



Reports of Government and Parliamentary Activity on
Education, Children's Services and Training from the
Government and Parliamentary Institutions
of the United Kingdom

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The monthly edition of *Education Parliamentary Monitor* reports on a range of government and parliamentary activity in education, children's services and training from throughout the United Kingdom and from some European and other international institutions. Part one includes a list of policy and governmental announcements and events that occurred during the month. Part two contains reports of all relevant debates from the House of Commons, the House of Lords, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly, together with reviews of select committee reports. Much of this information is taken from the weekly edition of *Education Parliamentary Monitor*, which reports on all activity concerning education, children's services and training from all the parliamentary institutions of the UK.

The sections of part one are indexed together, while the debates and select committee reports of section two are indexed separately. Cumulative indexes for part one and for part two are on our website at www.educationpublishing.com. Click on the 'Parliament' section.

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The pagination of the monthly edition is cumulative to the volume.

Vol.12 No.1	January 2007	Pages 1 to 66
Vol.12 No.2	February 2007	Pages 67 to 139
Vol.12 No.3	March 2007	Pages 140 to 228
Vol.12 No.4	April 2007	Pages 229 to 268
Vol.12 No.5	May 2007	Pages 269 to 334
Vol.12 No.6	June 2007	Pages 335 to 426
Vol.12 No.7	July 2007	Pages 427 to 502
Vol.12 No.8	August 2007	Pages 503 to 524
Vol.12 No.9	September 2007	Pages 525 to 584
Vol.12 No.10	October 2007	Pages 585 to 686
Vol.12 No.11	November 2007	Pages 687 to 806
Vol.12 No.12	December 2007	Pages 807 to 878

Contents

Part One – Reference

A synopsis of parliamentary and Government activity in December	811
Events in December, covering policy announcements and events during the month	813
Publications	819
Research journals	820
Answers to written parliamentary questions where data is given in statistical form by LEA etc	821
Early day motions tabled in the House of Commons	821
Written statements from Ministers in H M Government published in <i>Hansard</i>	823
Statutory instruments	823
Select Committees and their equivalents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland	825
International	827

Part Two – Debates and Reports

The House of Commons

Date	Report	Type	Page
4	Sale of Student Loans Bill	Legislation, Committee Stage	828
5	Public Service TV for Children	Westminster Hall Debate	831
5	Custody of and Access to Children	Westminster Hall Debate	832
5	Education Questions	Oral Questions, Prime Minister	832
11	Children Plan	Ministerial Statement	833
11	School Funding in Shropshire	Adjournment Debate	835
12	Youth Volunteering	Oral Questions, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster	836
12	Education Questions	Oral Questions, Prime Minister	836
13	Academy Sponsorship	Oral Questions, Church Commissioner	837
13	UK-Pakistan Protocol on Children	Adjournment Debate	837
17	Children, Schools and Families Questions	Oral Questions, DCSF	838
17	Select Committee Membership	Motion	841
18	Christmas Adjournment	Adjournment Debate	841

The House of Lords

Date	Report	Type	Page
3	Adult Learners	Short Debate	842
4	Higher Education: Adults	Oral Question	844
6	Schools	Short Debate	844
11	Children's Plan	Ministerial Statement	847

Scottish Parliament Debates

Date	Report	Type	Page
5	Class Sizes	Ministerial Statement	848
5	Fostering and Kinship Care	Executive Debate	849
6	School and University Funding	Oral Questions, General	851
6	Funding	Oral Questions, First Minister	852
6	Scouting	Members' Business Debate	852
12	Woodland and Green Spaces	Executive Debate	853
13	Abolition of sportscotland	Debate	854
13	Eco-schools; Deaf Children	Oral Questions, General	855
13	Support for Disabled Children	Oral Questions, First Minister	856
13	Anti-social Behaviour	Oral Questions, Justice and Law	856
13	Local Government Finance	Ministerial Statement	856
20	Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill	Legislation, Stage 1 Debate	857
20	Alcohol Consumption	Oral Questions, General	859
20	Class Size Reductions	Oral Questions, Finance	860
20	Support for ProjectScotland	Members' Business Debate	860

Welsh Assembly Debates

Date	Report	Type	Page
4	Education Questions	Oral Questions, First Minister	862
4	Child Poverty	Ministerial Statement	863
5	Education Funding	Opposition Debate	864
11	Bullying	Oral Questions, First Minister	865
11	Child Advocacy Services	Ministerial Statement	865
12	Children's Commissioner	Ministerial Statement	866
12	Closure of Small Schools	Opposition Debate	867

Northern Ireland Assembly Debates

Date	Report	Type	Page
4	Ending Selection	Ministerial Statement	868
10	Student Fees	Delegated Legislation, Prayer of Annulment	870
11	North/South Ministerial Council	Ministerial Statement	872
11	Transfer Procedure	Private Members' Debate	874

Indexes

Index of section one – reference	876
Index of section two – debates	878

Synopsis of Parliamentary and Government Activity in December

The biggest event of the month was the announcement of the Government's Children Plan. This was Ed Balls' big idea, a ten year plan that starts even before the last plan, the *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners*, has finished, as Tory spokesman Baroness Morris of Bolton unkindly but accurately pointed out in the Lords.

On the legislative front, it was a quiet month at Westminster with only the uncontroversial Sale of Student Debt Bill receiving attention. That situation will change in January, when the Education and Skills Bill gets its Second Reading debate in the Commons and the Children and Young Persons Bill goes into committee in the Lords. While the Sale of Student Debt Bill may be uncontroversial at Westminster, the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill is the opposite in Edinburgh. The minority SNP administration came a cropper over the Bill in committee and had a rough ride during the Stage 1 debate in the Scottish Parliament.

Early years and primary schools

The Children Plan is nothing if not ambitious (*page 815*). The ministerial statement, followed by a brief debate, in the Commons gave Secretary of State Ed Balls an opportunity to unveil his Big Idea and his Shadow, Michael Gove, another chance to display his political skills (*page 833*). The exchanges that followed the ministerial statement being read out in the Lords may have been more restrained, but they were also better informed (*page 847*).

The Cambridge-based Primary Review published more reports stressing the need for play in early years and warned against simplistic assumptions about children's differences and needs (*page 816*).

Secondary schools

There was a debate in the Lords on schools policy introduced by Tory peer Baroness Perry of Southwark. Along with former Shadow Education Secretary Stephen Dorrell MP, she chaired the Conservative Party policy group that produced the report, *Raising the Bar, Closing the Gap*, setting out the party's proposals for improving the provision of education for children and young people. Most of this debate was on secondary education (*page 844*).

Some local authorities have long complained about under-funding of their schools and Shropshire is one of them. Local MP Owen Paterson secured an adjournment debate in the Commons in order to raise the related problems of prospective school closures and the position of Shropshire at almost the bottom of the local authority funding table for education (*page 835*).

After 20 years at the top, Sir Cyril Taylor was ousted from the chairmanship of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (*page 818*).

Special educational needs

In the Scottish Parliament oral questions to the First Minister led to a statement about the Scottish Executive's policy on providing support for disabled children (*page 856*).

Further education

The National Audit Office is the latest to sound a warning over 14-19 reform (*page 815*). It warned that there were wide variations in the local partnerships between schools, further education colleges and local authorities that are essential to the success of the policy.

Higher education

The Sale of Student Loans Bill completed its committee stage in the House of Commons in one sitting (*page 828*).

The Government announced in September that it was switching £100 million from higher education students who were studying for a second equivalent or lower qualification (ELQ) to those who were studying for a first degree. This has caused a growing wave of opposition, which was reflected in a debate in the House of Lords (*page 844*).

Adult and continuing education

Crossbench peer Lord Quirk introduced a short debate in the Lords by asking the Government whether it would increase support for adults to pursue part-time higher education (*page 842*). This provided another opportunity for critics of the Government's policy of withdrawing support from ELQs.

Children's services

Apart from the Children Plan already referred to above, there were two interesting debates in the Commons. A Labour MP used a Westminster Hall debate to raise a constituency matter that also illustrated national issues about custody of, and access to, children (*page 832*). A Liberal Democrat MP used an adjournment debate to do much the same thing about the UK-Pakistan protocol on children's affairs. His concern was the impact on children when mixed marriages break up (*page 837*).

In the Scottish Parliament the Executive government initiated a debate on fostering and kinship care (*page 849*).

In the Welsh Assembly there was a ministerial statement on the Welsh Assembly Government's policy on child poverty (*page 863*).

General policy and politics

The main policy announcement in December was the Children Plan, reported above.

The Government announced that it was to split the QCA in two, with an independent Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator and a development agency for curriculum, assessment and qualifications (*page 816*).

Scotland

The SNP government outlined its education policy priorities in an answer to a written parliamentary question (*page 814*).

The minority SNP administration continued to come under attack from the Labour opposition during December. A ministerial statement on class size (*page 848*) saw the SNP administration try and palm off delivery for its election pledge to reduce primary class sizes onto local government, but Labour would have none of it.

There was major embarrassment for the SNP over the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill which failed in committee. On the casting vote of the Labour convener, the committee voted to reject the principles of the Bill (*page 826*). When it came to the Stage 1 debate in plenary, the SNP got the Bill through only by a compromise with the Liberal Democrats, who then joined the Greens in supporting an amended SNP motion agreeing to the principles of the Bill. This allowed the Bill to proceed to its next stage (*page 857*).

Wales

There is serious and growing concern in Wales over the funding gap in education between England and Wales, something which the relatively poor performance of Wales in the OECD's PISA international survey of 15 year-olds has underlined. The Conservatives, now the Official Opposition in the Welsh Assembly following the creation of a Labour-Plaid Cymru coalition, chose education funding for an opposition debate (*page 864*).

Northern Ireland

The most contentious education issue in the Northern Ireland Assembly remains the moves by the Sinn Fein education minister to abolish academic selection at 11 (*page 813*), something strongly opposed by their senior coalition partners the DUP. While Sinn Fein is firm on the principle, it is far from clear how they will achieve this in practice. There was a ministerial statement on the subject at the beginning of the month (*page 868*) and a back bench debate just before the Christmas recess (*page 874*).

International

The OECD published its third PISA survey at the beginning of the month (*pages 813 and 827*). It was based on a sample of 400,000 15-year-olds in 57 countries and contained some uncomfortable lessons for education in England, while results in Wales were poorer than for the rest of the UK.

Dr Lewis Perinbam, the chairman of the board of the pioneering distance learning organisation the Commonwealth of Learning, died in December (*page 827*).

There was very little educational activity in the European Union in December, with only the European Parliament's Culture and Education Committee active (*page 827*).

Events in December

Pupils 'shun science A-levels'

Comprehensive school pupils are shunning science A-levels, according to exam board Cambridge Assessment. Its research showed that pupils from independent and grammar schools were far more likely to study chemistry, physics and biology. It found that 33.3% of grammar pupils and 27.7% of private pupils were studying chemistry A-level, with 14.8% at comprehensive schools. Just over 21% of grammar pupils and 18.9% of private pupils had chosen physics, but in comprehensives the figure was 9.8 per cent.

3 December 2007, Cambridge Assessment

PISA proves Government wrong

The OECD's PISA survey of 15-year-olds in 57 countries shows the choice and diversity policies that lie at the heart of the Government's plans have a negative impact on education systems. The latest survey focused mainly on science. The two previous PISA reports focused on literacy and maths. Within science, the UK results were above OECD and international averages. The OECD divided scientific performance into six levels of proficiency, with level six the highest. In the OECD only 1% of the sample reached level six, while in the UK it was 3%. At level 5 the figures were 8% for the OECD as a whole, but 11% for the UK. At level 4 it was 20% for the OECD and 22% for the UK.

4 December 2007, PISA

NI Assembly to scrap 11+ exam

The 11-plus exam will be scrapped in Northern Ireland from 2010, the Education Minister has announced. Caitriona Ruane said that pupil's decisions about their future education and careers should be based on a process of formal, structured "election" at age 14. Ms Ruane also announced that grammar schools in Northern Ireland would no longer be able to admit pupils based on academic ability. The last 11 plus test will take place in 2008.

4 December 2007, Northern Ireland Assembly

Govt. helps HE reach employers

The DIUS has announced new funding to support innovative ways for higher education work with employers to meet their skills needs. The funding, which will rise to at least £50m a year by 2010-11, is intended to help the Government meet targets set out in the Leitch review of skills. The review made clear that 70% of the 2020 workforce has already left school, which means that the nation needs at least 40% of adults to be qualified to Level 4 or above by 2020. Higher education minister Bill Rammell said that, to achieve this, higher education institutions will need to develop new ways of teaching the workforce tailored to company needs.

4 December 2007, DIUS

Sex education should be statutory

The poor quality of sex education in schools is leaving many teenagers in complete ignorance, according to the UK Youth Parliament. In a study of 12 to 15-year-olds in England, more than half rated the teaching in school as poor or average. Nearly half said they had never been taught about the effects of teenage pregnancy and would not know where to find their local sexual health clinic. Around 55% had not been taught how to use a condom, despite government recommendations.

4 December 2007, The Times

Scruffy writers do well in exams

Children who concentrate on producing neat handwriting tend to do worse in exams, research from Warwick University has found. But researchers said that, despite evidence that fast writing improves exam performance, the national literacy strategy still concentrates on letter formation. Professor David Wray argued that if young writers had to devote large amounts of working memory to the control of lower-level processes such as handwriting, they may have little working memory capacity left for higher-level processes.

4 December 2007, Warwick University

Rural schools in Scotland

In answer to a written parliamentary question, the Scottish Executive admitted that there was no legal definition of a rural school. For statistical purposes the Scottish government classifies any school located in an "accessible rural", "remote rural" or "very remote rural" settlement as a rural school.

5 December 2007, Scottish Parliament PQ

SAT results still rising

The number of 11-year-olds reaching the expected level in English, maths and science has risen, according to the latest primary school league tables. Figures show that 255 schools had the maximum combined score of 300 in English, maths and science, up from 209 last year. Nationally, the results showed that 80% of 11-year-olds achieved Level 4 in English, 77% in maths, and 88% in science.

6 December 2007, DCSF

Inquiry into plan to scrap funding

The DIUS has announced an inquiry into the decision to phase out support for students taking second qualifications equivalent to or below their first qualifications. The Government had previously announced that £100m would be withdrawn.

6 December 2007, DIUS

Maths achievement 'plateau'

Schools are having virtually no impact on the progress of 11 to 14-year-olds in maths, according to a study from Manchester University. Professor Julian Williams from the School of Education said that year on year improvements for pupils in mathematics were almost nonexistent for higher and lower achievers. Independent tests revealed that the performance of 12,591 English five to 14-year-olds remained almost static in secondary schools.

6 December 2007, Manchester University

Scottish education priorities

In answer to a written question from Rhona Brankin (Lab, Midlothian), the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Education, Fiona Hyslop (SNP, Lothians) stated: "The Scottish government's priorities for education are to work with our partners to give Scotland's children the best start in life; improve life chances for children, young people and families at risk; support young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens and enable people in Scotland to be better educated, more skilled and more successful in a nation renowned for its research and innovation. In doing so our aim is to create a more successful country with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish through increasing sustainable economic growth."

6 December 2007, Scottish Parliament PQ

Inspection 'must be overhauled'

School inspection must be overhauled to prevent the process from producing more favourable judgements on schools in affluent areas and with students with above average attainment on entry, according to the Association of School and College Leaders. In a new policy paper, ASCL calls on Ofsted to develop a more robust inspection system that gives due credit to the challenges faced by leaders in difficult socio-economic circumstances. ASCL also proposes an end to mandatory inspections every three years.

7 December 2007, ASCL

Maths and science staff shortage

The Royal Society has warned that a critical shortage of science and maths teachers is being made worse by the Government being "in the dark" about the full scale of the problem. The society's review of the available data on the UK's science and maths teaching workforce across the five to 19 age range highlighted shortcomings in recruitment and retention.

10 December 2007, Royal Society

All-age academies

While the Government has no plans to introduce academies just for primary school age children, the academies programme does include eight all-age academies catering for children from 3 to 19, with another six in the pipeline, Schools Minister Jim Knight announced.

10 December 2007, Commons PQ, DCSF

Children's Plan

In its Children's Plan, the Government promises to publish a Child Health Strategy and an Obesity Action Plan, and undertake a major review of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. It will also publish a response to the *Staying Safe* consultation and an action plan, the Byron Review on children and new technology, and an independent assessment of the impact of commercial activity on children. And it will publish a Children's Workforce Action Plan; develop strong school level indicators for all the *Every Child Matters* outcomes; and review the consistency of Children's Trusts across local authorities. Child health services, social care, advice, welfare services and police will where possible be located on the same sites, making services more integrated and more convenient for children and their families.

11 December 2007, DCSF

Concern over 14-19 reforms

The Government reform programme for 14 to 19 education has wide support, but there are "substantial risks" that the DCSF must address, according to a new report from the National Audit Office. *Partnering for success: preparing to deliver the 14-19 education reforms in England* says that partnerships are central to the reforms, but warns that it found wide variations in the preparedness of the local partnerships at this early stage in the programme.

11 December 2007, National Audit Office

Widening HE participation

The next step in widening HE participation will be to build stronger links through the development of HE-backed trusts and academies, John Denham has said. Addressing the Action on Access conference, the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills praised those involved in widening participation for "genuinely changing peoples' lives". But he said evidence suggested that both schools and higher education institutions needed to be better at spotting and nurturing talent amongst students who may turn their backs on HE as young as 12 or 13.

12 December 2007, DIUS

Forging stronger links contradicts the competition culture

Efforts by the Government to encourage institutions, such as schools, colleges and providers of work-based learning to work more together contradicts existing government policy where institutions have to compete with each other for pupils, funds and resources, according to the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training. Ken Spours, from the Institute of Education, said: "Despite recent progress, 14-19 Partnerships are still very fragile because the forces urging competition remain stronger than those supporting collaboration. The balance has to change."

12 December 2007, Nuffield Review

'Lightning' inspections proposed

Schools in England could be subject to "lightning" on-the-spot inspections, under proposals put forward by Ofsted. Speaking to the House of Commons Select Committee for Children, Schools and Families, HM Chief Inspector, Christine Gilbert, revealed that Ofsted was "looking at the practicalities" of eliminating the current two day's notice for inspections that schools receive.

12 December 2007, Schools Select Committee

Worst rich outperform best poor

The brightest children in Britain's poorest homes are outperformed by the least gifted children from wealthy homes by the age of seven, according to research. Funded by the Sutton Trust, it concluded that social class was still the biggest predictor of school achievement, the likelihood of getting a degree and even a child's behaviour. The study found that 44% of young people from the richest fifth of the population had a degree in 2002, compared with 10% from the poorest fifth.

13 December 2007, Sutton Trust

Scotland won't scrap HE fees

The Bill to scrap the graduate endowment fee in Scotland has been thrown into uncertainty, after MSPs voted to reject it. The education committee had recommended that the principles of the legislation to abolish graduate endowment should not be agreed when the proposal came before the entire parliament next week. Labour and Conservative members voted against the proposal and Nationalists and Liberal Democrats backed the Bill, but it was rejected on the convener's casting vote.

13 December 2007, Scottish Parliament

Welsh identifying dyslexics early

The Enterprise and Learning Committee has published a report into approaches and treatment of dyslexia in Wales. The cross-party Dyslexia Rapporteur Group consulted with dyslexia organisations, leading academics and teachers to assess approaches currently being used to treat children with dyslexia throughout the country, before reporting back to the Committee. With early identification of the condition identified as key, the report highlighted the need to screen for every child in Wales at age 6 or 7 and for these services to be made available in both English and Welsh.

13 December 2007, Welsh Assembly

Scottish children play truant

Figures from the Scottish Executive show that 48,000 children were absent from school in Scotland each day. Although 22,000 were off sick, 5,600 were truanting, while 3,600 were on holiday and another 800 had been temporarily excluded. The figures showed only a marginal improvement on last year's rates for school attendance, to 93.3% from 93.1% in 2005/06. Education leaders had noted higher absence among children from deprived backgrounds. Less than 10% of pupils were responsible for 90% of the time lost to truancy.

13 December 2007, Scottish Executive

Review finds primary deficiency

New reports from the Primary Review have stressed the need for pretend play in the early years and structured talk and peer collaboration in the primary years. Drawing on recent brain research, one of the surveys challenged conventional wisdom about 'learning styles' and rejected the belief that there are developmental stages in learning to think. The reports on diversity, inclusion and SEN underlined the considerable diversity of the primary pupil population, but warned against simplistic assumptions about children's differences and needs.

14 December 2007, Primary Review

QCA to be divided

The Government has released a consultation proposing the division of the QCA into an independent Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator, and a development agency for curriculum, assessment and qualifications. It claims that the proposals will provide greater transparency in the regulation of qualifications and assessments.

17 December 2007, DCSF

International Baccalaureate

In answer to a written question on Government policy on the IB, Schools Minister Jim Knight

said that “Every young person should be able to choose rigorous, challenging qualifications that are suited to their interests and enable them to progress. This is the principle that underpins our 14 to 19 reforms”. The IB was one appropriate qualification, though it was up to individual schools and colleges to decide what to offer. The Government was funding start-up costs for 29 maintained institutions in areas where there is no IB provision at present.

17 December 2007, Commons PQ, DCSF

Heads believe in building project

Most headteachers believe that the Government’s building programme for secondary schools will improve teaching, learning and behaviour, and transform existing premises, according to a new report. The first annual evaluation of Building Schools for the Future, undertaken by Pricewaterhouse-Coopers, found that headteachers thought that existing unmodernised school buildings did not meet the needs of staff and pupils. The report, the first of three, concluded that there was more scope to improve communication at all levels and reduce complexity of management, which was perceived as a barrier. It also suggested a BSF manager for each school.

