nobody has said that anything is missing. I ask them which three of the five priorities they think would make the biggest practical difference in their lives. People are having no problem with that question and see themselves reflected in that. I think that it is a pretty good framework.

Dr Pearson: I cannot argue with the five principles. I think that having such a framework for a transitions policy is useful. Scotland is unusual in taking such an approach—there is not a unified transitions policy in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. I think that it is definitely a move in the right direction, and I welcome that approach.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I sit on that group as well. I think that it is a positive group, and I like the fact that the individual voice is paramount.

Gordon MacDonald: Charlotte, you mentioned the unusual way in which Scotland is approaching the issue. Tracey Francis mentioned Finland. Is there anywhere that we can learn lessons from that is doing such transitions work better than we are?

Dr Pearson: I do not see a good practice model. I see flags of concern. Although Australia put quite a lot of money into disability employment for disabled people, its outcomes are no better. When you look at the research and dig a bit deeper, you find that that is linked to the lack of early intervention and to not doing the legwork earlier on. Australia has had a policy that has had the resource, but it has not had the outcomes. That is where I would raise concerns in looking at this area. There is not a country that I would say is doing really well.

Tracey Francis: When I went to Finland, I thought that there would be initiatives that I would be able to identify. There were a few examples, such as the TUVA programme, which I have mentioned. I was struck by how much interest there was in Finland in the "Principles of Good Transitions" that ARC produced, which I mentioned earlier. It is the benchmark for good practice in Scotland. There was also interest in the principles into practice programme and what we had learned from that. A number of people said, "We don't have anything like this. Why don't we? We should be developing this." I am hoping to work with some of the people whom I connected with to share a little bit more about what we have.

I think that we are doing really well at the policy level, but there is always an implementation gap. We would never say that there is nothing that we can learn—of course, we can always improve—

but we have the frameworks and the structures. They are there. We just need to think a little bit more about how we can make it happen.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning, panel. I want to ask about consistency of approach across Scotland. Are we seeing a postcode lottery, or is there some degree of consistency? If there is no consistency, what more could the Scottish Government do to try to promote best practice?

I see that you are smiling, Charlotte, so I will start with you.

Dr Pearson: I think that there is a postcode lottery; indeed, it comes up continually. It comes back to Scotland's diverse geography and the different issues with services and supports in different areas.

This is where the principles approach can be usefully brought in, as there will be a marker for what should underpin transitions policy. Local authorities are—or should be—in a good position to reflect the needs of local communities, but there is certainly disparity across the country.

Tracey Francis: There are good programmes, as we know. However, they tend to be short term; funding can be pulled quite quickly, and they are not given time to embed. When you start something like this, there tends to be no consideration of how you can scale it up or make it universal, if it happens to be successful.

It is a challenge for organisations not to know whether they will be funded beyond, say, two years, because two years is not long enough to make a difference to anything. As a result, there is a little bit of vulnerability there. It is also quite difficult to have consistency of access across areas such as the Borders or Highlands, where things are very geographically diverse.

In short, some thought needs to be given to how we identify areas of good practice and scale those things up and how we overcome some of the geographical barriers that might be in place and which stop people accessing some of the services from which they might otherwise benefit. Those, for me, are the key factors.

Murdo Fraser: Before I bring in Anne-Marie Sturrock, Tracey, can you say a bit more about the principles into practice trials, which I understand are being implemented across 10 local authorities? What has been the experience so far?

10:45

Tracey Francis: Yes, sure. We published the seven principles of good transitions quite some time ago, but what we were hearing was, "This is all very well, but how do we make them happen in practice?"

The trials took place from 2020 to 2022 and involved 10 local authority areas. You can tell from the dates that Covid had a bit of an impact; we were not able to do the trials in quite the way that we had originally planned, but I think that it was testament to the authorities' enthusiasm for and commitment to it that they stayed involved for the whole two years. Nobody said, "I'm sorry—we cannot manage this at the moment."

We asked the local authority areas to identify something, particularly on transitions, to focus on making some changes to that and then to evaluate the difference that those changes made. We gave them support and help as well as the evaluation questions, and we brought them together in a learning exchange network, which is still going on. All the reports from the trials are online—I can share the link with the committee later, if members are interested—and we also put out a report of findings.

Every local authority area came up with something slightly different, because they were working with a different cohort of people. However, when all that work was put together, it basically produced something that we can guarantee works—that is, a framework structured around the seven principles of good transitions. It is an improvement framework that you can use to monitor your progress and look at the next stages and how else you want to progress. It is very practical and backed up by evidence from real situations, and we are now rolling it out across other local authority areas. The key to being involved is the local authority wanting to make a difference in the area and being prepared to make some time and resource available to sustain things and support the staff who are doing this work. If they are prepared to do that, we will work with them.