17 December 2007, DCSF

The cost of RPA

The cost of raising the education and training participation age (RPA) to 18 to over 90 per cent participation will be around £774 million “in present value terms (in 2016/17 prices)” Lord Adonis announced. The greatest part of this was the direct participation costs of more young people being in education and training, which are estimated to be around £583 million in a steady state.

17 December 2007, Lords PQ

Diploma worth 3½ A-levels

Diplomas will be worth a maximum of three-and-a-half A-levels when they are launched in 2008, the Government has announced. Schools Minister Jim Knight accepted the QCA’s

recommendation that diplomas should be equivalent to five GCSEs at foundation level, seven GCSEs at higher level and 3.5 A-Levels at advanced level. UCAS has confirmed that the “Progression” diploma will attract a maximum 300 UCAS tariff points, with 120 points available for the top grade in the “Additional and Specialist Learning”. When combined, these enable candidates to be awarded the advanced diploma, worth 420 points.

18 December 2007, DCSF

Language take-up encouraged

The Government has announced a £53 million investment in language teaching over the next year. The funding includes £35 million for primary schools, in preparation for compulsory language teaching for seven to 11-year-olds, which it hopes will reverse the sharp decline in the numbers continuing to study languages to GCSE level. The Government is urging schools to work together more closely to support the continuation of pupils’ language learning as they move from primary to secondary school. The funding amounts to an extra £340 each year for each primary school.

19 December 2007, DCSF

All private schools could receive Ofsted-style inspections

All private schools in England could receive Ofsted-style inspections, under confidential proposals from the Independent Schools Inspectorate. Schools that belong to recognised national independent school associations are inspected once every six years by the Inspectorate, with the remaining non-association independent schools monitored by Ofsted. But the document, exposed in the *Guardian* newspaper, proposes a move to three-yearly inspections for all private schools, reducing the notice period from 18 months to five days. Most controversially, the same “professional” inspectors that Ofsted employs could end up investigating standards in top private schools.

19 December 2007, *Guardian*

Government 'has missed half of its education targets'

A new DCSF report shows that it has missed or is set to miss over half of its targets to improve educational standards and children's wellbeing since 1998. The report on the performance of the Government's education department shows that 23 out of 53 targets were missed. These include the failure to achieve 85% of 11-year-olds reaching Level 4 or above in English and maths by 2006 and 85% of 14-year-olds reaching Level 5 in English maths and ICT by 2007.

20 December 2007, BBC

Fifth of academics earn over 50k

Nearly one in five academics in England earns more than £50,000, according to figures from the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Its latest survey showed that the number of high-earning academics had risen from 4% in 1995-96 to 18% in 2005-06. Overall numbers of staff had risen by 6% since 2004/5, and there had been a rise in black, minority ethnic, female and disabled employees. HEFCE said that the previously feared staff shortages caused by staff retiring had not happened.

20 December 2007, HEFCE

Fewer adults attending classes

Nearly 700,000 fewer adults than last year attended evening classes in England, equating to 21.7%, according to official figures. Over the same period, the number of adults on catch-up courses increased by 42% to 470,400. And the number of adults on Skills for Life programmes grew by 16% to 350,900. Meanwhile a further 220,000 adults enrolled on in workplace learning under the Train to Gain programme and an extra 10,000 apprenticeships began during the year. The LSC said the change mirrored the shift in funding towards younger learners and adults wanting to boost their skills.

20 December 2007, BBC

Sir Cyril Taylor ousted

Sir Cyril Taylor has been replaced as chairman of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. Sir Cyril, who had held the position for the last 20 years, will remain on the board, but will no longer be its chief spokesman. He said that, although he would not have said 'no' if asked to stay on in the position, he thought it "quite reasonable" that they had appointed someone new.

He is replaced by the trust's deputy chairman, Sir James Hill. Sir Cyril was well-known for his outspoken views, which had occasionally attracted sharp criticism.

21 December 2007, SSAT

More teachers quitting

Around 270,000 qualified teachers moved to another profession between 2000 and 2005, according to the Conservative Party. It also claims that its analysis of government figures has revealed that thousands of those who qualify as teachers never go on to work in schools, a problem that is on the increase.

Michael Gove, Shadow Children's Secretary, said: "I fear that a combination of classroom bureaucracy, government micromanagement and poor discipline in too many schools has encouraged a drift away from teaching."

28 December 2007, Conservative Party

Violent toys 'okay' for boys

Nursery school boys should be allowed to play with toy weapons, according to the DCSF. Its latest Early Years guidance states that: "Images and ideas gleaned from the media are common starting points in boys' play and may involve characters with special powers or weapons. Adults can find this type of play particularly challenging and have a natural instinct to stop it. This is not necessary as long as practitioners help the boys to understand and respect the rights of other children."

29 December 2007, DCSF

Publications

ASCL

Next Steps: The future of inspection of schools and colleges, December 2007, Association of School and College Leaders, 130 Regent Road, Leicester LE1 7PG. Tel: 0116 299 1122. £6

DCSF

DCSF Autumn Performance Report 2007: achievement against public service agreement targets, Cm 7279, December 2007, £18.55. ISBN: 9780101727921.

The Children's Plan: Building brighter futures, Cm 7280, December 2007, £33.45. Download free from www.dcsf.gov.uk/publications ISBN: 9780101728027.

Confidence in Standards: Regulating and developing qualifications and assessment, Cm 7281, December 2007, £13.90.

ISBN: 9780101728126. Consultation paper, visit www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations. Deadline: 10 March 2008.

Effective Provision for Gifted and Talented Children in Secondary Education, December 2007, download free from <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk>

Implementing Youth Matters: Continuing the dialogue with young people, December 2007, download free from www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations. Deadline: 2 July 2007.

Local Authority Children's Services Funding: 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11, December 2007, download free from www.dcsf.gov.uk

DCLG

Delivering Improved Outcomes for Children, Young People and their Families: The crucial role of the new local performance framework, December 2007, download free from www.communities.gov.uk

Indices of Deprivation 2007, December 2007, download free from www.communities.gov.uk

REACH: An independent report to Government on raising the aspirations and attainment of Black boys and young Black men - Government response, December 2007, free from www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/reachresponse

Department of Health

Investment to Improve Services for Disabled Children, Gateway Ref: 9267, December 2007, download free from www.dh.gov.uk

Valuing People Now: From progress to transformation, Gateway Ref: 8854, December 2007, download free from www.dh.gov.uk. Deadline: 11 March 2008.

DIUS

Innovation: Share your ideas with us, December 2007, download free from www.dius.gov.uk/consultations. Deadline: 31/01/08.

Food Standards Agency

Consensus View on Food Competences for Children and Young People, December 2007, download free from www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/competenciesconsensus.pdf

Government Office for Science

Science Review of the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, December 2007, download free from www.dius.gov.uk

NAO

Partnering for success: preparing to deliver the 14-19 education reforms in England, HC 99, House of Commons paper, December 2007, £13.90, download free from www.nao.org.uk/publications. ISBN: 9780102951585.

OECD

PISA 2006: Science Competences for Tomorrow's World, Vol.1 Analysis; Vol.2 Data tables. December 2007. ISBN: 978-92-64-04000-7.

Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland, December 2007, ISBN: 978-9-26404-100-4, £21. Free from www.oecdbookshop.org

Ofsted

Children on Care Standards, HMI 070140, December 2007, download free from www.ofsted.gov.uk

Poetry in Schools: A survey of practice, HMI 070034, December 2007, download free from www.ofsted.gov.uk

Race Equality Scheme, HMI 20070021, December 2007, download free from www.ofsted.gov.uk

The Young Apprenticeships Programme 2004-07: An evaluation, HMI 070032, December 2007, download free from www.ofsted.gov.uk

PricewaterhouseCoopers

School Building Design, Resources and Finance, December 2007, download free from www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/resources/financeandbuilding

Trade Unions Congress

Six Million Pay Cuts, December 2007, download free from www.unison.org.uk

UNESCO

Investing in the Children of the Islamic World, UN sales number E.06.XX.4, December 2007, £6.50. ISBN: 9789280638981.

World Bank

Raising Student Learning in Latin America: the challenge for the 21st century, Emiliana Vegas and Jenny Petrow, December 2008, £14.75. ISBN: 9780821370827.

Research Journals Published in December

In this section we list of academic journals published in December. These are mainly journals covering general and policy issues rather than those covering specific areas of the curriculum.

Active Learning in Higher Education (Sage) Vol.8 No.3
British Educational Research Journal (Routledge) Vol.33 No.6
Cambridge Journal of Education (Routledge) Vol.39 No.3
Compare (Routledge) Vol.37 No.5
Curriculum Journal (Routledge) Vol.18 No.4
Educational Psychology in Practice (Routledge) Vol.23 No.4
Educational Research (Routledge) Vol.59 No.4
Educational Studies (Routledge) Vol.33 No.4
European Journal of Teacher Education (Routledge) Vol.30 No.4
Gender and Education (Routledge) Vol.19 No.6
High Ability Study (Routledge) Vol.18 No.2
International Studies in Sociology of Education (Routledge) Vol.17 No.4
Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning (Routledge) Vol.7 No.2
Journal of Educational Administration and History (Routledge) Vol.39 No.3
Journal of In-service Education (Routledge) Vol.33 No.4
Journal of Research in International Education (Sage) Vol.6 No.3
Journal of Vocational Education and Training (Routledge) Vol.59 No.4
Learning, Media and Technology (Routledge) Vol.32 No.4
Paedagogica Historica (Routledge) Vol.43 No.6

EDM 510 ZARINE RENTIA Proposer: Diane Abbott (Lab, Hackney N & Stoke Newington)	Tabled: 6 December	EPM 344
EDM 517 UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD BLACK BOYS CAN PROGRAMME Proposer: Evan Harris (LDP, Oxford West and Abingdon)	Tabled: 10 December	EPM 345
EDM 524 STUDENT ARRESTS IN IRAN Proposer: John McDonnell (Lab, Hayes and Harlington)	Tabled: 10 December	EPM 345
EDM 534 CHILDHOOD CANCER AWARENESS MONTH Proposer: Ian Gibson (Lab, Norwich North)	Tabled: 11 December	EPM 345
EDM 545 SCHOOL UNIFORMS AND THE GET IT 4 SCHOOL PROGRAMME Proposer: Austin Mitchell (Lab, Great Grimsby)	Tabled: 11 December	EPM 345
EDM 549 SUNDERLAND YOUNG ACHIEVERS AWARDS SCHEME Proposer: Fraser Kemp (Lab, Houghton and Washington East)	Tabled: 11 December	EPM 345
EDM 562 OUTDOOR LEARNING AND INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING Proposer: Brian Iddon (Lab, Bolton South East)	Tabled: 12 December	EPM 345
EDM 585 PUBLIC SERVICE TELEVISION FOR CHILDREN Proposer: Janet Anderson (Lab, Rossendale and Darwin)	Tabled: 13 December	EPM 345
EDM 591 BOYHOOD TO MANHOOD FOUNDATION Proposer: Kieth Vaz (Lab, Leicester East)	Tabled: 17 December	EPM 346
EDM 592 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF DEAF CHILDREN Proposer: David Laws (LDP, Yeovil)	Tabled: 17 December	EPM 346
EDM 619 SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS (INFORMATION) PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILL Proposer: Lyn Brown (Lab, West Ham)	Tabled: 18 December	EPM 346

Written Ministerial Statements

This section lists all written statements from ministers in H M Government on education, children's services and training published in *Hansard* during the last month. The list gives the date of the statement, the department of state issuing the statement, the minister in whose name the statement was issued, what the statement was about and the issue number of *EPM Weekly Statements – Westminster* in which the full text of the statement can be found. *EPM Weekly Statements – Westminster* is part of the Weekly Edition of *Education Parliamentary Monitor*.

Date	Dept.	Minister	Subject	EPM
5.12.07	DCLG	John Healey	Local government (new unitary authorities)	344
6.12.17	DCSF	Kevin Brennan	Adoptions from Guatemala	344
11.12.07	DIUS	John Denham	Research and the science budget	345
13.12.07	DCLG	Hazel Blears	Central-local concordat	345
17.12.07	DCSF	Ed Balls	School buildings	346
17.12.07	DCSF	Ed Balls	Qualifications and assessment: regulation and development	346
18.12.07	DIUS	John Denham	Skills Pledge: management information	346

DCLG	Department of Communities and Local Government
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills

Statutory Instruments

The following is a list of all statutory instruments from throughout the UK concerning education, children's services and training listed by date of issue. Commencement orders are identified by the letter C followed by a number in the title line. The letter W followed by a number indicates a Welsh statutory instrument. Fuller details of each statutory instrument are given in *EPM Weekly Statutory Instruments*, which is part of the Weekly Edition of *Education Parliamentary Monitor*.

2007/3230 (W.282)

Wales

The Assembly Learning Grants and Loans (Higher Education) (Wales) (Amendment) (No.3) Regulations 2007

Issued: 04.12.2007. Made: 09.11.2007. Laid before the National Assembly for Wales: 13.11.2007.

2007/3373

England

The Education (Information About Individual Pupils) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2007

Issued: 06.12.2007. Made: 27.11.2007. Laid: 06.12.2007. Coming into force: 30.12.2007.

2007/3344

England

The Education (Student Support) (European Institutions) (Amendment) Regulations 2007

Issued: 10.12.2007. Made: 26.11.2007. Laid: 10.12.2007. Coming into force: 01.01.2008 except for

2007/3436

England

The Education (Provision of Information About Young Children) (England) Amendment Regulations 2007

Issued: 13.12.2007. Made: 06.12.2007. Laid: 13.12.2007. Coming into force: 10.01.2008.

2007/3473

England

The Salisbury College (Dissolution) Order 2007

Issued: 17.12.2007. Made: 03.12.2007. Laid: 10.12.2007. Coming into force: 01.01.2008.

- 2007/3490** **England**
The Childcare Act 2006 (Provision of Information to Parents) (England) Regulations 2007
 Issued: 18.12.2007. Made: 10.12.2007. Laid: 18.12.2007. Coming into force: 01.04.2008.
- 2007/557** **Scotland**
The Education (Recognised Bodies) (Scotland) Order 2007
 Issued: 18.12.2007. Made: 12.12.2007. Laid before the Scottish Parliament: -. Coming into force: 01.01.2008.
- 2007/558** **Scotland**
The Education (Listed Bodies) (Scotland) Order 2007
 Issued: 19.12.2007. Made: 12.12.2007. Laid before the Scottish Parliament: -. Coming into force: 31.12.2007.
- 2007/3505 (C.151)** **United Kingdom**
The Further Education and Training Act 2007 (Commencement No. 1 and Transitional Provisions) Order 2007
 Issued: 20.12.2007. Made: 12.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: -.
- 2007/3464** **England**
The School Organisation and Governance (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2007
 Issued: 20.12.2007. Made: 07.12.2007. Laid: 17.12.2007. Coming into force: 21.01.2008.
- 2007/3475** **England**
The School Organisation (Removal of Foundation, Reduction in Number of Foundation Governors and Ability of Foundation to Pay Debts) (England) Regulations 2007
 Issued: 20.12.2007. Made: 07.12.2007. Laid: 17.12.2007. Coming into force: 21.01.2008.
- 2007/564 (C.46)** **Scotland**
The Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 (Commencement No. 2) Order 2007
 Issued: 24.12.2007. Made: 18.12.2007. Laid before the Scottish Parliament: -. Coming into force: -.
- 2007/3545 (C.153)** **England and Wales**
The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 (Commencement No. 1) Order 2007
 Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: -.
- 2007/3549** **England**
The All Saints Catholic Primary School, Bootle (Designation as having a Religious Character) Order 2007
 Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: 17.12.2007.
- 2007/3551** **England**
The Holy Rood Catholic Primary School (Designation as having a Religious Character) Order 2007
 Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: 17.12.2007.
- 2007/3557** **England**
The Holy Trinity CE VC Primary School and Nursery Unit (Designation as having a Religious Character) Order 2007
 Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: 17.12.2007.
- 2007/3558** **England**
The Knaresborough St John's C of E Primary School (Designation as having a Religious Character) Order 2007
 Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: 17.12.2007.
- 2007/3560** **England**
The Lulworth and Winfrith C of E VC First School (Designation as having a Religious Character) Order 2007
 Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: 17.12.2007.

2007/3561 **England**
The Madani Muslim High School (VA) (Designation as having a Religious Character) Order 2007

Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: 17.12.2007.

2007/3567 **England**
The Manchester Mesivta School (Designation as having a Religious Character) Order 2007

Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: 17.12.2007.

2007/3568 **England**
The Slough Islamic School (Designation as having a Religious Character) Order 2007

Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: 17.12.2007.

2007/3569 **England**
The St Joseph's Catholic and Church of England Primary School (Designation as having a Religious Character) Order 2007

Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: 17.12.2007.

2007/3571 **England**
The St Peter's CE Primary School (Designation as having a Religious Character) Order 2007

Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: 17.12.2007.

2007/3572 **England**
The Stanwell Fields C of E Primary School (Designation as having a Religious Character) Order 2007

Issued: 28.12.2007. Made: 17.12.2007. Laid: -. Coming into force: 17.12.2007.

Committees

House of Commons Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families

On Wednesday 12 December the Committee took evidence for its inquiry on the work of Ofsted from Christine Gilbert CBE, HMCI and colleagues.

On Monday 17 December motions were laid before the House of Commons to change membership of the select committees on Children, Schools and Families and Innovation, Universities and Skills. Mrs Maria Miller (Con, Basingstoke) left the Children, Schools and Families Committee. She was replaced by Adam Afriyie (Con, Windsor), who moved from membership of the Innovations, Universities and Skills Committee.

On Monday 17 December the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee took evidence for its inquiry into testing and assessment from Ken Boston, chief executive of the QCA.

On Tuesday 18 December the Committee announced that it would undertake an inquiry into looked-after children. The inquiry will firstly examine the provisions of the Children and Young Persons Bill, to consider the extent to which the Bill reflects the outcome of the consultation process, and to make recommendations for amendment where appropriate; and secondly examine provision for looked-after children more widely in the context of the *Care Matters: Time for Change* white paper.

House of Commons Select Committee on Innovation, Universities and Skills

On Wednesday 5 December the Committee was scheduled to take evidence on the formation of the DIUS from Rt Hon John Denham MP, Secretary of State and Ian Watmore, Permanent Secretary, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. This meeting was rescheduled to Wednesday 16 January 2007. Instead, on 5 December the Committee took evidence from Professor Sir David King, the Chief Scientific Adviser.

On Thursday 6 December the Committee announced that it was to undertake an inquiry into the Government's decision to phase out support given to institutions for students taking second qualifications of an equivalent or lower level (ELQs) to their first qualifications.

On Thursday 6 December the Committee announced that it was to undertake an inquiry into biosecurity in UK research laboratories.

On Wednesday 12 December the Committee held an introductory meeting with the Government Chief Scientific Adviser designate.

On Monday 17 December motions were laid before the House of Commons to change membership of the select committees on Children, Schools and Families and Innovation, Universities and Skills. Mrs Maria Miller (Con, Basingstoke) left the Children, Schools and Families Committee. She was replaced by Adam Afriyie (Con, Windsor), who moved from membership of the Innovations, Universities and Skills Committee where his place was taken by Tim Boswell (Con, Daventry).

On Monday 17 December the Committee took evidence on the proposed UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation.

Scottish Parliament Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

On Wednesday 5 December the Committee met and took evidence on the draft budget 2008/09 (Stage 2) from Cllr Isabel Hutton, Education, Children and Young People spokesman; Jon Harris, Strategic Director; and Robert Nicol, Policy Manager, COSLA. The Committee, meeting in private, considered a draft Stage 1 report on the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill.

On Wednesday 12 December the Committee met and considered a draft report to the Finance Committee on the Budget process 2008/09 (Stage 2) and a draft Stage 1 report on the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill. On the casting vote of the convener, the Committee rejected the principles of the SNP Bill. The Committee was unconvinced that abolishing the graduate endowment went far enough in removing barriers to access to higher education. The vote is an embarrassment to the minority SNP government.

On Wednesday 19 December the Committee met and considered a petition from Ronnie Smith, general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland, calling on the Scottish Parliament to support significant reductions in class sizes in Scottish publicly funded schools during the lifetime of the next Scottish Parliament. Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, and Michael Kellet and Donald Henderson, Deputy Directors, Schools Directorate, Scottish Government, attended the Committee for this item. The Committee considered the budget process 2008/09 at Stage 2 in private.

Welsh Assembly Children and Young People Committee

On Thursday 13 December the Committee met and took evidence for its inquiry into advocacy services for children in Wales from Andrew Pithouse, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University and Sean O'Neil, policy director of Children in Wales.

Welsh Assembly Enterprise and Learning Scrutiny Committee

On Wednesday 5 December the Committee met and took evidence for its inquiry into the economic contribution of higher education from Professor Philip Gummatt, Chief Executive, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, and Roger Carter, Head of Economic Development, HEFCW.

On Wednesday 12 December the Committee met and took evidence for its inquiry into the economic contribution of higher education from David Rosser, Director, CBI Wales, and Non Rhys, Wales Policy Officer, and Russell Lawson – Press and Parliamentary Officer, Federation of Small Businesses. The Committee also considered an interim report and recommendations from the Dyslexia Rapporteur group on Dyslexia support in Wales.

Welsh Assembly Proposed Vulnerable Children LCO Committee

On Tuesday 4 December the Committee met.

Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee

On Friday 7 December the Committee met and received a briefing from senior departmental officials on Committee concerns on key RPA policy issues. The Committee received a presentation from the Transferors' Representatives Council on RPA proposals on school governance and accountability.

On Friday 14 December the Committee met and received presentations on proposals for post-primary education in Fermanagh.

Northern Ireland Assembly Employment and Learning Committee

On Wednesday 5 December the Committee visited Ulster Supported Employment Ltd, Belfast.

On Tuesday 11 and Wednesday 12 December members of the Committee attended the Department of Employment and Learning's corporate planning event.

International

Commonwealth

Commonwealth of Learning's chairman dies

Dr Lewis Perinbam, chairman of the Commonwealth of Learning's (COL) board of governors, died on 12 December 2007. Born in 1925 in Johor Baharu, Malaysia, Dr Perinbam was educated in Scotland and later emigrated to Canada, where he worked for the Canadian government in international development, working with the World Bank and UNESCO. He was the founding Executive Director of Canadian University Service Overseas, Executive Director of World University Service of Canada and Vice-President of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). After retiring from CIDA he dedicated himself to helping the COL, serving first as a special adviser to COL's first two presidents, Dr James Maraj and Dato' Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan, before being elected chairman of the board of governors in April 2003.

Third Commonwealth Teacher Research Symposium

In December the Commonwealth Secretariat announced that the third Commonwealth Teacher Research Symposium would be held between 19 and 21 February in Maputo, Mozambique. The symposium will focus on qualitative and quantitative research on Commonwealth teachers.

European Union – Commission

No Commission initiatives or events concerning education took place in December.

European Union – European Parliament

The Committee on Culture and Education met on 17 December. Most of the agenda concerned cultural matters, though there were sessions on the outcomes of the Portuguese presidency of the EU with the Portuguese Minister for Education and the Minister for Science, Technology and Higher Education.

European Union – Council of Ministers

The Education, Youth and Culture Committee of the EU Council of Ministers did not meet in December.

OECD

The OECD published its third Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey of 400,000 15-year-olds from 57 countries. The two volume report contained some uncomfortable evidence for the Government, questioning its policies of choice and diversity. This survey, conducted in 2006, focused on science. Previous PISA reports have focused on maths and literacy.

UNESCO

Children in the Islamic world

UNESCO published a report in December on the future of children in Islamic countries. The report, *Investing in the Children of the Islamic World*, (UN sales number E.06.XX.4) is available through the Stationery Office for £6.50. ISBN: 9789280638981.

World Bank

Student learning in Latin America

In December the World Bank published a study of student learning in South and Central America. *Raising Student Learning in Latin America: the challenge for the 21st century*, by Emiliana Vegas and Jenny Petrow, is available through the Stationery Office at £14.75. ISBN: 9780821370827.

Debates in the House of Commons

Sale of Student Loans Bill

House of Commons • Committee Stage • 4 December 2007

The Sale of Student Loans Bill was one of the first Bills to go through a new procedure for its Committee Stage in the House of Commons. As usual a group of Members had been selected to scrutinise the Bill in a Public Bill Committee (which replaced standing committees at the beginning of the last Session) but they were also empowered to take evidence on the Bill – in the manner of a Select Committee – and their first sitting began with oral questions to the Minister and an official from DIUS.

Evidence session

The Minister for Higher Education, Bill Rammell MP (Lab, Harlow) was accompanied at the oral question session by Michael Hipkins, Director of Student Finance Strategy at the DIUS.

The first batch of questions was about the valuation of the student loan book and how robust the procedure was for this exercise. Robert Ffello (Lab, Stoke-on-Trent South) wanted an assurance that the process was robust because he did not want the loan book to be sold on later at a substantial profit to the private sector. Mr Rammell argued that the Government had “a good track record getting the estimates correct,” based on the previous experience of selling part of the student loan debt. He told Members that the Government aimed to make £6.3 billion from the sales but they would not go ahead if market conditions were such that they could not get value for money.

That point was reiterated by the Minister after Sarah Teather (LDP, Brent East) raised the same issue of valuation and Mr Rammell told the MPs about the procedures being followed to ensure that the estimates were calculated correctly. There would be an external sales advisor to help the Department and the National Audit Office would review the first tranche of sales. Value for money, Mr Hipkins added later, was a complex calculation about the benefit of retaining the debt on the Government’s balance sheet or selling it and gaining a lump-sum sooner. “Those are estimates rather than complete answers,” he said.

The value of the loan debt was now at £18.1 billion and would rise further to reach £25 billion on 1 April 2009, Mr Hipkin said. The Government were planning a series of sales which would realise about £6.3 billion over the next three years; there would be further sales beyond 2011.

There was considerable concern amongst MPs at the possibility that the debt once sold could be sold on again. Mr Hipkins and Mr Rammell sought to persuade MPs that that was unlikely but that if it did happen there would be safeguards to ensure the interests of students and the taxpayer were protected. Rob Marris (Lab, Wolverhampton South West) implied that these sales could be like the PFI refinancing deals which he argued had been bad for the taxpayer; Mr Rammell did not think that a valid comparison. Mr Marris was unconvinced, fearing that windfall profits would be made by people selling on the loans. Mr Rammell told John Hayes (Con, South Holland & the Deepings) that he thought it unlikely the debt would be sold on.

The question of the disclosure of information to any purchaser also bothered Members. Gordon Marsden (Lab, Blackpool South) asked if the Student Loans Company was still not sharing data with HMRC following the recent loss of child benefit data. Mr Rammell confirmed that the ban was still in place but there was no evidence of the loss of student loan data. The suspension of data sharing was part of a Government-wide review of data security.

Mr Rammell added in a later answer that there would be no need for loan account data to be transferred to purchasers of date “for day-to-day purposes”. If they needed access to the data for some other purpose, such as auditing, “the method of data transfer would be secure and encrypted”. Mr Hipkins said that the Student Loans Company already had a policy of restricting access to data.

Rob Wilson (Con, Reading East) wondered how the part of the loan book to be sold would be selected. He asked if low-risk debt would be sold first. Mr Hipkin explained that they would not pick some debtors out; the selection would be random. They would however probably exclude very small debts and probably look at the track record of repayment over time as the current loan system was different from the previous mortgage-style approach.

A different point and one not previously discussed was the question of non-UK debtors, following the commencement of loans to students from other EU countries. Mr Rammell explained that debtors

elsewhere in the EU would be able to be pursued under EU law and that the repayment rates had been adjusted to reflect salary levels in other countries. A salary of £15,000 as a threshold before repayments began, would be too high in some countries and so had been set at a lower level in those countries.

Clause 1: Sale of student loans

After lunch, the Committee began considering the Bill line by line. The Minister moved an amendment to Clause 1, explaining that whilst the Government had believed that the intent of the Bill was entirely clear in the clause, it was necessary to make a technical amendment to the drafting so as to ensure that “potential purchasers in the commercial sector should be in no doubt as to what it enables the Secretary of State to do”.

Opposition spokesman John Hayes (Con, South Holland and the Deepings), when he spoke in the clause stand part debate, repeated a claim he had made in the Second Reading debate – namely, that there was a doubt about whether the purpose of the Bill was to transfer risk from the public to the private sector or whether it was to raise money for the Treasury. “I am not sure that it can be reasonably argued that the motive is to do both, because if this is to be an attractive product” it had to be advertised to prospective buyers as a safe product but if it was, it could not be something risky for the state to own. He thought it perfectly legitimate to sell the loan book in order to raise revenue but if that was the purpose, Ministers should be frank about it.

Mr Hayes was still concerned about the possibility of the resale of the debt. He said that it was normal for large debts to be parcelled up and sold on. He acknowledged that the Government were going to create a special purpose vehicle (SPV) for the sale of the loans and it was very unlikely as a result that the debt would be sold on, but it would not be prohibited by the Bill.

Liberal Democrat spokesman, Sarah Teather, wanted a clear statement from the Minister of what risks were being transferred from the public to the private sector in the sale.

The Minister said that the purpose of the sale was to achieve both objectives – the transfer of risk and the generation of income. The disposal of surplus assets was Government policy following the Lyons review, he added. He reiterated the fact that Ministers had been strongly advised that it was unlikely that the loan book or the SPV would be sold on – indeed, that had not happened since the first sale of student debt in 1997. The Government believed it was right to sell the debt without any clawback rights.

The amended Clause 1 was accepted without a vote.

Clause 2: Sales Supplemental

After a brief debate this Clause was also accepted without division.

Clause 3: Onward Sales

During the debate on this Clause, members of the Committee explored the question as to why the Bill gave the Secretary of State a permissive power to limit the circumstances in which a transfer of debt took place but did not require him to do so. This point was raised by both Mr Hayes and Miss Teather. Mr Hayes also speculated about the ability of purchasers of the debt to sell it offshore, which he was concerned about. Sarah Teather wanted to know what Ministers would use the powers of intervention in this Clause for.

Rob Marris said that this was really a Treasury Bill and that Members should be aware of the difficulties that had arisen in the past with the sale of Government assets. He reminded MPs that the purchaser of HMRC buildings had turned out to be a Bermudian company that did not pay tax in the UK. He wanted an assurance that the debt would not be able to be sold offshore.

Mr Rammell said that the debt would not be able to be sold on without Ministers knowing because the Government would under the terms of the Clause be a party to any onward sale. He did not believe that any further safeguards were needed in respect of offshore sales other than the requirements in the Bill, including that the loans remained governed by English law.

Following further discussion, the Minister agreed to look at whether the Clause could be clarified, with perhaps parts of it laying a requirement on the Secretary of State, but he did not think it was necessary.

The Clause was agreed.

Clause 4: Loan regulations

The Minister also agreed to look at a possible amendment based on one tabled by Rob Marris to clarify what costs of purchasers would be refunded by the Government. This Clause was agreed to without further debate.

Clause 5: Repayment

Mr Hayes wanted the Student Loans Company included in the legislation as the vehicle for the management of student loan debts and was unhappy that the Minister rejected this as unnecessarily inflexible. Mr Rammell said that the arrangements for graduates would not change whether the debt was owned by the public or private sectors.

The Clause was agreed to.

Clauses 6 & 7: were agreed to without debate.

Clause 8: Wales

There had been some concerns expressed at Second Reading about the transfer of powers to sell debt to the Welsh Assembly. Mr Hayes thought that the Welsh Assembly Government could choose to sell its loan book at a different time and in a different way and that might produce “incompatibilities” with the situation in England. Sarah Teather could not understand why the Assembly would want to sell the debate because the proceeds of the sale would go to the Treasury and not the Assembly.

Mr Rammell was clear that the provisions should apply equally to Wales as responsibility for student loans in Wales was transferred to Welsh Ministers last year. The powers to sell the loan book were being transferred but not the power to legislate on the matter. The Minister pointed out that the Welsh student loan debt was far smaller, at £1.1 billion, and he admitted that there was no incentive for them to sell because the proceeds of the sales would go to the Consolidated Fund and not into the Welsh block grant.

The Clause was agreed to.

Clauses 9 to 13: agreed to without debate.

The Committee having completed its consideration of this short Bill, it now passes back to the full House for the Report Stage debate.

The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chairman: Miss Anne Begg (Lab, Aberdeen South)

Anderson, Mr. David (Lab, Blaydon)

Boswell, Mr. Tim (Con, Daventry)

Cawsey, Mr. Ian (Lab, Brigg and Goole)

Dorries, Mrs. Nadine (Con, Mid-Bedfordshire)

Flello, Mr. Robert (Lab, Stoke-on-Trent, South)

Foster, Mr. Michael (Lab, Worcester)

Hayes, Mr. John (Con, South Holland and The Deepings)

Irranca-Davies, Huw (*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales*) (Lab, Ogmore)

Linton, Martin (Lab, Battersea)

Marris, Rob (Lab, Wolverhampton, South-West)

Marsden, Mr. Gordon (Lab, Blackpool, South)

Moran, Margaret (Lab, Luton, South)

Rammell, Bill (*Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education*) (Lab, Harlow)

Teather, Sarah (LDP, Brent, East)

Watkinson, Angela (Con, Upminster)

Williams, Mark (LDP, Ceredigion)

Wilson, Mr. Rob (Con, Reading, East)

HC 2007/0444

Public Service TV for Children

House of Commons • Westminster Hall Debate • 5 December 2007

Neil Gerrard (Lab, Walthamstow) introduced a debate in Westminster Hall on public service television for children, informed by the First Report from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Session 2007-08, on *Public Service Content*, [HC 36-I]. He claimed that there had recently been a lot of concern expressed about what has been happening to children's television, quoting the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, Ofcom, Pact (the trade association representing the independent production sector), Equity and the Writers' Guild.

Most of this debate was about television programming and the decline in the amount of British produced new programmes, and this lies outside the scope of *Education Parliamentary Monitor* and will therefore be covered only briefly. Mr Gerrard praised the many excellent British-made children's programmes, though he also acknowledged the negative effects of media, including TV, on children. "The toxic childhood campaign has had things to say about excessive time spent watching TV. There are also perfectly legitimate concerns about children being exposed to inappropriate materials on the internet and in video games, and none of us would try to argue that safety issues did not matter, particularly online, or that TV was a substitute for parenting."

Mr Gerrard observed that children were watching more children's TV, according to Ofcom figures, despite competition from video games and the internet. He wanted to ensure that children were able to watch the best, but that was under threat. The problem was that investment in children's TV by ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 had collapsed, leaving only the BBC as a major provider. It had increased its investment in children's programmes, though its present budget problems would mean that there would now be cuts. Even so, its share of children's programmes was likely to increase from 75 per cent to 90 per cent. The Welsh channel S4C had also made a significant investment. Overall, only 17 per cent of children's television programmes were made in Britain, and many of those were repeats. Mark Field (Con, Cities of London and Westminster) wondered whether the increase in spending by S4C had been funded by the Welsh Assembly Government rather than being due to commercial considerations.

There was some debate about the restrictions on advertising products that might be harmful to children, including fast food products. Edward Vaizey (Con, Wantage) was not convinced that this would work. He said that there were more fat children in Sweden than in Finland, and yet Sweden has a ban on advertising to children and Finland does not. Mr Field did not know about Scandinavia, but in the UK, recognising the increasing concern about childhood obesity, the advertising industry had proposed strict new rules on content, such as the removal of licensed characters and celebrities from advertisements that are directly targeted at primary school children. "That amounts to an effective voluntary code, albeit one that is established in the shadow of concerted media-led pressure, which one might argue is tantamount to blackmail." Restricting advertising, however, mean commercial channels made fewer programmes. Broadcasters' investment in programming was directly linked to the amount of advertising associated with that programming.

John McDonnell (Lab, Hayes and Harlington) was concerned about the negative impact on skills in the television industry that is resulting from the decline in children's programming. He was also concerned about jobs and the development of talent. The children's genre was the UK's biggest television export genre after film and drama, and it accounts for 15 per cent of all finished television programme exports. Exports of children's programming outperformed exports from all other countries in consultations and research undertaken in recent years, Mr McDonnell claimed. He was concerned a review by Ofcom would not take this sufficiently into account and that the decline in children's programming being commissioned by commercial channels would do irreparable harm.

Mr McDonnell said that the Treasury's review of skills set great store by employer-led training, which was one of the key strategies being developed with Skillset, the sector skills council for the audio-visual sector. "Children's programming has traditionally excelled at employer-led training, because, uniquely, it is multi-genre and acts as a microcosm for the rest of the industry."

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Gerry Sutcliffe (Lab, Bradford South) welcomed programmes about healthy lifestyles and programmes that helped people to face and deal with difficult matters. He also praised the classic BBC series, "Dr Who". "Many of us remember the 'Doctor Who' series from when we were children, and it is great for me to sit down with my grandchildren and see them be scared in the same way that I was."

HC 2007/0445

Custody of and Access to Children

House of Commons • Westminster Hall Debate • 5 December 2007

Frank Doran (Lab, Aberdeen North) used the opportunity of a Westminster Hall debate to raise a constituency matter that illustrated wider problems about custody of, and access to, children. He had constituents who were a mixed race couple who had married abroad and then moved to Aberdeen. They had a child with a disability. The family broke up with the mother leaving with the child, without the father's consent.

The mother and child then moved to England. The problem at the heart of Mr Doran's concern was the difficulties raised when a custody battle was fought across the two legal jurisdictions of Scotland and England. In this case the English courts had, in effect, seized jurisdiction from the Scottish courts, in contradiction, he thought, of the Family Law Act 1986 which sets out the rules for court jurisdiction in relation to child custody.

In replying to the debate the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice, Bridget Prentice (Lab, Lewisham East), said that regardless of which jurisdiction a case was heard in the law required that the paramount interest was that of the child and that should guide the courts. In this particular case the father appeared to have received bad legal advice in England. She denied that English courts could ignore the Family Law Act 1986.

In January 2005, the Minister said, the Government had changed the application procedure for cases where there were concerns about the risks of harm to a child. "If there is an indication of risk, the application forms are sent to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service—CAFCASS—which will conduct certain checks, undertake a risk assessment and advise the court accordingly. From 1 October this year, that is a statutory duty for CAFCASS. I hope shortly to publish an evaluation of the effectiveness of that procedure."

The Minister referred to research conducted for her what is now her Department, following parents through the process with CAFCASS. "The evidence that we have received suggests that that was a positive way of trying to move things forward. In most cases, an agreement about contact was reached or the cases were closed."

Ms Prentice accepted that, historically, Scotland had its own legal system which differs in substantial ways from that of England and Wales. "That is why we have made provision to deal with contact and residence cases in which people live on different sides of the border." It was possible for two sets of proceedings—one in each jurisdiction—to be under way at the same time. The legislation applying to contact and residence cases in Scotland is different, "but both the Government and the Scottish Executive are united in the view that children should have contact with both parents, as long as it is safe and in the best interests of the child".

HC 2007/0446

Education Questions

House of Commons • Oral Questions, Prime Minister • 5
December 2007

Mr Brown came under attack during Prime Minister's Questions from a Conservative MP concerned about school spending in Shropshire, but he received support on education from two Labour MPs.

Philip Dunne (Con, Ludlow) claimed that school spending had been fixed for the next three years "to favour Labour areas" and this meant school closures in Shropshire and other rural counties. He suggested that this was what the Prime Minister meant when he talked about "education for the many, not the few". The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown (Lab, Kirkcaldy & Cowdenbeath), said that spending per pupil was falling in 1997, it had doubled since and he accused the Conservatives of planning to cut the school-building programme.

Martin Linton (Lab, Battersea) lauded the improvements in GCSE results at Battersea City Technology College since 1997, which he said had risen from five per cent then to 60 per cent this

year. He thought that improvement had something to do with the increases in spending and claimed that the Conservatives were planning public spending cuts.

Mr Brown congratulated the college and its staff and pupils on the success, describing the improvement in results as “spectacular”. He said that the Government had announced further resources for science, maths and for literacy; such plans would not be affordable if Conservative tax plans went ahead.

Gordon Marsden (Lab, Blackpool South) welcomed the expansion of apprenticeships and claimed that the Conservative Party had not funded them when in Government. Mr Brown claimed that “the apprenticeships was dying under the Conservatives” and that there were now 250,000 young people on apprenticeships.

HC 2007/0447

Children's Plan

House of Commons • Oral Statement • 11 December 2007

The Secretary of State for Children, Schools & Families, Ed Balls (Lab, Normanton), came to the House to present the Children's Plan, an ambitious set of proposals for children and young peoples' services over the next decade. The reaction was not one of universal support; there was scepticism from the opposition parties and concern about funding from some Labour MPs.

The Statement

In his long statement, Mr Balls told the House of the progress made over the last decade but said that more needed to be done to prevent children falling into disadvantage or failing to live up to their learning potential. Parents also wanted more support in dealing with the challenges of modern life, such as the internet and commercialism. The children's plan was the Government response to these needs.

The Secretary of State announced 20,000 free child care places for the most disadvantaged children and additional funds so that there were at least two graduates in nurseries in the most deprived areas. He also said that there would be a review of the primary curriculum so as to ensure that there was enough time for maths, literacy and a foreign language. He would be allocating £44 million over the next three years to enable all teachers to study for a masters qualification.

There would be new information for all parents, with every parent having “a record of their child's development and education through the early years and into primary school”. The Government would legislate if necessary to ensure that every child had a personal tutor all through secondary school, that every parent received updated information about their child's progress, attendance and behaviour using new technologies such as the internet or mobile phones and that every secondary school had a parents' council so that they could be consulted and informed.

Mr Balls made several announcements concerning improvements to special educational needs provision. These included extra funds in order to improve initial teacher training in SEN and to find new ways to identify dyslexia earlier. There would also be an Ofsted review of SEN provision in 2009. A joint review of child and adolescent mental health services by the DCSF and the Department of Health would investigate how these services could work better with schools.

The Secretary of State promised improvements in inspection, new guidance on the building schools for the future programme and would seek to make all schools carbon neutral by 2016.

The Steer behaviour report proposals would be reviewed by Sir Alan Steer and more resources would be made available to tackle youth reoffending. Expert parenting advisers would be appointed in every local authority too.

Mr Balls confirmed that if the pilot programme was successful key stage testing would in future not be at fixed points but when a child was considered to be ready for them.

Measures to deal with children's issues in wider society were also mentioned. The review of internet and video games would report in the spring of 2008 and the effect of advertising and marketing on children and young people would also be investigated.

There were promises of more resources for youth services, in addition to the resources being released by the unclaimed assets initiative. There would be a national play strategy next year and funds to build or upgrade 3,500 play areas.