Off the top of my head, I think that we are now up to 13 local authorities, with three more saying, "Yes, we like the look of this and would like to be part of it." We are hoping that, over time, the approach will transform some of their practice.

Murdo Fraser: Okay—that was interesting. Did any local authority stand out as an exemplar?

Tracey Francis: That is a very unfair question. Lots of them stood out in different ways. One that I would signal—and I referred to it earlier—is the local authority that trialled the role of transition co-ordinator across children and adult services. In that case, I will name a name: it was Falkirk Council. I know that several other local authorities are speaking to that council to see how that approach can translate into their practice.

Murdo Fraser: Thank you—that was very helpful. Anne-Marie, do you want to add anything?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I would like to go back to Gordon MacDonald's question, if you do not mind. He did not ask me to respond, and I had a good answer ready. [*Laughter.*] I was awfully hurt, but I am okay now.

My answer to that question is Ireland. That is not just because I have an Irish accent and I am sitting here, having come from Ireland originally, but it has very good examples of supported employment opportunities for people with learning disabilities and autism, and they cover not just employment but tenancies, an individual's social and—dare I say it?—spiritual needs and the transitionss into adulthood and into retirement. In fact, they cover the whole transition process all the way from early intervention, as has been mentioned, and the service ensures that an individual's life journey is supported the whole way through.

I worked in that area, and I have not seen anything like it in Scotland. It was quite transformational. I started my career in a sheltered workshop where we said, "We are going to change this service to make it person-centred, and we are going to look at support for employment and so on." Ireland, therefore, has quite a good transition process, covering everything from school to social needs, employment and tenancies.

Gordon MacDonald: It might be helpful if you could send the committee some more information on that.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Okay—I will do that.

Gordon MacDonald: I apologise for missing you out.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I am over it. [*Laughter.*] I do not hold grudges.

Gordon MacDonald: I can hear that you are over it.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I was crying silently.

The Convener: I call Kevin Stewart.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Good morning. I will try not to miss anyone out.

We have heard a lot from young folk, and not just those from The Usual Place, whom we had in the other week. Just last night, I had a conversation with someone about what their autistic daughter wants and needs.

The young folk themselves had very strong opinions about certain things—they were all very articulate. Anne-Marie Sturrock, I am afraid to say that I am going to be harsh, as the young folk from The Usual Place thought that college was a tick-box exercise and that nobody listened to them. They had strong views about schooling, too, and what did and did not work, and they had some views about parents impeding them from reaching their full potential and aspiring to what they wanted to do. My question, basically, is this: do we listen to the voices of lived experience enough in the shaping of policy and services?

If we could start with Tracey Francis, that would be grand.

Tracey Francis: I think that things are getting better. It now feels more routine to actively seek the voice of lived experience, and that is a huge step forward. I have just written down the phrase "People, not process". Sometimes, we get very hung up on the process—and understandably so—but we need to remember that it is people who are at the centre of this and people's lives that we are talking about.

That brings me back to what we were saying about the importance of transition. It sets the trajectory for the rest of someone's adult life; it is all about their family situation, whether or not they are in poverty and so on. These things have very individual real-world impacts, and it is the voice of lived experience that reminds us of that. If you have somebody in the room, you are talking not about case load, but about that person. That is really important; I think that we do it more, but we could do it even more than we do.

Dr Pearson: As Tracey Francis has said, things have improved in this respect. We are having different conversations about lived experience from those that we would have had 10 years ago.

With the responsibility that I have in academia, I feel very much that this is not our research, as such—it is very much led by the young people. We try to bring in different voices and use creative methodologies to allow young people to express their viewpoints on transitions in different ways. There is a concern, though, that you go and hear people's stories and talk about these things in different settings—and then nothing happens. That is the real risk. In recent years, there has been a lot of talk about co-production of policy, and there are really good examples of that, but again you have to implement it in a meaningful way. That is the challenge for policy makers and researchers alike.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: It is very disappointing when you hear that somebody has had a bad experience in college, because colleges do their best to try to support a young person. We try to invite young people to highlight their additional needs at the application stage, so that we can bring them for a chat. After all, early intervention—I am sorry; I keep looking at Brian Whittle when I say that phrase—is so key for their success. If we can get all the information, we can put support in place.