Mr Balls concluded by telling the House that the Government would “make our country the next place in the world for children to grow up”.

Opposition response

That was not the interpretation placed upon the Secretary of State’s statement by Michael Gove (Con, Surrey Heath), Mr Balls’ shadow. Mr Gove did welcome the support of the Secretary of State for improvements in provision for special needs and the free child care places for disadvantaged two year-olds, but he was scathing about the recent results of the international comparisons of education performance which showed Britain having fallen down the league tables dramatically since 2000. He wanted Mr Balls to explain why the UK was in the top 10 when the children tested had mostly been taught under the Conservative Government and was now in the second division when today’s children had been taught entirely under a Labour Government.

Mr Gove ridiculed talk of a primary review that would “clear away the clutter” when the early years curriculum had “576 different targets for professionals”. He did not believe that that was empowering professionals. He was similarly sceptical about claims of greater parental involvement when Ministers had said that the poor performance in international reading tests was partly because parents had failed to ensure their children read more at home. He wanted to know why primary responsibility for getting every child to read by the age of six was not given to schools.

Mr Gove wanted a series of other measures included in the plan, notably Conservative policies on exclusions, innovation in schools and a right for parents to take their children out of a failing school and place them in a good school.

Mr Balls said that Mr Gove was wrong in his interpretation of the international literacy study which had made it clear, he said, that there was a responsibility on parents as well as government and teachers to ensure all children were reading. It was true that Britain’s brightest children were reading less at home. He disputed Mr Gove’s points about standards because he claimed that they had risen since 1997.

The chairman of the Children, Schools & Families Select Committee, Barry Sheerman (Lab, Huddersfield) wanted to know what the monitoring process would be for the plan. Mr Balls replied that he expected that the Select Committee would look into it and that there would be a report back on progress in a year’s time.

Liberal Democrat spokesperson David Laws (Yeovil) said that while it was traditional for Opposition spokesmen to be disappointed on these occasions, “may I genuinely say that many people inside and outside the House will be tremendously disappointed with the plan”. He thought it was a “mouse of a plan” to deal with “a mountain of a problem”. He contrasted the creation of 20,000 free child care places for disadvantaged two year-olds with the fact that 650,000 children were in that cohort.

Mr Laws’ toughest criticism was for the absence of any reference to child poverty in the statement. He thought that the absence of any mention of the Government’s ambition to halve child poverty by 2010 might be an indication that they were trying to manage the failure to meet their target. Mr Laws also thought the amount of money put forward for tackling poverty in the pre-Budget report “almost trivial” compared to the amount being spent on cutting inheritance tax.

He dismissed the review of the primary curriculum, saying over half the time was already taken up with literacy and numeracy lessons. He also thought that the Government had “fixed” primary education in their first term in office but “we now find that apparently it has not and that we need another review”. He thought that power should be devolved to schools to make decisions about how much time was needed for subjects rather than having a review.

Mr Balls said that he made a speech about child poverty the previous day and the previous targets remained in place as part of the children’s plan. In further exchanges, Frank Dobson (Lab, Holborn & St Pancras) agreed with the emphasis on children’s play but called for all departments and agencies to work together to deliver safer play spaces for children.

The former Tory Education Secretary, Ken Clarke (Con, Rushcliffe), said that there had been a campaign against testing and league tables and he feared that the new system of testing based on stage rather than age was a serious “step back” in the face of that campaign. It would make meaningful comparisons between schools “almost impossible”. Mr Balls told him that the new system would include comparison between different schools and it would allow schools to stretch brighter children.

Peter Bottomley (Con, Worthing West) said Mr Balls was not the first to propose a joint approach to child health services and urged him to look at the Court Report from 1977 and the Plowden report of 1969. Hilary Armstrong (Lab, NW Durham) said that a great deal had been done to improve the teaching workforce but more needed to be done to recruit a greater share of the top 10 per cent of

graduates. Mr Balls agreed, saying that more resources were being made available for training the early years workforce and the Government wanted every new teacher to study for a masters degree.

Tom Clarke (Lab, Coatbridge, Chryston & Bellshill) wanted the funding Mr Balls had referred to for disabled children to be spent across the UK. Mr Balls criticised the SNP-led Scottish Executive for, he claimed, having chosen to spend the money on cutting the council tax.

Dr Ian Gibson (Lab, Norwich North) urged that more be done to support children with autism and Asperger's. Annette Brooke (LDP, Mid-Dorset & North Poole) wanted to know what the Government was going to do to overcome the failure of Sure Start to reach many of the most disadvantaged families.

HC 2007/0460

School Funding in Shropshire

House of Commons • Adjournment Debate • 11 December 2007

Owen Paterson (Con, North Shropshire) had sought this short debate in order to raise the related problems of the prospective school closures and the fact that Shropshire is almost at the bottom of the local authority funding table for education.

Mr Paterson highlighted the geographical challenges faced by a county with a population of only 289,000 scattered across a wide area. Despite these difficulties it was an authority that performed above the national average in many areas, with good results at both key stage 2 and at GCSE.

This success was despite the fact, Mr Paterson claimed, that the authority received £337 less per pupil than the average authority. Over a year that meant £13.23 million less for Shropshire to spend on schools. The position was going to get worse by 2011, when it would reach a gap of £385 per pupil. Mr Paterson contrasted that with the £7,089 per pupil received by the City of London and he challenged the Minister to argue that it was fair for the City of London to receive twice what Shropshire received per pupil.

Mr Paterson explained that falling school rolls meant that the county would have to review school provision because there were already a substantial number of empty places. He argued that there were reasons for not launching a school closure programme, including high levels of immigration into the county since the enlargement of the EU and the fact that women were having children later in life. He believed that the school reorganisation was entirely unnecessary and driven fundamentally by Shropshire's lack of funds.

The fact that the BSF programme did not reach Shropshire for some years yet also aggrieved Mr Paterson. He also argued that ministers had repeatedly claimed that they did not allow rural schools to close. Mr Paterson said that he did not want any more tax to be raised for Shropshire but for the county to receive a fairer share of existing funds so that it could avoid "a bitter and costly closure programme".

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Children, Schools & Families, Kevin Brennan (Lab, Cardiff West), congratulated Shropshire's schools on their good performance but he resolutely defended the school funding system. Mr Brennan contended that Shropshire had seen a substantial rise of 38 per cent in its school funding grants from the Government since 1997. There had been a dramatic increase in funds for school building as well.

Mr Brennan told MPs that the funding system reflected the fact that some areas had greater deprivation and higher costs than other areas. He said that the problems of disadvantaged areas were very serious because of the gap in outcomes for children in those areas compared to other children. The Government was determined to close that attainment gap. He did point out that the budget for schools did now fund pockets of deprivation in relatively prosperous areas. He also said that a major review of the school funding system would begin in the New Year.

The Minister confirmed that the rules on surplus places were different in rural areas, where it might be necessary to maintain a higher proportion of empty places. He also acknowledged that Shropshire was in a later wave of BSF but for that reason was being given extra funds to tackle those schools that were in the worst conditions.

HC 2007/0461

Youth Volunteering

House of Commons • Oral Questions, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster • 12 December 2007

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, Ed Miliband (Lab, Doncaster North) is the Minister responsible for the voluntary sector. In that capacity he answered questions on youth volunteering.

The junior Minister at the Cabinet Office, Phil Hope (Lab, Corby) told Kevan Jones (Lab, North Durham) that the Government would be investing £117 million in youth volunteering through a charitable organisation over the period 2008-11. Mr Jones suggested that self-help by young people should be supported as one good example of volunteering; Mr Hope agreed.

Peter Bottomley (Con, Worthing West) urged the minister to support organisations like the Guides, Scouts and the Woodcraft Folk and the cadet units of the armed forces. The minister said that he very much did so.

Bill Oler (Lab, Nuneaton) was concerned that there could be obstacles in the way of young people volunteering. Mr Hope told him that he wanted every young person to have a chance to volunteer and there would be teams in every local authority helping with youth work in volunteering.

Joan Walley (Lab, Stoke-on-Trent North) welcomed the “record investment” in the youth volunteering programme and Shona McIsaac (Lab, Cleethorpes) raised the question as to how enough coaches could be found to maintain youth teams.

HC 2007/0462

Education Questions

House of Commons • Oral Questions, Prime Minister • 12 December 2007

It was young people and not schools that featured in Prime Minister’s Questions as Mr Brown (Lab, Kirkcaldy & Cowdenbeath) found his own party keen to talk about this issue. The fact that they did so at both Cabinet Office questions immediately before those to the Prime Minister perhaps indicated a certain level of advance preparation.

Mr David Clelland (Lab, Tyne Bridge) said that one of the barriers to young people receiving training or education was the cost of transport; he wanted to know if the Prime Minister had any plans to address that problem. Mr Brown agreed that it was a possible barrier and that adults were already going to be helped with transport costs. He agreed to look at the matter.

Helen Jones (Lab, Warrington North) also had a transport-related question – in her case it was about the difficulty of accessing youth facilities in disadvantaged areas like Burtonwood in her constituency. The Prime Minister was keen to talk about the Government’s plans to expand the number of youth centres and he accused the Conservatives of opposing this and other proposals to improve opportunities for young people.

HC 2007/0463

Academy Sponsorship

House of Commons • Oral Questions, Church Commissioners • 13 December 2007

Each month there are Oral Questions to the Member of Parliament who represents the Church Commissioners in the House of Commons. This month Bob Russell (LDP, Colchester) asked a question about the sponsorship of academies by the Church of England.

Sir Stuart Bell (Lab, Middlesbrough), the Second Church Estates Commissioner, told Mr Russell that the Church was in “daily contact” with the Department for Children, Schools & Families over the development of academies sponsored by the Church.

Mr Russell was probably not too happy about that because his point was to criticise the Church, in the form of the diocese of Chelmsford, for “being involved in the closure of two community secondary schools” and what he called the imposition of an Anglican academy in south Colchester. He wondered how that would win hearts and minds for the church. Sir Stuart told him that all of the Church’s academies were “largely for local pupils and the majority have no faith criteria for admission,” nor did they set out to convert pupils but to “nurture, affirm and challenge within a community founded on Christian values”.

HC 2007/0464

UK-Pakistan Protocol on Children

House of Commons • Adjournment Debate • 13 December 2007

Paul Rowen (LDP, Rochdale) introduced an adjournment debate about the UK-Pakistan protocol on children’s affairs because of a local constituency matter concerning the Akhter family. This report is not concerned with the case of the Akhter family, which is in any case before the courts so even Mr Rowan was limited in what he could say about them.

The UK-Pakistan protocol on children’s matters was signed in 2003 between the president of the Family Division of the Royal Courts of Justice in England and the Chief Justice of Pakistan. It aims to “protect the children of the UK and Pakistan from the harmful effects of wrongful removal or retention from one country to the other”. It is designed to help deal with cases where one parent in a failed marriage seeks to take their children out of one of the countries to the other country without the consent of the other parent. However, the High Court in Pakistan sometimes views the protocol as a non-binding memorandum of understanding and is not always prepared to enforce it.

Dr Kim Howells (Lab, Pontypridd), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister of State for the Middle East, responding to the debate, said that international parental child abduction was not new, nor was it uncommon. In 2003 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office set up a dedicated child abduction section within the consular directorate to provide advice and support to parents affected by child abduction. The 1980 Hague convention on the civil aspects of international child abduction is an international convention under which legal procedures are agreed between a number of countries, including the United Kingdom, to assist in the return of a child who has been abducted. This does not work with all countries, as some aspects of sharia law conflict with the principles of the convention. The convention argues that the country of habitual residence should be the deciding factor in determining where custody issues should be resolved. Most cases of abducted British children, almost a fifth of the total, involve Pakistan. This is a country that practices sharia family law and has not signed the Hague Convention. The protocol is a judicial consensus and is not legally binding. The minister said that the protocol aims to secure the return of abducted children to the country where they normally live, without regard to the nationality, culture or religion of the parents, so that matters of custody and access can be resolved by the courts there.

HC 2007/0465

Children, Schools & Families

House of Commons • Oral Questions, Children, Schools & Families •
17 December 2007

December's oral question time for Ministers at the Department of Children, Schools & Families was full of lively exchanges and contained an interesting debate about international comparisons of educational standards.

Education leaving age

Sarah McCarthy-Fry (Lab, Portsmouth) believed that raising the education leaving age would help those young people who had been in care but Sir Patrick Cormack (Con, South Staffordshire) could see no point in compelling young people to stay in education “unless there is adequate tuition and guidance in the crafts”. The Secretary of State for Children, Schools & Families, Ed Balls (Lab, Normanton) agreed with Ms McCarthy-Fry on improving outcomes for children in care and told Sir Patrick that the point of the Education & Skills Bill was to give every 16 and 17 year-old a right to an apprenticeship.

Children, Schools & Families Select Committee chairman Barry Sheerman (Lab, Huddersfield) said that the Education Bill was not “a staying on in schools” Bill but he urged that something be done for young people before the leaving age was raised in 2013. Mr Balls told him that things were being done before then – such as the extension of education maintenance allowances and help to enable children to get on to an apprenticeship.

Alan Beith (LDP, Berwick-upon-Tweed) pointed out that 16 year-olds in his area “compelled to attend courses” would have to go to an FE college 50 miles away when they were charged £360 a year for transport by the Government. Mr Balls said that there would be an obligation on local authorities to make provision available but he accepted that transport costs would have to be considered.

International comparisons

Asked about international comparisons of education standards by Mark Harper (Con, Forest of Dean) and Philip Hollobone (Con, Kettering), the Minister for Schools & Learners, Jim Knight (Lab, South Dorset) said that England had participated in two recent international studies, the PIRLS study of reading attainment at 10 years old and the PISA study of science performance at 15. Mr Knight explained the fall in the UK position in these tables when he told MPs that both surveys “enjoyed much higher levels of participation by other countries than previous studies” and independent analysis showed that “we have moved from below average to above average”.

Mr Harper wanted to know why the UK had fallen from eighth to 24th in the OECD maths league table; the OECD had itself said that the sample was too small to use for comparative purposes, Mr Knight replied, but in science England was “found to be among the best in the world”.

Mr Hollobone thought the evidence showed that Britain was falling down the international league tables in literacy and suggested that it was “a source of national shame”. Mr Knight said that the Government was taking steps to improve literacy but he said the sample for one of the studies had been too small and that in the other study the fall was due to “the fact that higher attaining readers are not spending enough time reading, and are being too distracted by computer games”.

Sally Keeble (Lab, Northampton North) asked what help was available to help underperforming local authorities improve; there were resources as part of the national strategies to help authorities, Mr Knight told MPs, and to promote the findings of the Rose review of teaching reading.

Rob Marris (Lab, Wolverhampton South West) was a sceptic about the international comparisons because he said that UNICEF had been caught making up data about levels of poverty in Canada. The Minister said that the Government proceeded “with a certain amount of caution” with these kinds of projects but it did want to participate in them. The studies did show that there was, for example, a “very large gap in performance between the lower achieving and the highest achieving pupils in this country”.

Jon Trickett (Lab, Hemsworth) concluded from the studies that there was no link between greater autonomy for schools and their performance; the real issue was “socio-economic inequalities”. He urged the Minister to move on from “the agenda on school governance”. Mr Knight said that the children's plan set out to narrow the gap in attainment but school governance was relevant.

Shadow Secretary of State Michael Gove (Con, Surrey Heath) told the House that more than 500 authors, co-ordinated by Channel 4, had written to the Secretary of State saying that over the last 10 years “our literacy performance was plummeting”. The Government had dropped their “more

ambitious literacy plans". Mr Knight hit back by saying that the Channel 4 assessment of Mr Gove's claims of falling literacy standards had shown that they were not supported by the OECD studies.

Mr Gove said that the Government used international studies when "they are convenient, but when they are inconvenient, they run away from the truth". The children's plan had made no mention of synthetic phonics, he said, and the Government were in danger of "caving in to the educational establishment by getting rid of rigorous testing". Mr Knight dismissed that intervention as largely "gloop" and said that he had not been criticising the OECD but quoting the OECD's own reservations about the data.

Child Employment

The Minister for Children, Beverley Hughes (Lab, Stretford & Urmston) disagreed with Lorely Burt's (LDP, Solihull) claim that the legislation on children at work was "chaotic and unworkable". Mrs Hughes accepted that there was a balance to get right between children's safety and giving them opportunities for work experience, but she believed that the law was adequate.

Unauthorised Absence

Andrew Rosindell (Con, Romford) wanted to know how many parents had been fined or jailed for not ensuring their children attended school. The junior Minister, Kevin Brennan (Lab, Cardiff West), did not know but he agreed with Kevan Jones (Lab, North Durham) on the importance of school's having a strong policy on unauthorised absence.

John Redwood (Con, Wokingham) alluded to the Prime Minister's absence from the recent European summit photocall in his question but Mr Brennan used his response to say that the Opposition's approach was to use "unauthorised absence as a measure of truancy" when the two things were not the same.

David Taylor (Lab, North West Leicestershire) was worried about parents who condoned their child's absence from school; the Minister agreed this was a problem and it was right for headteachers to refuse to authorise absence from school.

Shadow spokesman Tim Loughton (Con, East Worthing & Shoreham) pointed out that the Government had withdrawn the truancy targets from the public service targets published in October and he claimed that the truancy sweeps had not been working. Mr Brennan said that Mr Loughton was deliberately muddling truancy with unauthorised absence and opening himself up to ridicule.

Orphaned pupils

Philip Davies (Con, Shipley) wanted to know what help was available to support a young person who had been orphaned because he claimed a constituent of his had not been given proper advice. Mr Brennan said that if the girl had been given the advice Mr Davies had referred to, then "that is completely and utterly unprofessional and unacceptable". The Government was looking at the support provided to young people in that position.

Sex education

There was a call from Jo Swinson (LDP, East Dunbartonshire) for sex education in schools to be made statutory. Mr Knight rejected that idea, saying that Ofsted did not support it; the focus had to be on improving the quality of sex and relationship education in schools as part of PSHE.

Anthony Steen (Con, Totnes) thought that the dangers of being groomed for prostitution should be part of sex education; the Minister agreed and highlighted an example of how this had been done in one school through a project on the abolition of the slave trade.

Respite care

Gordon Marsden (Lab, Blackpool South) made a plea for Government support to enable families with disabled children to have short breaks. The Secretary of State told him that the Government were impressed by the work done by authorities like Blackpool Council and would be funding innovative approaches through pilot schemes over the next three years.

Tony Baldry (Con, Banbury) urged the Department to work with charities like the Family Holiday Association; Mr Balls promised that it would and said extra funding for 16 and 17 year-olds had been announced recently.

Nurseries

Dr Phyllis Starkey (Lab, Milton Keynes South West) got the opportunity to attack the Liberal Democrat controlled council in Milton Keynes which had planned to close several nurseries but had

now withdrawn those plans. Not surprisingly the Minister for Children congratulated her on her campaign and said it was “extraordinary” to be thinking about closing nursery provision.

Children’s Plan

Measures to support parents were the issue of interest to David Kidney (Lab, Stafford). Beverley Hughes told him that “supporting parents is central to the children’s plan”. Extra funding had been announced so that there could be two expert parent advisers in each authority.

Margaret Moran (Lab, Luton South) asked the Minister to consider using family workers across all schools following the success of a scheme in Luton. The Minister avoided committing herself to that but praised the work of family support workers.

Schools in Swindon

Anne Snelgrove’s (Lab, South Swindon) question about the BSF programme in the town sounded like an opportunity to repeat her party’s claim that the Conservatives will cut the BSF. That was what Jim Knight did when he reassured Ms Snelgrove that his colleague Mr Brennan had visited one of the dilapidated schools in Swindon and saw for himself the problems there.

Topical Questions

Sarah MacCarthy-Fry felt that too often vocational skills were not given the same respect as academic skills and wondered what could be done to tackle that problem. Mr Balls said that the Government had been working with business and universities to make sure that diplomas would bridge the academic and vocational divide; the CBI had welcomed them for that reason.

Philip Davies was puzzled by a booklet designed to encourage reading which said that they could be encouraged to read in any language, a statement which contrasted with the calls of the Communities Secretary for immigrants to learn English. Mr Balls said that it was important that parents read to their children and while they might do that in their mother tongue they should also do so in English.

Liberal Democrat education spokesman David Laws (Yeovil) asked Mr Balls why Britain was “bottom of the league table of social mobility” and why the situation had not improved in the last 10 years. Mr Balls claimed that the reforms of the Government were “designed to ensure that we break the link between poverty and educational achievement in our country”. Children who received free school meals had seen their results grow faster in the last five years, he added.

James Duddridge (Con, Rochford & Southend East) asked why Mr Balls had not told the House when he had announced the new system of testing that “one in seven schools in the pilot pulled out because of excessive bureaucracy”. Mr Knight said that this claim came from the *Times Educational Supplement* and should be treated with caution.

Andrew Mackinlay (Lab, Thurrock) was anxious for young people to see a live artistic performance; this was something referred to in the children’s plan, Mr Brennan told him. The Government were looking at a number of different approaches to ensuring that children had “top-quality cultural opportunities”.

Opposition spokesman Maria Miller (Con, Basingstoke) said that a report on nursery funding for the Department had shown that private, voluntary and independent nurseries were struggling to provide the provision for three and four year-olds because the Government funding was insufficient. Mrs Hughes denied this, saying that there were sufficient funds in the system but that some operators needed to examine their own costs.

Nigel Evans (Con, Ribble Valley) called for the Government to ensure every pupil had access to a school nurse. Mr Balls said that it was Labour manifesto commitment that they should; money was being provided through the Department of Health.

Andrew Selous (Con, South West Bedfordshire) said that 58,000 school appeals were rejected in 2005-06 and he asked how more could be done to help good schools expand. The Government believed that good schools should be able to expand but on a “managed basis” and not in a way that meant that surplus places emerged “willy-nilly at the expense of rebuilding much needed schools”.

John Mann (Lab, Bassetlaw) asked if a school was the “worst performing primary school in a local education authority year after year” whether the Secretary of State believed it was his role to intervene. Mr Balls said that it was in the final resort, if the local authority had not intervened.

In view of the large number of changes to secondary education, Miss Ann McIntosh (Con, Vale of York) asked whether it was right “to cut the budget by one per cent for efficiency savings”. It was very important to deliver the efficiency savings, Mr Balls told her “to support teachers delivering these reforms”.

HC 2007/0480

Select Committee Membership

House of Commons • Motions • 17 December 2007

Two motions to change the membership of education select committees were moved and agreed without debate or division. They concern changes in membership of the Select Committee for Children, Schools and Families and the Select Committee for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

Mrs Maria Miller (Con, Basingstoke) was discharged from the Children, Schools and Families Committee. She was replaced by Adam Afriyie (Con, Windsor), who moved from membership of the Innovations, Universities and Skills Committee where his place was taken by Tim Boswell (Con, Daventry), a former Conservative minister responsible for further education.

HC 2007/0481

Christmas Adjournment

House of Commons • Adjournment Debate • 18 December 2007

As usual the end of term adjournment debate, where MPs can raise any topic they like, produced a variety of speeches that referred to education and skills topics. They included an attack on academies, the funding problems of the Open University and the need for a school in Havering to have its own postcode.

A vociferous Government critic on the Labour back benches, Dr Ian Gibson (Lab, Norwich North), attacked the proposal for an academy at Heartsease in his constituency, quoting the local newspaper as saying that the public had been “duped” by a “vile campaign”. The people of the estate did not want the academy and he asked for the Minister to meet him to discuss the issue.

Dr Gibson also spoke about special educational needs in the context of a proposal to close Parkside, a special school for children with mild to moderate learning difficulties. He said that it had been praised by Ofsted and he could not understand why the county wanted to close it. He claimed that Norfolk had fewer children in special schools and despite the rising population of the county had not built any new special schools. Part of the weakness of the consultation he believed was that there had been no attempt to calculate how many children with special needs there were in the county.

Mark Lancaster (Con, Milton Keynes North East) spoke about the needs of the town in its fortieth anniversary year. He said that the Government still wanted the town to expand but had cut their basic needs allocation for building new schools. Fifteen new primary schools would be needed over the next few years to accommodate the growing population and five new secondary schools. The cut the Government had made amounted to £64.5 million.

Mr Lancaster described the many successes of the Open University since its foundation 38 years ago and the way that it was involved in the community of Milton Keynes. He said that the effect of the Government’s decision to cut funding for students with equivalent or lower level qualifications would hit hard people seeking to retrain through the OU. He said that “instead of part-time study being favoured because of its economic benefits, it is always the poor cousin”. Mr Lancaster hoped that his early day motion signed by 204 MPs would make the Government think again.

Angela Watkinson (Con, Upminster) talked about the funding problems faced by her authority as a result of its increase in budget being held at two per cent. This had resulted in cuts to the youth service.

Ms Watkinson finished her remarks with a description of the bizarre difficulty a school in her constituency has had in getting its own postcode; having the same name as a convent school next door their post was often muddled up and sometimes inaccessible for weeks during the holidays.

HC 2007/0482

Debates in the House of Lords

Adult Learners

House of Lords • Short Debate • 3 December 2007

The Government announced in September that it was directing the Higher Education Funding Council for England to transfer £100 million a year away from students who were studying for an equivalent or lower level qualification (ELQ) in higher education. This proposal has met with near universal condemnation in higher education. Baroness Sharp of Guildford (LDP, Life) had tabled a motion for debate, asking Her Majesty's Government, "why at a time when they are encouraging people to upgrade skills and continue working later in life, adult learners taking a second qualification at an equivalent or lower level to that already held must pay full-cost fees?"

Baroness Sharp set out the proposals of the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities & Skills, John Denham MP (Lab, Southampton Itchen), and in particular highlighted Mr Denham's argument that resources needed to be redirected to those who had had no higher education qualification. By releasing £100 million this way, 10,000 extra full-time student places could be created. The argument was that giving resources to ELQ students denied places to those who had never been to a higher education institution. The logic sounded irrefutable, Lady Sharp said, but it was not obvious that "there are many knocking on the door of higher education and being denied entry" and falling school rolls would mean that places would be freed up for adults over the next few years. She questioned whether it was right to make these cuts now when adults were not coming forward for these places.

Lady Sharp said that the proposal would have significant financial consequences for a number of institutions. In the case of the Open University it estimated that it would lose 29,000 of its 120,000 students – the equivalent of three medium-sized universities. Many universities had part-time courses with many ELQ students and they would be vulnerable to closure if the ELQ students were unable or unwilling to finance the whole cost of their course. Lady Sharp said that the proposals hit disproportionately those who the Government was trying to attract in to higher education, namely part-timers. About 20 per cent of part-time students would be affected as opposed to two per cent of full-time students. Many of these students were older and were training for new careers.

The institutions worst affected by this change would be those reaching out to their communities and bringing people into higher education, such as London South Bank University, Anglia Ruskin University, Barking College and Lewisham College, Lady Sharp told peers.

The baroness did acknowledge that the Government had compromised in some ways: not all subjects would be hit, with specific exemptions for medicine, architecture, nursing and all the science and technology subjects. But she could not understand why pharmacy had not been exempted and she called on Ministers to consider delaying implementing the changes.

Lady Sharp suggested that the resources to fund ELQ students could be found from the Train to Gain budget, which was being doubled despite doubts as to whether employers had "the will or the capacity to absorb this money and expand that fast". Studies showed that no less than 85 per cent of Train to Gain programmes were paying employers for training they would have provided anyway.

No one in the House spoke in support of the Government in the debate that followed. Some were firmer in their criticism than others. Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe (Lab, Life), the chief executive of Universities UK, said that students in certain sectors frequently retrained for a change in career, including psychology, education and the performing arts.

Lord Dearing (CB, Life) suggested that while he supported the change in emphasis to ensure that the target of getting a further two million people up to level 4 by 2020, he did not believe that that target would be reached "if we now take action that will damage the institutions that can deliver on that". He suggested ring-fencing the ELQ money provided institutions changed their overall approach to fit in with the Government's objective.

Lord Watson of Richmond (LDP, Life) claimed that the Open University would lose as much as 12 per cent of its operational budget.

Baroness Blackstone (Lab, Life), a former Higher Education Minister in the Blair Government and now vice chancellor of Greenwich University, asked some tough questions of today's Ministers. She

wanted various courses, including HNDs and HNCs, exempt from the change. She could not understand why teacher training courses for FE colleges were included in courses for which students would have to pay the full cost because, she said, that broke a promise made when she was Minister and she called for a delay in the policy's implementation.

Lord Plant of Highfield (Lab, Life) told the chamber that 54 per cent of ELQ students were in London; this reflected the fact that London was a hub for the cultural and creative industries. This was also true of pharmacy; he said that the "London School of Pharmacy will be seriously destabilised by the loss of income". Music schools would also be adversely affected.

While Lord Quirk (CB, Life) called on the Government to "recognise the storm of reasoned objections and back off", Lord Morgan (Lab, Life) called the proposal "philistine" and "deeply damaging to English universities". He pointed out that institutions such as Oxford University would lose income – £4 million in the case of Oxford – and he called it a "terrible blow for the Open University, of which Labour is deeply proud".

Lord Haskins (CB, Life) said that loss to the Open University would amount to £31 million after three years. He was sceptical about how it would be possible to ensure that a student did not already have a degree or other qualification, especially those who came from overseas.

Lord Griffiths of Barry Port (Lab, Life) reminded peers that almost all trainee clergy were doing a second degree and would therefore be affected by the proposal. He urged Ministers to reconsider the change. Another Labour peer, Lord Puttnam (Lab, Life) said that there was "an overwhelming case for significant and constructive change within this sector" but he asked whether the Government understood that "continuing to batter the sector and pulling stunts such as this only allows the universities themselves to retreat into a bunker from it is almost impossible to create change".

Baroness Walmsley (LDP, Life), for the Liberal Democrats, urged retreat, saying that because foundation degrees were exempt but other courses were not, some students might be pushed into taking the wrong course for financial reasons.

For the Opposition, Baroness Verma (Con, Life), said that those in work needed the opportunity to retrain and she said that this "retrograde step" was at odds with the Government's own commitment to the skills agenda. Lady Verma said that the Shadow Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities & Skills (David Willetts MP) had said that the idea had "all the hallmarks of a rushed and potentially damaging proposal".

The Government's response

Responding for the Government, Lord Triesman (Lab, Life), the junior Minister at the Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills, recognised the scale of his task when he said that he had "not detected an outpouring of warm support for the proposals". He put the changes to ELQ student funding in the context of the Government having to make decisions about priorities. The Government had increased funding for higher education by 25 per cent in real terms since 1997 but there was a finite sum of public spending and it was necessary to choose between competing priorities. The Minister set out the Government's priorities in further and higher education and explained that the cut to ELQ funding would be far less than the £100 million referred to at first. It would be about £25 million next year and £60 million the year after. It was also not the case that all ELQ student funding was being cut; in fact, they were removing less than one-third of the £327 million spent on that group. No institution would lose cash on its 2007-08 baselines for three years and no decision had been taken about additional savings in the next comprehensive spending review period. Lord Triesman argued that the Government's approach was fairer because "it helps more qualified people to get into higher education". Lord Triesman sought to persuade the House that the proposed changes were not incompatible with ambitions for improving skills in the Leitch Report. The central message of that report had been that we needed to increase the number of people with higher level qualifications; the Minister argued that we would not achieve that goal "if we continue to prioritise those who already have such qualifications over those who do not".

The Minister disputed the claims about the high level of income that would be lost to the Open University as a result of the change. Of the £100 million to be redistributed, Lord Triesman said that the Government believed about £12 million would come from the OU by 2011. The OU would benefit from the extra students going into higher education as a result of the reallocation. Lord Triesman agreed to consider the suggestion of Lord Dearing that the universities most affected by the ELQ funding change be put at the top of the list for expansion using the redirected resources. The Minister was firm on the absence of consultation: the Government had been clear about its priorities and that was "not a matter for consultation" but they were now consulting about how to implement the changes.

HL 2007/0448

Higher Education: Adults

House of Lords • Oral Question • 4 December 2007

Crossbench peer Lord Quirk (Life) asked Her Majesty's Government: "Whether they will increase the amount of support and encouragement for adults to pursue part-time higher education?" Lord Quirk's question enabled peers to resume their criticism of the Government over the planned redirection of resources in higher education.

Lord Triesman replied that the Government had introduced in 2006-07, "the most generous package of financial support that has ever been offered to part-time students". It included increases in the maximum grant of 27 per cent above inflation.

Lord Quirk referred back to the debate the previous night and the "nigh unanimous support" across the House for the Government to change its stand on ELQ students. Lord Triesman said that consultation was taking place and he fully intended that the many serious points made in the debate should be fed into the consultation process but he could not give undertakings about the outcome of that process.

Lord Mackay of Clashfern (Con, Life) used the opportunity of an education question to congratulate Lord Ahmed (Lab, Life) and Baroness Warsi (Con, Life) on the safe return of British teacher Gillian Gibbons from the Sudan.

Lord Morgan was another peer to refer to the previous day's debate about ELQ students and to ask the Minister what proposals he had to mitigate the effects for the Open University. The Minister urged the House to "look with caution at all figures produced about the likely consequences for the Open University" but he accepted the need to work with the OU on "a sustainable business model".

Baroness Carnegy of Lour (Con, Life) wanted to know how a proposal that she claimed was "so clearly damaging to the Open University" came to be made. Lord Triesman did not accept that the policy was unwise. The aim was to increase the resources for those who had never been able to go to university. The choice was made to reallocate resources from those who had a first degree or equivalent to those who did not.

Baroness Howe of Idlicote (CB, Life) said that she had been unable to be at the debate but strongly supported the OU. She wanted to know how the Minister answered the point that women returning to education would be particularly hard hit. Lord Triesman said that 57 per cent of ELQ students were women – the same proportion as the non-ELQ group. About 10 million women in the workforce did not have a higher level qualification "and they are among those whom we have sought to prioritise by this policy move".

HL 2007/0449

Schools

House of Lords • Short Debate • 6 December 2007

Baroness Perry of Southwark (Con, Life) introduced a debate on schools policy. She said that the policy Green Paper issued by the Conservative Party entitled *Raising the Bar, Closing the Gap*, set out the party's proposals for improving the provision of education for children and young people.

In the Green Paper David Cameron had said: "Britain today is a country where it is harder, not easier, for children to achieve their potential". Lady Perry said that during Labour's 10 years in office, social mobility had stalled and the country's educational achievement had fallen down the international league tables. Education had suffered because of Whitehall's belief that the way to improve standards was central control, bureaucratic directives, oppressive targets and a punitive inspection regime, which had demoralised and disempowered teachers. She said that there was worrying evidence that for a large number of young people, school contributed little of relevance or value to their lives. The curriculum on offer was manifestly unsuited to their needs, interests and motivation, so they failed to achieve any worthwhile qualification.

Lady Perry claimed that there were far too many schools where standards were below expectation. The real question was not about admissions policies, but about how to increase the total number of

good school places. Therefore the Conservative Party was taking as a model for policy the experience of Sweden's past 15 years, where the system allowed new high-quality, non-selective state schools to be created which were free from any political control. All parents had the power to take their child out of the state school if they were dissatisfied and apply to one of the new independent schools as the money followed the pupil from one school to another. She claimed that the degree of parental choice and parental involvement had brought about a rise in standards in all state schools.

Although the Baroness supported the Government in establishing new independent academies within the state system, there were so many restrictions on the setting up of the schools that the policy had not flourished as widely as it should have. The Conservative Green Paper promised 220,000 new school places in schools which would enjoy a great degree of freedom.

The Green Paper promised improvements in Ofsted's methods with more detailed inspections for schools where attainment was poor, and lighter inspection regimes for those schools where the outcomes were good. In the report of the Conservative policy commission on public services, on which Lady Perry was co-chairman along with Stephen Dorrell, a new partnership with the teaching profession had been recommended in which senior professionals had a part in developing policy and an input in determining the criteria for their own accountability to the public. The report had also recommended the establishment of a Royal College of Teachers, on the model of the royal colleges in the medical profession.

Baroness Massey of Darwen (Lab, Life) argued that the Government had developed several strategies to do what the noble Baroness wanted. She said that one aspect of achievement and of being a good school was academic progress and it was unquestionable that standards had risen over the past 10 years.

The Prime Minister's promises

Lord Dearing (CB, Life) pointed out that the Prime minister had promised one to one tuition for 300,000 children in English and 300,000 in maths, but he had not indicated what timetable the Government had in mind. He said that the causes of children's difficulty with either reading or sums needed to be expertly diagnosed. He said that preferably every primary school should have a specially trained teacher to identify the cause of, and the best teaching approach to respond to the needs of the child, or the local authority should provide that expert diagnostic service. He said that league tables carried great weight and influence in public opinion. Although he agreed that SATs had worked, because they had focused minds on achievement, inevitably they could lead to teachers concentrating on the near borderline children who had a chance of reaching the required standard, to the detriment of those who had no chance. Lord Dearing said that to avoid the damage caused by the present SATs and league tables, at least at primary level, either SATs should be dropped completely until Mr Brown's policy had been fully implemented or the information on them should be restricted to value added, which was the whole purpose of education. He said that national and sub-national standards could be monitored by sampling using SATs-like tests. He said that while SATs had had an effect on things that were tested, they were not necessarily the same thing as preparing children for life. Therefore, they needed to be rethought.

Lord Dearing said that an example that had troubled him when he was carrying out the review on languages was the influence of the SATs on head teachers who perceived languages as difficult and especially demanding in the levels of marking that applied to them. Since languages had become an entitlement as opposed to a requirement the proportion of pupils taking languages had fallen from 80 per cent to below 50 per cent. Lord Dearing believed in setting by ability and he also lamented the way in which the development of technology and skills in education had been neglected.

Lord Sutherland of Houndwood (CB, Life), a former Chief Inspector of Schools in England, said that many schools faced the problem of trying to teach the skills of spoken and written English and reading in schools where a very high proportion of pupils did not have English as their first language, and in which English very often was not the first language of home, if it was spoken there at all. He also called on the Government to take account of the constant refrain from huge numbers of teachers and head teachers who found themselves overwhelmed by central initiatives and the paperwork that went with them. He asked the ministers and their departments to begin to prioritise and to reduce the number of initiatives.

Baroness Howells of St Davids (Lab, Life) said that the Caribbean's reputation for good schooling had been growing because respect for teachers and respect for elders was still an important facet of raising children. Many black parents still preferred to send their children—and their sons in particular—to schools there. She said that attainment in education was one of the key ingredients to equality of opportunity. Children from low-income or disadvantaged backgrounds, including many who were black or from other ethnic minorities, needed, more than their wealthier peers, to have an

excellent education in English, maths and science. She believed that it was a retrograde step that modern languages were no longer compulsory for pupils to GCSE level. In a high-skill service economy in a global world, where communication was vital, those at the bottom needed, more than most, to have as many communications tools at their disposal as possible.

Every Child a Reader

Baroness Warnock (CB, Life) said that the document, *Every Child A Reader*, showed that efforts were being concentrated on the right end of the education system: the early years. But she agreed with Lord Dearing that the transition from primary to secondary school was equally important and that many of the considerations that applied to the very early years should apply again when children changed schools at that stage. She asked the minister if the practice of allowing children to take tests when they were ready was underway, and if so would it be extended to other school subjects.

She shared the enthusiasm of Lord Howard, for old-fashioned teaching methods in reading. One of the reasons that she thought it was a good and proven system of teaching was that it made it easier to detect early signs of dyslexia. She asked the Minister how far matters have progressed in ensuring that, especially in the first year at school and then again as a check-up in the first year of secondary school, every child was watched to see whether they had dyslexia or whether they had the same neurological problems with numbers as other children had with words. She said that such children should have access to a specialist teacher, as it was no good their being taught one to one by someone who did not know the technique of teaching dyslexic children. Lady Warnock strongly agreed with Lord Sutherland about the importance of music in schools. She hoped that the Government would put pressure on smaller radio companies to provide programmes that would help children to sing together in schools.

Baroness Sharp of Guildford (LDP, Life) said that an interesting report, called *Reducing Inequalities: Realising the Talents of All*, had been sponsored by the National Children's Bureau, the Institute of Education and the National Family and Parenting Institute, and published in September 2007. It had revealed that, by the age of three, children from poorer homes were six months behind those from more advantaged homes. She claimed that middle-class parents flocked to middle-class schools, filling the waiting lists and leaving no places for the less well-informed, less well-motivated and less knowledgeable families from the neighbourhood. Where schools were able to select their pupils, as Sutton Trust research had shown, those trends were exacerbated.

Baroness Morris of Bolton (Con) said that following the Secretary of State's announcement in July, new academies would no longer have the freedom and independence that is the source of their ability to make a difference. It seemed that the Government was set on watering them down by forcing them back into the national curriculum and encouraging local authorities to co-sponsor them, thereby vitiating their purpose of providing diversity. She was also concerned about the announcement that the Prime Minister's delivery unit was to undertake a root-and-branch review of academies. She concluded that the present Government lacked commitment to the academies programme, and were backtracking which, she pointed out, would also be on the minds of many who were considering sponsoring academies.

Ministerial response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Children, Schools and Families, Lord Adonis (Lab, Life) said that there were many good schools and that the number had been increasing in recent years. Although Ofsted had rated nearly two out of three schools as good or outstanding, and the proportion of schools judged inadequate now stood at only 6 per cent, he wanted to see more schools in the good or outstanding category and fewer schools in the inadequate category. He said that it was a particular concern of the Government that more than 600 secondary schools had failed to achieve the new ambition for every secondary school of 30 per cent or more pupils achieving five or more good GCSE passes, including English and maths.

Lord Adonis believed that there would be general agreement across the House that there were five essential elements in producing more good schools: first, there needed to be enough effective teachers and support staff. Secondly, every school needed an effective head teacher and school leadership team. Thirdly, there needed to be an effective system for improving or for closing failing schools and opening new schools. Fourthly, a modern curriculum was needed that gave primacy to the basics of literacy and numeracy, but with breadth and depth beyond enabling all young people to develop their talents to the full. Fifthly, fit-for-purpose school buildings were needed with the facilities necessary to deliver the curriculum but also the increasingly wide range of services needed to promote the well-being of children and their families and wider communities.

Lord Adonis said that many underperforming schools were turned around without the need for drastic remedies such as closure or the establishment of new schools. The action plan regime at school

level which concentrated the minds of school leaders on the need to bring about defined improvements where defined weaknesses had been identified, had been highly successful in improving schools. As a result some 1,668 schools had come out of special measures since 1997.

HL 2007/0450

Children's Plan

House of Lords • Oral Statement • 11 December 2007

When the statement on the Children's Plan was repeated in the House of Lords peers discussed many of the same issues as those raised in the lower house. There was a general welcome for the plan but questions on the specifics.