It all comes back to the transition process. We are doing things; the whole induction into college or university is very scary, so we are implementing quiet inductions over the summer. The student voice is so key to shaping not only the curriculum but the support around it, and we are constantly looking at ways of adapting and changing things to ensure that we get the voice of people with learning disabilities and, in particular, people with autism.

I will take what you said on the chin, Mr Stewart. It would be so good if people could give us that feedback, so that we can learn from it; after all, you want to make college or university a positive experience and to ensure that the transition in, the transition out and the learning in between are really good, that we have met their pastoral needs and that we have been able to ask, “What was the support that you needed?” It is disappointing to hear what you say, but we do strive to improve things on an on-going basis.

Kevin Stewart: The young folk had positive things to say about certain aspects of their journey. For example, Project Search has had a major tick from almost everyone I have heard from, not only during the course of this inquiry but from my own experiences in Aberdeen. Young folk definitely felt listened to in some aspects of their journey. What do we need to do to change cultures, given that a lot of this involves other people, too? How can we change the culture to ensure that young folk with autism and learning disabilities are listened to more and are taken seriously and that the points that they make are followed up on?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: There is so much we need to do. From a college perspective, we need to encourage more people who have autism and learning disabilities to be student reps and let the voice of students be heard.

Project Search is a good example of a multi-agency approach that addresses the employment needs of people with autism and learning disabilities. The voice of individuals with learning disabilities is really important, but as Tracey Francis has said, the language has to be decluttered in a way that enables people to make an informed decision. In a previous life, I was an advocate for people with learning disabilities; I do not mean to be condescending here, but I know that, for their voices to be heard, it is important that the written and verbal language that we use is almost simplified to enable them to make informed decisions about their future.

Kevin Stewart: Let me focus on the specifics that you talked about earlier. You said that when you were working in the college sector a multidisciplinary team was set up, with a transitions officer and all of the rest of it. That probably was not the norm at that time, but might be becoming more so now. Did that set-up and the people who were involved change the culture overall in other parts of the organisation?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: I would have to say yes, because at the transition meeting everybody listens to the young person’s voice and hears their choices and preferences.

Sometimes it is about managing expectations: you mentioned managing the expectations of parents and the young person. It can sometimes be difficult to navigate the parents’ wishes and the young person’s wishes, but we must all the time remind ourselves that it is the young person who is transitioning. Where the culture changed was in respect of preferences regarding next steps, but we are restricted when services are not available as the young person transitions.

11:00

Kevin Stewart: Does anybody else want to pick up on the cultural aspect?

Tracey Francis: The only thing that I would add is that people need positive role models—people who are visible and can share their experiences. That is one of the biggest things, because someone who is not sure about aspirations and so on can see someone who looks like them and say, “Okay. Yes—they’re doing that. If they can do it, so can I.” That is huge.

Kevin Stewart: Grand. Thank you.

From my perspective, the folks whom we have talked to have been very realistic and some of them have been pretty ambitious, which is not a bad thing. On the role-model aspect, one of the young folk whom we talked to wants to be an actor, but I think that probably a lot of folk have tried to stymie that. Positive role models of learning disabled folks, including an Irish actor who was recently nominated for an Oscar—or, at least, the film that he was in was nominated—have made a difference. You are saying that positive role models need to be brought to the fore.

Tracey Francis: Definitely. That is a really interesting example, because a young man who works with me—we do training together—had wanted to be an actor, but at the time when he said that he wanted to be an actor it was very difficult for anyone outside the family to understand what he was saying. I know that the family will not mind my sharing this. His father was the person who said, “No. Come on. That’s not going to work", so he tried other things, which did not work out.

In the end, with a lot of the right support around him, the young person completed a mainstream drama course, which he passed. He has not gone on to become an actor, but he is now working with me doing training, so he is speaking to groups and is using all those skills. He loves the work that he is doing and is getting paid for doing it.

I think that his father would not mind my saying that they should have listened to what he wanted to do in the first place and asked how they could make that work, rather than saying that it would not work and that he should try something else instead. He is a very good role model: he is self-employed, earning and doing very well.

Kevin Stewart: On that positive note, I am finished. Thank you.

The Convener: I will ask one final question. Tracey Francis mentioned that the principles into practice trials happened during the pandemic. Sometimes we forget that we have had a pandemic, but we know that it had a big impact on some young people's education, which I imagine includes people with additional support needs. Does anyone want to comment on what the impact was for that cohort of young people and what we are doing to address the lingering tail of Covid for those young people?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Things were significantly difficult for people with learning disabilities during the pandemic. At that time—I am speaking only about my experience—I managed a faculty in which we had a significant number of people with learning disabilities on the college's courses. From speaking to parents, I know that it was so difficult because quite a lot of students on other courses could use the digital platforms online to learn their courses. For people with learning disabilities, that was not as easy as it was for their peers.