Speaking for the Conservative Party, Baroness Morris of Bolton (Life) highlighted the difficulties with Sure Start. She said that in many areas it had "failed to reach the very children it was designed to help" and she wondered how this would improve for two-year-olds. She also felt that the developmental issues with such young children were considerable and she worried about the Government's proposals for the foundation stage. On education she pointed out that this 10 year plan came only three and a half years into the *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* which had a series of ambitious targets, some of which she told peers had not been reached. She highlighted in particular the failure to achieve the target of 85 per cent of children reaching the expected levels at key stage 2. She wondered if the Government regarded the current figure of 78 per cent as acceptable. She did not disagree with greater parental involvement but thought that rather than talking about regular email contact between schools and parents, they should instead address the fact that 58,000 of the 79,000 school admission appeals failed in 2005-06 and the highest failure rate was in deprived areas where more than half of appellants failed to get into the school of their choice.

Baroness Walmsley (LDP, Life) agreed on the importance of early years but questioned whether it was right for a child as young as two to be in a nursery and the possibility that the Government was really saying to parents that it knew how to do the parenting job better. She also questioned the need for "another root and branch review of the primary curriculum" and she had doubts about the evaluation of the SEAL programme which the Government intended to roll out nationally.

Lady Walmsley drew particular attention to the needs of children with speech and language difficulties and wondered what was in the plan that would help them.

Lord Adonis (Lab, Life), Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Schools & Families, was clear that the "prime responsibility for bringing up children must of course reside with parents". The Government was offering more help and advice to parents to help narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor.

The Minister believed that standards had risen in schools but he said that the Government did not consider the current level of achievement at key stage 2 as sufficient. It was because they wished to see improvements that they were implementing the recommendations of the Rose review of reading and were commissioning Jim Rose to look at the primary curriculum.

Lord Dearing (CB, Life) expressed his support for the plan, welcoming in particular the inclusion of modern foreign languages in the primary curriculum review. He called for help so that those young people unable to take the key stage 2 tests in future while at primary school at 11, but who would take them later at secondary school, were properly supported.

The Minister sounded much more cautious than the Secretary of State when he gave further details of the proposed changes to the primary testing regime. "Such a step would require substantial and proper support. Big issues are raised about how it would be implemented in practice," he said and he went to explain that that was why the new approach was being piloted in over 400 schools. These pilots would be evaluated "before we make firm commitments on how we proceed".

Former Education Secretary Baroness Morris of Yardley (Lab, Life) was concerned at the suggestion that key stage 2 tests might be abolished. "One externally set test between the ages of five and 11 is not over-burdensome" she suggested. She wondered how it would be possible for parents to compare schools without the key stage 2 tests. Lady Morris was also concerned that teachers could take on too much and not focus on their core responsibilities for teaching and learning.

HL 2007/0466

Debates in the Scottish Parliament

Class Sizes

Scottish Parliament • Ministerial Statement • 5 December 2007

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop (SNP, Lothians) made a statement on class sizes. She said that as part of the new relationship with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, local government would deliver year-on-year progress in reducing class sizes in primary 1 to primary 3 to a maximum of 18 pupils.

Mrs Hyslop said that total pupil numbers were expected to drop from 703,000 in 2006 to 666,000 in 2011 and to rise again to 680,000 in 2020. The projections showed that there would be 10,000 more pupils by 2011 and 60,000 more by 2020. Most of the change was due to revised population projections, following the GROS publication of 23 October, to allow for increased birth rates and inward migration. As a result of the revised population projections, an additional 450 primary teachers by 2011 and 2,100 primary teachers by 2020 would be required simply to meet those demographic demands. She said that the government did not underestimate the scale of the challenge, as only 11 per cent of pupils in P1 to P3 were currently in classes of 18 or fewer, but she believed that having smaller class sizes for all in the critical early years was the right policy and the best approach. Thousands more teachers would have to be trained, and she expected that more than 20,000 people would have entered training by 2011.

The minister said that the government would provide sufficient resources to allow Government to broadly maintain teacher numbers as pupil numbers fell, as part of a package that had delivered an extra £1.3 billion for local government by 2010-11. There would be a reduction in ring-fenced funding streams from £2.7 billion in 2007-08 to less than £0.9 billion by 2010-11. On 2007-08 figures, the ability to retain all efficiency savings was worth £213 million each year—£639 million in total. Those measures would provide local government with the resources and flexibility to make real progress on bringing down class sizes in P1 to P3.

Rhona Brankin (Lab, Midlothian) said that the Scottish National Party's manifesto costings for reducing class sizes were £210 million, but there was no specific costing in the government's agreement with COSLA. She asked the Cabinet Secretary if she had given specific funding to councils to deliver the manifesto promise, and queried what would be left for services after inflation and the council tax freeze. Ms Brankin also asked if the SNP manifesto pledge to deliver £30 million for an additional support fund had been broken because of the class size pledge.

Fiona Hyslop said the concordat stated that: "the Scottish government and local government will each do what is required to ensure delivery of key government policies and programmes including ... reducing class sizes in P1 to P3 to a maximum of 18". She said that the wording expected year-on-year progress from local government over the spending review period and the SNP party's period in office. Mrs Hyslop said that the figure of the cash increase for local government was £1.3 billion. The figure after inflation was £500 million, but there were also efficiency savings, which local government could keep. Efficiency could also be gained from not having ring-fenced funding. Mrs Hyslop said that the additional support for children with special needs had been specified in the concordat.

Murdo Fraser (Con, Mid Scotland and Fife) said that there was no costing in the statement for the class size reduction policy pledge or any timescale for implementation. He said that when he had asked during the meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee about costings for the concordat, COSLA representatives had responded by saying that they had no figures to hand for specific education priorities, including the class size policy commitment.

Fiona Hyslop said that the Government would deliver on its manifesto pledge on a year-on-year basis. But she added that none of the specified manifesto commitments came with an individual price tag because the package as a whole was being presented to local government for agreement.

Jeremy Purvis (LDP, Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) asked the minister to confirm that the 20,000 teachers that she had mentioned were in addition to the current 53,000 teachers or would they be redeployed, rebadged and moved around. He said that if there was to be quicker year-on-year progress on class size reduction, why was there no baseline data for expectations. He asked how much of the £40 million capital for 2007-08 that the Cabinet Secretary referred to was being directed at reducing class sizes, and he asked where in the concordat was it stated that efficiency savings could be moved into education and used to reduce class sizes.

Mrs Hyslop said that she had not suggested that the 20,000 teachers would somehow be on top of the current 53,000. But the 20,000 teachers would help to maintain numbers in view of the level of retirements. She said that the £40 million would help contribute to the policy of reducing class sizes. To deliver the policy, the capital that would be available—£115 million extra in the first year, and 15 per cent across the piece—would have to be directed appropriately. Therefore to ensure that capital investment to reduce class sizes could be made in future years, the minister had agreed with local government that it might want to bring forward other capital investment projects so that investment in the spending review period could be dedicated to reducing class sizes.

SP 2007/0451

Fostering and Kinship Care

Scottish Parliament • Executive Debate • 5 December 2007

The Minister for Children and Early Years, Adam Ingram (SNP, South of Scotland) introduced a Scottish Executive debate on fostering and kinship care by saying that everyone had been dismayed by the 2006-07 looked-after children statistics, which showed an unacceptable lack of progress in the achievement of educational outcomes and positive destinations.

On 5 December, the Scottish government had published *Getting it Right for Every Child in Kinship and Foster Care*. He said that children who were looked after away from their families, and their dedicated carers, would be the first to benefit from a joint strategy between the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities which had followed the signing of a concordat in November. The minister said that there were five key principles at the heart of the strategy: first, that the needs of the child must be paramount; secondly, that families should be supported to stay together; thirdly, that where the child needed to be away from their birth parents, care within the family circle should be the first option, unless it was not in the best interests of the child.

Rhona Brankin (Lab, Midlothian) intervened to ask when allowances would be paid, and how the Government would ensure that they were paid by all councils. Mr Ingram replied that the concordat specifically committed the Government and COSLA to providing allowances for kinship carers, which had been covered by the cash settlement. He said that the current payment of allowances would continue, and he anticipated that kinship care allowances would start in April 2008. He then went on to complete his list of the five principles. The fourth principle in the strategy was that all placements should be designed to achieve stability and the fifth was that appropriate support should be provided.

Mr Ingram said that focus should be on prevention and on helping to build resilience in children and families in the early years. Those families who needed more help would be identified at an early stage, and agencies could then be mobilised under the getting it right for every child framework. He said that removing a child of any age from their parents is a huge step that placed a great responsibility on both the local authority, as the corporate parent, and on the carer of the child. But when that occurred, the wider family circle should be supported in looking after the child, if that was in the child's best interests. He said that although the majority of kinship carers did not want or need any interference by the state, they may welcome the occasional helping hand to ensure that both they and the children in their care were able to get the support that they needed. Therefore the Citizens Advice Scotland would establish a national framework of information services tailored to the needs of children in kinship care arrangements.

Ken Macintosh (Lab, Eastwood) asked how much money had been set aside for local authorities to pay for kinship allowances. Adam Ingram said that the Government would settle a block grant for local authorities.

Brian Adam (SNP, Aberdeen North) asked when the minister planned to publish the regulations on fostering and when they would come into force. The minister replied that consultation on the regulations would close in March, but he did not know if he would be in a position to launch the regulations thereafter. He said that from early 2009 the permanence order, which had been introduced by the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007, would give children for whom adoption or return to family was not possible the assurance of a permanent home with an approved carer or in an appropriate residential setting. Mr Ingram said that the Scottish Government and COSLA had established a multidisciplinary reference group, co-ordinated by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering

and the Fostering Network, to develop proposals on the recruitment and support of carers that were informed by best practice. It would report in the second half of 2008 and its recommendations would cover recruiting the right range and number of carers to meet the needs of children; providing a consistent assessment and approval process for foster and kinship carers; providing improved training arrangements to meet the requirements of current and future carers; and identifying whether existing organisational arrangements for placing children in foster and kinship care were fit for the challenges that he had outlined.

His department was consulting on a number of issues: the approval of foster carers and kinship carers; how to address any shortcomings that were identified in the recent report from the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care on the quality of fostering services; improving the planning process for the child; creating and retaining records; and removing existing barriers to recruitment by lifting the prohibition on fostering by same-sex couples.

Conservative support

Elizabeth Smith (Con, Mid Scotland and Fife) said that the Conservatives were happy to support the motion given the government's determination to pursue the strategy's main objectives. But she said it should be recognised that in some cases residential care could play an important role. Ms Smith added that whatever route was taken, it was imperative that the child's best interests came first in their educational development and their social and economic integration. She said that the Scottish Conservatives were concerned by the overall growth in demand for vital services and the question mark over whether the present funding arrangements were adequate.

Jeremy Purvis (LDP, Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) said that although the Liberal Democrats would not disagree with the Government's motion, they would not offer unconditional support for the proposed regulation. He was pleased that funding for advice and support for kinship carers was to be made available through Citizens Advice Scotland.

Christine Grahame (SNP, South of Scotland) asked where the £4 million package for training, advice and information for foster carers and approved kinship carers would be directed. Mr Ingram said that the £4 million was a one-off payment this year to provide foster and kinship carers with training packages, at a cost of £1,000 for each carer. But the demand had been so great that £6.2 million had been spend so far.

Robin Harper (Green, Lothians) said that more support should be available for 16-year-olds in their transition from care to the outside world. The Minister for Schools and Skills, Maureen Watt (SNP, North East Scotland) Maureen Watt said that under the new strategy such children would be identified early so that they could be helped. Rhona Brankin asked if an additional £10 million would be made available each year for kinship care. Maureen Watt said that £4 million had already been given this year and that central Government funding for kinship care had been moved to local government.

The following motion was agreed without a division. "That the Parliament recognises that the needs of a child are paramount and that families should be supported to stay together; agrees that, where the child needs to live away from his or her birth parents, care within the family circle by a kinship carer should be the first option unless it is not in the best interests of the child; believes that all placements for a child who must live away from his or her birth parents must provide a safe and nurturing home, whether for a planned short-term period or on a permanent basis, and affirms its commitment to the provision of equitable and appropriate support for all carers of looked-after children, with systems in place to ensure that carers can provide the best possible opportunities and chances to all looked-after children."

SP 2007/0452

School and University Funding

Scottish Parliament • Oral Questions, General • 6 December 2007

Frank McAveety (Lab, Glasgow Shettleston) asked the Scottish Executive what funding had been allocated for schools in the recent spending review statement. The Minister for Schools and Skills, Maureen Watt (SNP, North East Scotland) said that details were given in chapters 22 and 27 of the *Scottish Budget Spending Review 2007*. She said that direct investment by the Government in schools policy would be £409 million in total from 2008-09 to 2010-11 and most public sector expenditure on school education was channelled through local authorities.

Frank McAveety (Lab/Co-op, Glasgow Shettleston) asked what additional resources would be made available to Glasgow City Council to improve the level and range of sports activity in schools. Maureen Watt said that in taking forward the concordat with local government, the Scottish Government would engage with every local authority on single-outcome agreements.

Elizabeth Smith (Con, Mid Scotland and Fife) asked what plans the Scottish Government had within its share of the education budget to improve pupils' reading, writing and arithmetic skills. Maureen Watt said that the matter would continue to be discussed with local authorities.

Jeremy Purvis (LDP, Tweeddale, Etrick and Lauderdale) said that on 13 September the Minister for Schools and Skills said that education ministers had made a funding bid to the Cabinet Secretary for finance and sustainable growth to implement in full the promise to reduce class sizes in primary 1 to primary 3 to a maximum of 18. He called on the minister to place a copy of that request and a statement of how much she had received in the Scottish Parliament information centre. Maureen Watt said that matters had moved on since September. There was now a concordat with local government and ring fencing had been removed from many areas.

Ken Macintosh (Lab, Eastwood) asked when an announcement would be made on the Scottish futures trust. In particular, he wanted to know if the Government was still committed to continuing Labour's school building programme. Mrs Watt said that an increase of £40 million had already been allocated in the current year for school capital programmes. There was also £115 million of extra capital in the first year for local government, which could be invested in schools. Ms Watt said that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth would make an announcement on the work of the Scottish futures trust when the information was available.

Universities

Marlyn Glen (Lab, North East Scotland) asked the Scottish Executive when it would next meet representatives of universities to discuss funding. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop (SNP, Lothians) said that she would meet Universities Scotland for the first meeting of the joint future thinking taskforce on 20 December.

Ms Glen said that following her meeting with university principals in November, the Cabinet Secretary had said that the Cabinet was sympathetic to universities' needs and that extra funding might be available to them at the end of the current financial year. Ms Glen wanted to know how much the universities would now receive, and when they would receive it.

Fiona Hyslop (SNP, Lothians) said the joint statement that was issued by the Scottish Government and Universities Scotland had indicated that Universities Scotland was committed to providing more detailed information to the Scottish Government on the issue.

SP 2007/0453

Funding

Scottish Parliament • Oral Questions, First Minister • 6 December 2007

During First Minister's questions Wendy Alexander (Lab, Paisley North), the embattled Leader of the Opposition, said that in October, the United Kingdom Government had allocated an extra £340 million to provide after-school and respite care for families whose children had disabilities. Scotland's share of that money was £34 million, which was to fund a step change in respite care and accessible child care, and to help young disabled people leaving school.

But in November when the Minister for Children and Early Years was asked how the £34 million would be spent in Scotland, he said that the money would become part of the total funding available to the Scottish Government. Mrs Alexander said that parents of children with special needs were now concerned that the money would not be spent on their children.

The First Minister, Alex Salmond (SNP, Gordon) said that the matter was part of the discussions that were taking place with every local authority in Scotland as part of the new relationship between central and local government in Scotland.

Mrs Alexander said that the review had been in May, and the Government had received the cash in October. She said that the Scottish government had promised an answer by mid-November, but there was still no clear indication of how the £34 million would be used. The First Minister said that the concordat and outcomes were quite specific about increasing respite hours.

Nicol Stephen (LDP, Aberdeen South) said that students had been protesting about the Scottish government's real-terms cut in higher education spending next year. Alex Salmond claimed that the vast majority of Scottish students approved of the abolition of the student endowment and the restoration of free education in Scotland.

Malcolm Chisholm (Lab, Edinburgh North and Leith) asked the First Minister why his government was forcing the Scottish Arts Council to end the highly regarded cultural co-ordinators scheme, which had ensured wider access to the arts for a large number of young people. Mr Salmond said that there was substantial support for arts and culture, including the youth music initiative.

Hugh O'Donnell (LDP, Central Scotland) asked the First Minister to arrange to meet East Ayrshire Council to talk about the closure of rural schools. The First Minister said that the deployment of schools policy in relation to individual schools was a matter for individual councils. The commitment to class size reductions was enshrined in the agreement between the Scottish government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and it would be reinforced by individual outcome agreements with every local authority across Scotland.

SP 2007/0454

Scouting

Scottish Parliament • Members' Business Debate • 6 December 2007

Robert Brown (LDP, Glasgow) introduced a debate about Scouting. He said that there were currently 450,000 scouts across the United Kingdom, and 35,000 in Scotland that operated through 594 local scout groups in all 32 local authority areas, covering an age range from five to 25. The work was supported by around 6,150 adult volunteer members.

He said that the key challenge, as with any organisation, was to recruit more volunteers and to reduce the waiting list, which had 2,000 people on it, as well as to expand opportunities for scouting into new areas. Like many other organisations, the scouts were essentially self-funding, but the small assistance that the government provided had disproportionately large benefits both to their agenda and to the Parliament's. One of the fruits of the youth opportunities fund had been work that was designed to increase youth participation in policy development and decision making. Mr Brown was concerned about the future of project Scotland, as its funding was to be stopped. He urged the Scottish Government to ensure that scouting and other organisations could access development funding for capital projects that also served the wider community and provided a level of expertise that was often not available in a local organisation.

Elizabeth Smith (Con, Mid Scotland and Fife) said that the scouting movement in Scotland should look towards the challenges that the organisation would face and develop innovative ideas to ensure that scouting in Scotland continued to reflect the needs of Scotland's young people.

Karen Whitefield (Lab, Airdrie and Shotts) said that in a recent survey of the scout troop in Chapelhall, young people had spoken about the difference that scouting had made to their lives. It had made them more confident, allowed them to make new friends and to spend their free time having fun, learning and trying new things and enabled them to experience a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The Minister for Children and Early Years, Adam Ingram (SNP, South of Scotland) said that the best youth work opportunities allowed young people to expand their horizons, develop their confidence and practise leadership and team-working skills. They involved young people in designing programmes and were clear about the outcomes that they wanted to achieve. He said that the scouts had promoted and demonstrated those qualities for many years, and it was encouraging to see how the Scouts organisation had modernised and adapted to reflect social change.

The Scottish Council of the Scout Association had increasingly been active and constructive in shaping and delivering national policy, most recently on youth work and the protection of vulnerable groups. In particular, the minister had been impressed by how the scout movement had embraced the possibilities of the youth work strategy year of action and had contributed to its overall success. It had also worked with YouthLink Scotland and other partners from the voluntary and local authority sectors to develop a peer assessment and grant distribution model for the youth opportunity fund and the youth facilities fund.

He said that Project Scotland had been successful in raising the profile of volunteering among young people and he was keen to broaden it out to a wider range of people, to slightly older people who had more life experience and who could make a significant contribution to youth organisations. Mr Ingram said that all the commitments that had been made to Project Scotland up to 2008-09 would be fulfilled.

The minister announced that the Scottish government intended to continue to support the voluntary organisations support fund at the level of £0.5 million a year for the next three years, to 2011. As a national fund, it would continue to be delivered through YouthLink, and it would continue to support training and capacity building. But the minister would also explore with YouthLink and voluntary youth organisations the possibility of expanding its criteria. He said that there could be scope to include initiatives by national voluntary organisations that were designed to support local groups' and volunteers' work with local authorities to deliver their agreed outcomes for young people.

SP 2007/0455

Woodland and Green Spaces

Scottish Parliament • Executive Debate • 12 December 2007

The Minister for the Environment, Michael Russell (SNP, South of Scotland) introduced a debate on woodland and green spaces on behalf of the Scottish Executive government. He said that green space played an important part in all of the administration's five main objectives. Apart from the green objective, the most important that green spaces made a contribution to was health.

During the debate, Robin Harper (Green, Lothians) said that children in Scotland did not receive equal access to the opportunities and advantages provided by outdoor education. The main obstructions were the increasingly risk-averse culture and a lack of investment and training. Although children needed to be protected from harm, the current risk management model would always find another hazard to control, which would then lead to another over-bureaucratic restriction on activities which would further stifle the opportunities for quality learning.

Mr Harper quoted Kathleen Marshall, the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland, who had recently said that excessive restrictions on the lives of children and young people breached their rights and impeded their development. Mr Harper called on Scottish ministers to show more leadership and resolution, because the health and well-being opportunities that had been welcomed in their motion would be limited by the risk-averse culture that was developing in Scottish schools and care establishments, which had varying and inconsistent local policies on risk. He claimed that the opportunities for learning spaces that woodland and green areas offered would be further

undermined by any continued lack of investment and encouragement. He urged the Scottish government to create a long-term plan to ensure that every schoolchild in Scotland could participate in outdoor education and to require school inspectors to appraise and report on access to and use of green space.

The Minister for Public Health, Shona Robison (SNP, Dundee East) said that Scotland's physical activity strategy, *Let's Make Scotland More Active*, was published in 2003 and was supported by a funded programme of activities that were aimed mainly at children and young people. Through the spending review, the funding had been doubled to a total of £12 million which would be available over the next three years. Ms Robison said that if children and young people learned and played in woods and green spaces at a young age, they would be more likely to be active in them as adults.

SP 2007/0467

Abolition of sportscotland

Scottish Parliament • Debate • 13 December 2007

During the debate on a motion on sport and young people that he initiated, Ross Finnie (LDP, West of Scotland) said that because future athletes were being inspired by world class performances and school children were becoming more active through the Active Schools Network, the Liberal Democrats rejected the case for the abolition of sportscotland.

The Minister for Communities and Sport, Stewart Maxwell (SNP, West of Scotland) said that the debate was premature. He thought that it would be logical and sensible to have a debate on the subject after the review was completed and the outcome was announced. He said that the review of sportscotland was being carried out within the context of a commitment to create a simpler, more effective public sector in Scotland by getting rid of duplication and simplifying structures. The review was examining whether sportscotland's current functions would continue to be necessary and, if so, which organisational arrangements would be most effective in delivering them. He intended to announce the outcome of the review early in the New Year.

Jamie McGrigor (Con, Highlands and Islands) supported the Liberal Democrats and said that the Conservatives could see no case for abolishing sportscotland. He hoped that the Scottish government would not abolish the body despite the SNP election manifesto pledge to do so. The Conservatives believed that there were other more important priorities to focus on, "not least in encouraging more young people to participate in all kinds of sport".

The Labour Party was also against abolishing the agency. Johann Lamont (Lab, Glasgow Pollok) said Labour recognised the need for stability in sport and the important role of sportscotland in a number of areas including child protection.

Margo MacDonald (Ind, Lothians), formerly a leading light in the SNP some years ago, said that in 2003 she had attended the AGM of sportscotland and had been unimpressed by its emphasis on elite athletic sports. However, since then it had mended its ways and was now much more broadly based.

The basic argument in the debate was between the SNP, who said that sportscotland spent too much on administration and not enough on frontline sport and therefore wanted to review the agency, and all the other parties who thought that, with the Olympic Games in 2012 and the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow in 2014 coming up, sportscotland should not be abolished. An SNP amendment that welcomed the Executive government's review was defeated, while a Conservative amendment acceptable to the Liberal Democrats, and which referred to improving the agency, was carried. The amended motion was also carried. This defeat for the SNP government reflected the reality of its minority status.

SP 2007/0468

Eco-schools; Deaf Children

Scottish Parliament • Oral Questions, General • 13 December 2007

During general questions to the Scottish Executive government Cathy Peattie (Lab, Falkirk East) asked what action the Scottish Executive was taking to promote and encourage the building of eco-schools. The Minister for Schools and Skills, Maureen Watt (SNP, North East Scotland) said that work was continuing with local authorities to create sustainable schools, and the Executive provided funding for renewable technologies and energy efficiency measures.

Cathy Peattie wondered in the Scottish Government had considered introducing a rewards system to encourage the building of eco-schools and the work that was being done by teachers and pupils in promoting eco-schools and eco-systems. Ms Watt said that the eco-schools programme had been extremely successful in Scotland and more than 500 schools had achieved green flag status. The minister said that she would consider Ms Peattie's suggestion in relation to the building of schools. She said that local authorities and the schools themselves should be in line for rewards.

Nanette Milne (Con, North East Scotland) said that positive steps were being taken by the Woodland Trust to nurture an understanding of woodland environment in schools, as well as developments in the National Assembly for Wales to promote tree planting in schools. She asked the minister to consider the possibility of such a scheme being developed in Scotland, in line with the projects that were currently being run to provide free hedge and copse to schools. The minister replied that she was prepared to take the suggestion forward with the Minister for Environment.

Jackie Baillie (Lab, Dumbaraton) asked the minister if she would encourage her colleagues to call in the planning application for Dumbaraton academy. Maureen Watt said that would be a matter for the local authority.

Deaf children (Early Years Framework)

Bashir Ahmad (SNP, Glasgow) asked the Scottish Executive what plans it had to introduce a co-ordinated early years framework for deaf children following diagnosis.

The Minister for Children and Early Years, Adam Ingram (SNP, South of Scotland) said that a long-term early years strategy for publication in 2008 was being developed. It would ensure that all services for children, including deaf children, would be delivered in a co-ordinated, holistic way. For deaf children, the strategy would build on and complement the existing newborn hearing screening programme and the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, which already aimed to co-ordinate support for children who were diagnosed as having hearing impairments.

Bashir Ahmad said that research had indicated that Asian children were 3.5 times more likely to be deaf than non-Asian children. In addition to other obstacles, BME children and families faced other cultural and language barriers that could restrict parents from accessing vital information from health and education professionals.

Mr Ingram said that the Scottish government had appointed a project officer to work with the National Deaf Children's Society and, specifically, to liaise with families of Asian children to identify what support they needed. The outcome of the project would be known at the end of March 2008.

Mary Mulligan (Lab, Linlithgow) asked what measures the Scottish Government would put in place to support the parents of children who were identified as deaf or hearing impaired to help their children's development. Mr Ingram said that one of the major themes of the early years strategy was building the capacity of parents and families to deal with problems within the family. Also, a review had been undertaken of the universal newborn hearing screening programme, which had resulted in a report that was currently being considered.

Alasdair Allan (SNP, Western Isles) asked if any consideration had been given to the use of new technology that might overcome the particular problems experienced by deaf people in remote and rural areas. For instance, there was often a lack of any meaningful access to British Sign Language interpreters. Adam Ingram said that progress in that area would be monitored by the audiology services advisory group.

SP 2007/0469

Support for Disabled Children

Scottish Parliament • Oral Questions, First Minister • 13 December 2007

Wendy Alexander (Lab, Paisley North) raised the issue of support for families with disabled children, as she had the previous week when the First Minister had confirmed that, although families in England and Wales would benefit from a £340 million dedicated fund, the £34 million share for Scottish families would not be protected for that purpose.

The First Minister, Alex Salmond (SNP, Gordon) said that the concordat with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities included a commitment to progress to an extra 10,000 respite weeks per year. Mrs Alexander replied that she had read the concordat very carefully, and it made no specific mention of support for disabled children. Although there was a non-specific line on respite places, it did not say that those places were dedicated to children.

The First Minister read out a section of the document, which referred to: “Carers’ support—progress towards delivering 10,000 extra respite weeks per annum at home and in care homes.” Mrs Alexander said that at next week’s meeting of the Local Government and Communities Committee, her Labour colleagues would move an amendment that would protect the £34 million and guarantee that that support went to families with disabled children. She called on the First Minister to direct Scottish National Party members on the committee to support the amendment.

The First Minister said that there was a new dimension and a new deal between central and local government in Scotland, which was supported across the range of Scottish society, but which Wendy Alexander chose neither to read nor to understand.

SP 2007/0470

Anti-social Behaviour

Scottish Parliament • Oral Questions, Justice & Law • 13 December 2007

Johann Lamont (Lab, Glasgow Pollok) asked the Scottish Executive what its priorities were in tackling antisocial behaviour. The Minister for Community Safety, Fergus Ewing (SNP, Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) said that the government would like more emphasis to be placed on prevention and earlier intervention. In particular, young people should be provided with more positive opportunities that would help to instil a sense of personal and collective responsibility.

Johann Lamont asked for reassurance that enforcement action against antisocial behaviour would remain a priority. Fergus Ewing said that simply handing out bits of paper called antisocial behaviour orders did not get to the root cause of the problem.

SP 2007/0471

Local Government Finance

Scottish Parliament • Ministerial Statement • 13 December 2007

During his statement on the Local Government Finance Settlement 2008 to 2011, John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (SNP, North Tayside) said that the government would reduce class sizes to a maximum of 18 in primaries 1 to 3 as quickly as possible.

He said that substantial progress would be made towards a 50 per cent increase in pre-school entitlement with access to a nursery teacher for every child and more pupils would be given opportunities to experience vocational learning. The government had also signed up to extend

entitlement to nutritious free school meals to all primary and secondary school pupils in families that were in receipt of maximum child or working tax credit and to provide allowances for kinship carers of looked-after children.

Andy Kerr (Lab, East Kilbride) pointed out that only £175 million—or 0.5 per cent—in the grant was available for services. The rest of the uplift was to cover 2.7 per cent inflation and the cost of the council tax freeze. Mr Kerr asked if the parents of children with disabilities should assume that the £34 million consequential for them was to be found from within that £175 million.

John Swinney replied that the government was committed to delivering additional respite care weeks for children in Scotland. He said that the line about the £34 million figure had been advanced by the Labour Party for some time. He argued that the rest of the United Kingdom had been offered a package that was inferior to the objectives that had been set out in the Scottish settlement.

Mr Kerr responded that the First Minister had promised to reduce class sizes in primaries 1, 2 and 3 to a maximum of 18 by 2011, but no new money had been provided in the settlement for local government to meet that pledge. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities had said that the target would not be delivered during the current session, and it had disagreed with the Government's position. At last week's meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, the SNP councillor Isabel Hutton from COSLA had said: "we did not sign up to deliver the commitments in the concordat in this session of the Parliament." In relation to class sizes in particular, she had said: "the concordat did not say that there would be a reduction in class sizes within the current session of Parliament. COSLA did not sign up to that."

Mr Kerr said that on nursery provision, the SNP had promised to increase the number of hours by 50 per cent. But the budget and the concordat had indicated that the pledge would not be met, as insufficient money was being made available. COSLA had told Parliament that: "No specific amounts of money were assigned to any commitment in the concordat." He said that families with disabled children were also victims of the concordat. In the comprehensive spending review, the Treasury had allocated £340 million for disabled children in England and Wales. But SNP minister Adam Ingram had said that it was a matter for Scottish ministers to determine how the money should be spent. Although the First Minister had said that the money was contained in the funding of the concordat that had been agreed with COSLA, there was no specific indicator in the concordat relating to children with disabilities and neither was it one of the outcomes of the concordat.

SP 2007/0472

Graduate Endowment Bill

Scottish Parliament • Legislation, Stage 1 • 20 December 2007

The SNP administration in Edinburgh is a minority government heartily disliked by all the other major parties (though with an understanding with the Greens). Labour never loses an opportunity to attack the nationalists for having the temerity to usurp them from what Labour has always regarded as its rightful place as the natural governing party in Scotland, yet the electorate has rather taken to Alex Salmon as First Minister. He had some popular policies in May's Scottish election, though implementing them without a majority or enough money is proving difficult.

One of those popular promises was to wipe out student debt. The SNP Executive therefore introduced the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill. Its Stage 1 debate started with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop (SNP, Lothians) attacking the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee for letting down 50,000 Scottish students and their hard-working families. The committee, on the casting vote of the convener, had rejected the general principles of the Bill and had voted to keep the graduate endowment fee. This was a recipe for a great deal of politics in the Stage 1 debate on the floor of the Parliament.

Mrs Hyslop argued that two thirds of students could not afford the graduate endowment fee and so simply added it to their student debt, and added that despite the fact that debt, and the fear of debt, was known to be a barrier that prevented people from going to university, the Labour and Conservative members of the committee had failed to see the obvious link.

Murdo Fraser (Con, Mid Scotland and Fife) said that the Scottish National Party had promised in its manifesto to wipe out student debt, but the Government had not fulfilled its obligations. Mrs Hyslop

retorted that the committee had suggested that there was no evidence that abolition of the graduate endowment fee would, in itself, widen access, but she argued that the policy memorandum had stated that the measure was a “first step”, and that it would contribute to the aim of widening access. The SNP would reduce debt through abolishing the graduate endowment fee and would then reintroduce student grants to replace loans, starting with the £500 grant for part-time students.

Rhona Brankin (Lab, Midlothian) pointed out that in 1996 the Irish Government had abolished student tuition fees. But Professor Patrick Clancy of University College Dublin had said that there had subsequently been no improvement in working-class participation in higher education and that in some deprived areas of Dublin participation rates had fallen. She added that Irish heads of universities and the funding council had met during the week to consider some form of graduate contribution.

Mrs Hyslop said that between 2002 and 2006, entrants to higher education from Scotland's most deprived areas had increased by just one per cent. Richard Baker (Lab, North East Scotland) said that increasing student bursaries would address student hardship far better. The Minister replied that the endowment fee had proved to be an extremely inefficient way of providing funds. It had not raised the predicted levels of income and, as much of the graduate endowment fee was added to student loans, the taxpayer had lost about a third of the income. She challenged any of those who opposed the Bill to defend the graduate endowment fee, which she claimed had been flawed since its introduction and urged Parliament to agree to the general principles of the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill.

Tuition should be free

Jeremy Purvis (LDP, Tweeddale, Etrick and Lauderdale) said that Liberal Democrats had always argued that tuition should be free. They understood that living costs were a major factor in students' accumulation of debt by the time they graduated. They had argued for the provision of financial support to students from the poorest backgrounds. An illustration of their approach was the package that was brought in six years ago when the devolved Government reintroduced student grants of £2,000 per year. The Cubie committee had argued for changes in how students were supported and the graduate endowment, as it became known, was established to provide support for students from poorer backgrounds. The payment was not connected with university funding and had never been linked with the cost of student tuition. Mr Purvis said that the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee's recommendations, which were decided on a Labour vote, had included a statement that the Labour Party and Conservatives wanted to use some of the money that was raised through the graduate endowment to fund universities. Although it was prohibited under the law, he said that the proposal was for a graduate poll tax. He then proposed an amendment to the motion seeking to place a statutory duty on Scottish Ministers to provide student support.

Karen Whitefield (Lab, Airdrie and Shotts) said that although the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee fully supported the intention of the Bill and its objective of removing barriers to higher education, it did not agree that the abolition of the graduate endowment was the best way to do that. The committee believed that the government's policy initiative was based more on ensuring that it could tick off an ill-conceived manifesto commitment than on sound research and evidence. She said the Scottish government's officials had told the committee that no alternatives had been considered prior to the introduction of the legislation. The committee had received 25 written submissions in response to its call for evidence and it had taken oral evidence on the Bill over three meetings. Although the majority of those who made submissions said that they had no objection to the abolition of the graduate endowment, many also said that they had serious concerns about what the Bill failed to do.

Ms Whitefield said that the Bill failed to do anything to support part-time students; it failed to support students financially while at university; and it failed to address the issue of widening access and getting more students, particularly those from deprived communities, into education. In the stage 1 report on the Bill the committee concluded that there was insufficient evidence to demonstrate that the abolition of the graduate endowment would contribute to the aspiration of widening access. She said that there was no hard evidence that the graduate endowment had had a significant impact on participation in higher education. Ms Whitefield concluded that the Bill did nothing to support students while they were at university; instead, it helped people in employment who were earning money. She said that financial concerns were not always the main barrier to students from Scotland's most deprived communities going to university. Therefore a serious review of the barriers that continued to restrict access was needed. She asked Parliament not to support the Bill's general principles.

Murdo Fraser (Con, Mid Scotland and Fife) said that the Scottish Government's budget was finite and, given a choice of extra funding for universities and more student support or abolishing the graduate endowment and making graduates even better off than their English counterparts, the priority

was to increase university funding and improve student support. He said that the Conservatives would vote against the Bill.

The Minister for Children and Early Years, Adam Ingram (SNP, South of Scotland) said that the proposal to abolish the endowment was the first step towards a truly free higher education system. He urged MSPs to support the Bill.

The procedure in the Scottish Parliament is that voting takes place at the end of the day, during decision time, rather than at the end of the debate. The SNP motion was “that the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Graduate Endowment Abolition (Scotland) Bill”. The first vote was on the Liberal Democrat amendment, which proposed adding the following text to the SNP motion: “and, in so doing, calls for a statutory duty on Scottish Ministers to provide student support and provision made thereunder to be improved for existing and future students and further calls for more research into the barriers to accessing further and higher education to be undertaken.” The SNP, Liberal Democrats and Greens voted for this, while the Tories voted against and Labour abstained. This ensured that the amendment was carried, by 65 votes to 16 with 45 abstentions. The amended motion was carried by 65 votes to 60, with the SNP, Liberal Democrats and Greens joined by the previously abstaining independent and former SNP luminary Margo MacDonald (Ind, Lothians) while Labour joined the Tories in voting against.

SP 2007/0483

Alcohol Consumption

Scottish Parliament • Oral Questions, General • 20 December 2007

Bill Kidd (SNP, Glasgow) asked the Scottish government how it intended to target resources and services for raising awareness of the effects of alcohol consumption among young people and for providing rehabilitation services for them.

The Minister for Public Health, Shona Robison (SNP, Dundee East) said that the Scottish Government provided resources to alcohol and drug action teams, which made decisions on allocations to services, including rehabilitation services, based on local circumstances and identified need. The minister said that the Scottish government had run alcohol awareness-raising campaigns, including the alcohol awareness week in October 2007, which was aimed at increasing understanding of units and the promotion of responsible drinking.

Mr Kidd asked the minister if she would consider supporting an alcohol awareness week that was specifically targeted at young people. Shona Robison replied that although she would consider targeting future campaigns at young people, a culture change in the relationship with alcohol in Scotland was needed. Therefore the government would bring forward a draft strategy for consultation in spring 2008, which would be supported by an £85 million boost in the budget over three years to help tackle alcohol misuse.

Dr Richard Simpson (Lab, Mid Scotland and Fife) said that since the advertising arrangements were changed to prohibit the advertising of alcohol, the number of young people who were not drinking had risen by 12 per cent. He suggested that the minister should follow up on the motion that Bill Wilson had lodged which called for further pilots and work in universities and colleges on the establishment of normative data, and for the promotion of that data, which encouraged people to recognise that the majority of people did not abuse alcohol, rather than using the punitive approach. Ms Robison said that it was important to recognise that Scotland had a particularly unhealthy relationship with alcohol, which filtered through to the behaviour of young people.

SP 2007/0484

Class Size Reductions

Scottish Parliament • Oral Questions, Finance • 20 December 2007

Oral questions on the theme of finance and sustainable growth allowed former Education Minister Hugh Henry (Lab, Paisley South) to ask the Scottish Executive how much additional revenue was being allocated under the local government finance settlement for 2008-09 to support the reduction in class sizes to 18 in primary 1 to primary 3. This was the latest example of Labour attacking the SNP for breaking another election pledge, this time to reduce primary class sizes.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney (SNP, North Tayside) said that a concordat had been signed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that would enable year-on-year progress in reducing primary 1 to primary 3 class sizes to a maximum of 18. Local government would receive £34.8 billion over three years in overall financial support, which was an increase of £1.4 billion. If local authorities signed single outcome agreements, ring-fenced funding streams would be reduced and councils would be able to redeploy all efficiency savings. But local government would be responsible for allocating the total financial resources that were available to it on the basis of local needs and priorities, and the jointly agreed set of national and local priorities, including class size reduction.

Mr Henry said that in August 2007, ahead of the budget, ministers collectively knew that the target could not be met by 2011. Mr Swinney said that the government had undertaken a colossal amount of work during the summer to prepare to put a strong and ambitious budget programme to Parliament in November.

Gavin Brown (Con, Lothians) asked how many new classrooms would be required to meet the pledge. The Minister replied that that would vary from local authority to local authority, and it would depend on the way the policy was implemented locally.

Ken Macintosh (Lab, Eastwood) said that the documentation that COSLA and local government representatives had produced following the concordat showed a zero increase in the class size line. John Swinney replied that the Government would not preside over inefficient public services.

SP 2007/0485

Support for ProjectScotland

Scottish Parliament • Members' Business Debate • 20 December 2007

Bill Butler (Lab, Glasgow Anniesland), proposing a motion supporting ProjectScotland, said that ProjectScotland had been launched in the spring of 2005, and had been hailed as a revolutionary volunteering organisation for 16-year-olds to 25-year-olds.

Participants received a subsistence allowance that allowed them to take up a variety of opportunities and a wide array of placements. Its structured placements provided for the needs of each participant. Young volunteers were supported by staff, mentors and peers and were provided with the tools and training to build and develop their skills. They were shown how to set goals and track progress, and they were encouraged to show initiative and learn from mistakes. They learned how to develop leadership and to work in teams. As a result more than 2,000 young people had built their confidence and raised their aspirations.

Mr Butler said that his motion had arisen because the SNP Government had decided to slash ProjectScotland's annual budget from £6.5 million to £1.4 per annum. He argued that since 2004, £16.9 million had been invested in ProjectScotland, and its total economic value was £21 million per annum, which was three times the level of investment. The organisation had recently produced a forward business plan with a 33 per cent reduction in the cost per volunteer. It had also proved to be successful in preventing unemployment. Volunteers who passed through ProjectScotland programmes learned skills that made them more attractive to employers and were able to command starting salaries that were, on average, £4,000 a year higher than they might otherwise have been. ProjectScotland's activities had also resulted in a saving on welfare benefits of £1.47 million a year. Mr Butler said that it was important to bear in mind that ProjectScotland had contributed £9 million in funding and

incremental value to its 300 not-for-profit partners and he called on the minister to rethink the government's decision.

The Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism, Jim Mather (SNP, Argyll and Bute) said that the Government had spent almost £17 million on ProjectScotland, and it had benefited fewer than 2,000 young people. He said that the government had concluded that it had a wider duty to volunteers throughout Scotland and that the approach should be to facilitate volunteering opportunities for as many people as possible, of all ages and backgrounds, using a wide range of providers. The Executive's decision had been made to stop the funding for ProjectScotland that will come to its natural end in March. But the government had offered funding in 2008-09 of £1.4 million to ensure that all current commitments to those seeking placements under ProjectScotland's current programme could be fulfilled.

SP 2007/0486

Debates in the Welsh Assembly

Education Questions

Welsh Assembly • Oral Questions, First Minister • 4 December 2007

Questions to the First Minister, Rt Hon Rhodri Morgan (Lab, Cardiff West) included a number on education, covering school buildings, small schools in rural Wales, school uniform and the foundation phase.