When we were targeting students to come back on campus, which you will remember was in August 2020, the priority group for the college area that I managed was people with learning disabilities because they were quite isolated. Some people had tenancies to consider. There was no way for some to do their courses. Some had digital capability, but some did not. We had to work a lot with parents and we had to work on people's transport.

I have never worked as hard as I did on that August 2020 reopening of our campus to make it right and safe, to implement new ways of teaching and to ensure that people were getting good teaching and having a good transition. We had previously had three individuals sharing taxis, which moved to one person per taxi. The change was quite profound. I had a lot of parents calling on the phone saying, for example, "Please assist—my son is so lonely". The college is not only about learning: it is also about people's peers and friendships and the social aspect.

If my memory serves me right, we went into a second phase of the pandemic over Christmas 2020 and January 2021, so we had to get materials out to students to ensure that during that second phase they had enough to do that met the curriculum needs. Quite a lot of the curriculum that we ran was practical; there were associated work placements and there were cooking and arts and crafts work to do. It was quite difficult.

The Convener: Do those young people need additional support? That is a group who were, for those two years, not able even to access what we did offer. Has that been provided to them? Do you think that that situation is recognised?

Anne-Marie Sturrock: Yes—we elongated their time in college. It was an extremely difficult time for people with learning disabilities and people with autism. In the college that I worked in, engineering students and construction students had to get back on campus, and it was agreed unilaterally that our students with learning disabilities also had to get back on campus and continue their learning. Our support staff and our lecturing staff were amazing: it was a lot of work for them. This is going back to the time when there was 2m social distancing: we went around with a 2m stick making sure of that all the time. There was a lot of work for the staff, the management and the executive of the college. That was the case not only in the college that I worked in, but in a lot of colleges.

The Convener: Before I see whether Charlotte Pearson and Tracey Francis want to add anything, do you want to come in with a supplementary question, Brian?

Brian Whittle: It is not a supplementary to your question, but a different question, so you might want to finish.

The Convener: Yes. Would Tracey Francis or Charlotte Pearson like to comment on the impact of the pandemic and what that has meant for the transitions of the group of young people who were caught in that situation?

Dr Pearson: From speaking to the young people and their parents, I think that the impact was absolutely profound, particularly in respect of social care. Services that stopped during lockdown have not been fully reinstated. There are real gaps in social care and in mental health provision. The Independent Living Fund Scotland transition fund is, as you know, quite an innovative policy that gives sums of money to young disabled people. "Try something new", is the strapline. It has seen much greater demand in relation to mental healthrelated services. I am very aware that there have been profound mental health impacts from the pandemic.

Tracey Francis: We are still very much experiencing the fallout from the pandemic for all young people, but particularly for disabled young people. The convener is right: we tend to forget so quickly. It is almost as if we have gone back to normal.

I will add one thing that I have heard from some young disabled people. They said that during the pandemic everything went online—they could work online and get their learning online, so they ask why they cannot do that now. The technology exists and we have shown that it can be done, so why can we not make such adjustments for them? It happened when it was important for everybody else. Why can it not happen now?”

The Convener: If your question is a brief supplementary, Mr Whittle, I will let you in. The witnesses have been here longer than they anticipated.

Brian Whittle: This has been almost a summing-up of the journey that we need to go on. I think from the evidence that we have taken that we understand an awful lot more about the journey of young people. Anne-Marie Sturrock talked about an individual approach being needed, which is generally true for any person, let alone somebody with special support needs.

We have heard that half the people in schools have special support needs. I speak as the father of a daughter who is a school’s head of guidance. Schools are under extraordinary pressure already and we are coming up with extra resources and support that will be needed. In their entirety, the changes that we need to make look massive, but we need to start somewhere. What would you ask for, in the first instance, to start us on the process of closing the gap? That is an easy question.

Dr Pearson: We need early intervention. Start early—start having the conversations and discussions about inclusion and transitions.

Anne-Marie Sturrock: We need to think about the transition of services between schools and colleges and universities.

Tracey Francis: I add that we should also focus on information—on making it accessible and easy to find.

The Convener: Thank you very much for your evidence this morning. It is much appreciated and will help us with the inquiry.

11:10

Meeting continued in private until 11:45.

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