School Building

Chris Franks (PC, South Wales Central) requested a statement on the school building programme in the Vale of Glamorgan. The First Minister replied that the construction of the new Cowbridge comprehensive school would start shortly. When Mr Franks complained of a “cut of £200 million in the funds available to the people of Wales by the Treasury because of an underspend by English health authorities,” the First Minister noted this was “one of the unexpected perils of having a comprehensive spending review that does run for a full three years”.

Small Schools in Rural Wales

Kirsty Williams (LDP, Brecon & Radnorshire) requested a statement on Welsh Assembly Government policy on small schools in rural Wales. The First Minister stated “the educational interests of children in rural areas must be paramount at all times,” adding “we support small schools in tackling the challenges that they face”.

Ms Williams spoke of the large proportion of small schools in Powys County Council, serving a dispersed population and lamented the one per cent rise in its settlement next year. Although he was unclear on the position with surplus school places in Powys, the First Minister commented “there is no evidence that small schools provide better educational outcomes but we know that they are more expensive to run”. However, he noted that “the rate of the school closures in rural areas is low” and concluded it was the responsibility of the council to “set out its schools policy in a way that gives paramount importance to the education of the children”.

Alun Ffred Jones (PC, Arfon) pointed out that the background to this issue was the big fall in pupil numbers which “is more obvious in rural areas”. He suggested developing policies that ensure that more young families are able to live in rural areas, rather than policies that concentrate all efforts on the populated centres.

While Alun Cairns (Con, South Wales West) felt this “may well be the answer for the longer term” he questioned what hope the First Minister could give to schools with fewer than 90 pupils, given that half of the schools in rural Wales are in that situation. Mr Morgan pointed out that “local authorities have to get on with the job of trying to decide what they think is a viable pattern for the area”.

School Uniforms

In response to Leanne Wood (PC, South Wales Central), who requested a statement on guidance on school uniforms, the First Minister confirmed that guidance would be issued in the new year on a range of issues associated with school uniform policies.

Nick Ramsay (Con, Monmouth) welcomed the First Minister’s comments and requested that he review big inconsistencies between certain authorities with regard to available grants. While the First Minister observed there had been a big improvement in the availability of grants for school uniforms since a backbench motion passed a few years ago, he conceded that not all inconsistencies would have been removed. However, he pointed out that with “some of the big supermarket groups making available some kinds of school uniform, it is less unaffordable than it was 20 or 30 years ago”.

The Foundation Phase

Jeff Cuthbert (Lab, Caerphilly) requested a statement on the importance of the foundation phase and learning through play. The First Minister confirmed the approach, “designed to give children the best possible start to learning”, had “been extensively piloted in Scandinavian countries...because they believe that play is crucial to children’s learning”. He said that “there has been 100 years of failure in British educational policy” and therefore advocated following the successful Nordic method; starting

the reading element of education later and having a “structured play element during three or four years of intensive kindergarten education”.

Andrew Davies (Lab, Swansea West), noting that a lot of the extra tools required for interactive play in the foundation phase were provided by fundraising, asked whether money for the foundation phase should be ring-fenced, following pressure on the budget. The First Minister confirmed “there is a revenue stream as well as a capital stream to ensure that the roll-out goes well” which he understood had been ring-fenced.

Janet Ryder (PC, North Wales) spoke of the need to provide “good, national training levels for classroom assistants”, with which the First Minister was in agreement. He hoped to get esteem into the profession but noted that historically the occupation was deemed to be a female-only profession while “it was not clear that it really was a profession”.

WA 2007/0456

Child Poverty

Welsh Assembly • Ministerial Statement • 4 December 2007

Brian Gibbons (Lab, Aberavon), the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government, made a statement on tackling child poverty. He reported a fall in the proportion of children living in less well-off households from 35 per cent to 28 per cent, which was a bigger drop than in the rest of the Great Britain.

Mr Gibbons emphasised “the abolition of child poverty is a key requirement in achieving a socially just and economically prosperous Wales”. He spoke of the two-dimensional approach to abolishing child poverty; improving benefit entitlement and getting more parents into work, and noted that the *One Wales* agreement between Labour and Plaid Cymru that forms the basis of the coalition Welsh Assembly Government commits the coalition to putting a comprehensive advice service in place across Wales with a draft budget of £250,000. Further, the draft budget included £1.25 million to ensure access to a credit union in every secondary school, and £2.5 million to support our commitment to add to the child trust fund for all children entering compulsory education in Wales. Educational initiatives include the Flying Start programme, RAISE, the foundation phase and the 14-19 learning pathways, and a new school curriculum including modules on improving financial literacy.

Angela Burns (Con, Carmarthen West & South Pembrokeshire) agreed that education was a priority. She noted the number of children leaving school with no GCSEs or no grades above D in key skills, and the rise in truancy and suggested that deprivation and truancy were linked.

Peter Black (LDP, South Wales West) noted that the RAISE programme had been well received throughout Wales but requested an assurance that deprived children would continue to be targeted by putting extra resources at schools’ disposal to deal with the issue in the way that the RAISE programme does at present. Mr Gibbons acknowledged the challenge of ensuring that programmes such as RAISE were capable and delivering on the ground and emphasised the importance of effective evaluation through placing a statutory obligation on all public bodies to demonstrate their commitment to eradicating child poverty.

Bethan Jenkins (PC, South Wales West) welcomed the statement and the expansion of credit unions in our sixth form colleges.

Mark Isherwood (Con, North Wales) noted the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report of 2006 had said that around 10 per cent of 16 to 18-year-olds are not in employment, education or training, a figure which had increased. Mr Gibbons agreed this represents a significant problem which probably also concerned a wider age-range of young people and had remained resistant to significant improvement. While noting the ongoing work on revising the children and young people’s strategy was looking specifically at that issue, he expressed the hope that the resulting report would provide suitable direction.

Eleanor Burnham (LDP, North Wales) asked for an assurance that in developing the 14 to 19 learning pathways, more emphasis would be placed on FE. Responding, Mr Gibbons confirmed the 14 to 19 learning pathway was a key element of improving the skills base and thereby economic wellbeing.

WA 2007/0457

Education Funding

Welsh Assembly • Opposition Debate • 5 December 2007

Alun Cairns (Con, South Wales West) opened a Conservative Party opposition debate on education funding, calling on the Welsh Assembly Government “to bring forward a timetable for closing the gap in education funding that exists between England and Wales”.

He said that the existing gap at schools level was £355 per pupil (or £202 if the higher level of spending in London was excluded), spoke of the poor performance of Wales compared to the other home nations according to the OECD’s PISA report and drew attention to the quality and age of school buildings and resources compared with England. Mr Cairns claimed that the draft budget would lead to a wider funding gap, given the 2.2 per cent increase in the local government settlement, and an accepted 2.7 per cent rate of inflation.

Peter Black (LDP, South Wales West) listed three main trends which characterised education in Wales; “continuing confusion” regarding the amount and distribution of money to schools; underinvestment in further education in terms of capital investment or non-statutory services; and a funding gap between higher education institutions in England and Wales of £41 million according to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales. He spoke of the “wide variation” in school funding across Wales with “fourteen out of 22 local education authorities ... failing to spend up to the indicative budget allocation”, and noted that the Committee on School Funding had made “27 recommendations to try to address some of these issues,” the vast majority of which he felt the government had ignored.

Jonathan Morgan (Con, Cardiff North), the Shadow Minister for Health and Social Services, welcomed the debate, stating “pupils in Wales are at a distinct disadvantage compared with pupils in England” and noting the “huge disparities in local authorities’ performance in Wales”.

As a former president of the National Union of Students Wales, Alun Davies (Lab, Mid & West Wales) focused on the funding gap in higher education. He voiced his support for increasing access, and the widening of access but conceded this would necessitate looking again at how higher education in Wales was funded. He called for proactive assessment of options “to ensure that we can sustain and invest in higher education while ensuring that access is not restricted... on financial grounds”.

Angela Burns (Con, Carmarthen West & South Pembrokeshire) noted the funding gap was higher than quoted, when taking into account the £307 million that was spent in Wales on special educational needs.

Michael German (LDP, South Wales East), the leader of the Liberal Democrats in the Welsh Assembly, agreed that if the funding gap was allowed to remain, this would cause “great trouble in building the skills agenda for the future”. He cited the £41 million gap between Wales and England and the £93 million gap between Wales and Scotland and warned of the future migration of staff which would put pressure on student fees.

John Griffiths (Lab, Newport East), the Deputy Minister for Skills, called for members to reject the motion, arguing “it is not possible to make the rather simplistic comparisons that many have sought to make on education spending in England and Wales”. He pointed out that since devolution “we have seen impressive increases in the education budget in Wales” and further noted the improvement, year on year, of results at GCSE, A-Level and vocational levels. He pointed out that England and Wales used different systems, arguing that if the south-east of England were taken out of the equation that would give a different result. Mr Griffiths spoke of the reasons behind the development of the school fora and cited the role of the Bramley review in examining distribution methodology, from which complex issues were emerging. He agreed on the need to “improve transparency” and confirmed that the Assembly Government statisticians had worked with local government to ensure greater consistency.

Professor Nick Bourne (Con, Mid & West Wales), the Leader of the Opposition in the Welsh Assembly, concluding the debate, stated that closing the funding gap “remains at the top of our agenda on education”. The Liberal Democrats proposed amendments that were defeated, as was the original Conservative motion.

WA 2007/0458

Bullying

Welsh Assembly • Oral Questions, First Minister • 11 December 2007

During questions to the First Minister, Irene James (Lab, Islwyn) asked what the Assembly Government was doing to tackle bullying among children. The First Minister, Rt Hon Rhodri Morgan (Lab, Cardiff West) replied that “bullying has no place in modern education settings or in wider society”. He said that two conferences had been run during anti-bullying week to raise awareness and that information packs had been to all schools in Wales. Ms James noted the growth in cyber-bullying and the First Minister confirmed work would begin shortly on developing detailed guidance to tackle it.

Alun Cairns (Con, South Wales West) suggested that the response to bullying in schools across Wales was “patchy”. He further suggested that a special educational need, not addressed early enough, might be a cause of bullying and asked if the First Minister planned to revise the guidance on bullying.

While the First Minister agreed “there is patchiness and variability in the way that headteachers tackle bullying,” he noted that by law, they must have an anti-bullying policy. In terms of special educational needs as a cause of bullying, the First Minister emphasised the need for the police to take bullying seriously as “such cases could be categorised as hate crimes”.

WA 2007/0473

Child Advocacy Services

Welsh Assembly • Ministerial Statement • 11 December 2007

Jane Hutt (Lab, Vale of Glamorgan) Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, made an oral statement on the provision of advocacy services for children and young people in Wales. She began by welcoming the review of advocacy services by the Children and Young People Committee and by emphasising the importance of advocacy services.

Mrs Hutt noted the work of task groups established in 2002 and 2005, the work of Gwenda Thomas (Lab, Neath) and the findings of a study by Cardiff University. This feedback had shaped current thinking and the Minister was of the view that “any new framework for delivering advocacy services should make some form of universal provision, as well as more specialist provision for particularly vulnerable groups”. Further, Mrs Hutt emphasised the need for a strong set of governance arrangements to ensure the independence of advocacy provision. She planned to have advocacy services regulated and inspected by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales, with more specialist service providers being registered with the Care Council for Wales. However, Mrs Hutt confirmed that the final decision on how best to proceed would be deferred until the Children and Young People Committee had completed its deliberations.

Alun Cairns (Con, South Wales West) welcomed the minister’s statement but expressed concern over two key issues; independence of advocacy and access to advocacy. Mrs Hutt agreed on the issue of independence and cited the national minimum standards introduced in 2003 for advocacy providers in social care, the regulations and guidance for social services introduced in 2004, and the new objectives for monitoring complaints about advocacy through the Children First programme. On access, Mrs Hutt spoke of the “Additional Learning Needs Legislative Competence Order, which would enable the passing of Measures on an advocacy duty in relation to SEN.

Helen Mary Jones (PC, Llanelli) also welcomed the statement but voiced concern over whether an advocacy service that is commissioned and paid for by local service providers can be truly independent. Ms Jones emphasised the need to prioritise the needs of children and young people with special learning needs and looked-after children. She also asked the minister to seek further advice as to the exact nature of the statutory duty on local authorities with regard to advocacy, given the confusion as to whether there is a duty to provide services or to ensure access.

Mrs Hutt agreed that Ms Jones’ point about the statutory duty “is key”, adding “there has to be independent commissioning of independent providers”. She confirmed “we have to have more

clarification on the legal side, on the statutory duties”, which would be done through the Children and Young People Committee, chaired by Ms Jones.

David Melding (Con, South Wales Central) welcomed the statement which he felt “indicates some shift in the Government’s position”. He noted there was agreement on the issue of independence and credibility but questioned how to construct such a system when the essential commissioning role remains with local authorities. Noting the need to change the statutory position to move away from that model, Mr Melding advocated using the LCO on vulnerable children as it was currently going through the Assembly. He spoke in favour of a “nationwide commissioning body that is at arm’s length from the Welsh Assembly Government and [is] detached from local government”.

Mrs Hutt emphasised her agreement with “ensuring that there is fundamental independence”, reiterating the importance of regarding the authorities’ statutory duty as a duty in relation to advocacy for the provision of specialist services, adding “we must ensure that specialist advocacy is provided and that it is suitably funded”.

WA 2007/0474

Children’s Commissioner

Welsh Assembly • Ministerial Statement • 12 December 2007

Jane Hutt (Lab, Vale of Glamorgan), the Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, made a statement on the appointment of the next Children’s Commissioner for Wales, a post originally established by the Care Standards Act 2000 and the Children’s Commissioner for Wales Act 2001.

Mrs Hutt commended the work of the late Peter Clarke and noted that the appointment of the same candidate had been recommended by both a panel of young people and the formal interview panel. She confirmed the appointment of Keith Towler, programme director for the Wales programme of Save the Children and chairman of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child monitoring group for Wales. Mr Towler, whose background includes work in youth justice, community safety and criminal justice, will take up his post in March 2008.

David Melding (Con, South Wales Central) welcomed the statement, congratulating Mr Towler on his appointment and the minister on her role in the appointment process, which he called “a model of good practice involving all political parties... particularly in the way that it involved children and young people”. He spoke in favour of a review of the working of the Office of the Children’s Commissioner and suggested moving the responsibility for the appointment to the National Assembly. Mrs Hutt agreed to consider in terms of Measures whether “the LCO could provide for the appointment of the commissioner to be devolved to the Assembly”.

Helen Mary Jones (PC, Llanelli) welcomed the statement and the appointment of Keith Towler, with whom she had worked previously. While she, too, agreed on the success of the appointments procedure, Ms Jones suggested “it was an exceedingly long and drawn out process” and asked the minister to discuss the process with those involved to see how it could be speeded up. Responding on the timescale of the appointment, Mrs Hutt recommended the Assembly Commission “look at the public appointments code of practice”.

Eleanor Burnham (LDP, North Wales) echoed earlier comments, congratulating Mr Towler and commending the minister for her involvement with the appointment which she felt “was thoughtfully and sensitively done”.

WA 2006/0475

Closure of Small Schools

Welsh Assembly • Opposition Debate • 12 December 2007

The Conservative Party chose the closure of small schools for an Opposition debate in the Welsh Assembly. Alun Cairns (Con, South Wales West) opened the debate by expressing concern over what he called “the lack of policy and guidance available from the Welsh Assembly Government to support small schools; the Assembly Government’s failure to recognise the excellent achievements of small schools; and the Assembly Government’s failure to acknowledge the vital role small schools play within their wider local communities”.

Mr Cairns spoke of the unique opportunity offered by being educated in a small school, and noted the Scottish Executive’s report last year was “overwhelmingly in favour of small schools”. He further noted the role played by schools in the sustainability of communities and of the Welsh language, often forming the centre of village life and frequently used as the hub for social activity. Mr Cairns listed four innovative models presented by UCAC of how small schools can survive; through federation; in partnership; by sharing facilities; and finally an option to have a joint headteacher. He stressed that each case be considered on its own merits with a presumption against the closure of schools. Schools should close only in extreme circumstances. Mr Cairns sought to increase the settlement to local authorities, because, under the current proposed budget, “the future of small schools is under question”.

Kirsty Williams (LDP, Brecon & Radnorshire) noted that while “the Audit Commission regards small schools as having 90 pupils or less; a large number of our primary schools in Wales have less than 90 pupils”. Like Mr Cairns, she spoke of the advantages of small schools, including the individual attention afforded to pupils and the fact that the schools “are hugely well regarded by their communities”, offering “a wonderful resource”. Ms Williams suggested there might be “other aspects of budget that should be put into these small schools, if we want to keep them there for more than just educational purposes”. She advocated working in federation to provide mutual support for the teaching staff and the development of individual expertise across a number of schools.

William Graham (Con, South Wales East) felt that “no small school should close without full and meaningful consultation with the local community” and an exploration of “alternative and viable options”. Mr Graham further advocated a moratorium of at least three years following a reprieve on its planned closure in order that the school could adapt and spoke of the formation of community partnerships upon the announcement of an intention to close a school. Mr Graham concluded that the feasibility of small and rural schools should not solely be dependent upon pupil numbers.

Professor Nick Bourne (Con, Mid & West Wales), the Leader of the Opposition, wanted small schools to be preserved but warned that would require “a more favourable local government settlement”. He noted three crucial issues which were central to the debate; education, the importance of the Welsh language and the protection of communities. Prof. Bourne voiced his concern that “both parties in the government are driving this agenda on cost”.

Noting the commitment in *One Wales* to look at the funding formula, Janet Ryder (PC, North Wales) expressed the hope that the Government would soon deliver on that commitment. She further noted the importance of ensuring community schools were “in a state to offer all of the things that we would like a community school to offer to its community”.

Replying to the debate, Jane Hutt (Lab, Vale of Glamorgan), the Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, claimed that there was policy, guidance and funding available to support small schools and “as promised in *One Wales*, we are continuing with our grant arrangements for small and rural schools”. She said that evidence from Estyn shows “overall, small schools perform no better or worse than other schools, but do so at a higher cost”. Mrs Hutt also pointed out that “improving and increasing the community role and focus of all schools across Wales, whether small or large, has been central to our schools policy”. However, she noted that local authorities must be strategic about managing school places and that the size and quantity of small schools in rural areas was a matter for local authorities. She outlined the development of planning policy and guidance on school places and noted that “there are no special rules for small schools, because our policy objectives are the same for all schools” in that “the case for any closure must be robust, and the alternative provision must be at least as good as what was provided previously”. The motion, in favour of small schools, was carried by 35 votes to ten with six abstentions.

WA 2007/0476

Debates in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Ending Selection

Ulster Assembly • Ministerial Statement • 4 December 2007

The Minister of Education, Caitriona Ruane (SF, South Down) made a ministerial statement in the Assembly under the heading: “Outline of a Vision for our Education System”. What the statement was actually about was ending selection and the 11+ in Northern Ireland. This is a highly controversial and highly significant change.

Mrs Ruane said that she relished the challenge of transforming Northern Ireland’s outdated and unequal education system into a modern, flexible one that placed equality of opportunity for every child at its core. She said that the previous lack of local accountability was one of the reasons why no action had previously been taken to change a system that was put in place in the late 1940s.

Following consultation on the Burns Report, Martin McGuinness, then the Sinn Féin Minister of Education, had announced in 2002 the ending of the transfer test known as the 11+. Subsequently, direct rule Minister Jane Kennedy had announced that the final transfer test would be held in 2008. That would mean that the final children to transfer under the existing system would commence post-primary school in September 2009. The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 caused the current admissions arrangements to lapse for September 2010 admissions. Mrs Ruane said that the reformed post-primary system would have to take account of the full reform agenda that was already affecting the education system in the North. For example, the revised curriculum was being introduced over the next three years. The entitlement framework within the curriculum would introduce new and exciting opportunities for young people and she envisaged access to a broad range of academic, professional and technical courses before and after GCSE.

She said that she had brought forward her revised school-improvement policy, *Every School a Good School*, and she intended to mobilise and co-ordinate the resources at her disposal to build a modern and flexible education system. Mrs Ruane said making fundamental educational determinations for children at the age of 11 was wrong; and such decisions, for most children, became irreversible. By moving the point of transition to age 14 and by introducing more flexibility and agility into the structures, it would be possible for the transformed education system to facilitate the deserved and diverse needs of children — reversing the negative demand of slotting children into a system that had historically branded some as failures and others as successes. Her vision was for young people to enjoy equal access to their post-14 educational pathway in a number of ways, as determined by the planning of education in their local areas. They would include: access within an 11-19 school; transfer to an alternative 11-19 school; access through an 11-19 school or a post-14 school, which offered the entitlement framework in collaboration with other schools in a learning community. A local area may offer general provision in 11-14 schools followed by specialism and diversity in 14-plus provision. An academic pathway would remain and would be available through modern, organisational flexibility.

Mrs Ruane said that testing was not the best way to inform admissions decisions at 14 about a young person’s educational and career pathway. Such decisions should be based on a process of formal, structured election which would take account of the outcomes of three years of post-primary education and teacher and parental guidance, in addition to careers education, information, advice and guidance resulting in the matching of children to suitable provision. She said that through the entitlement framework, academic courses could be well integrated with challenging professional and/or technical courses, which would provide a much better base for many future third-level entrants. That framework would also ensure the capacity to deliver high-quality professional and/or technical pathways, accessed by choice, available through modern organisational flexibility, and enjoying parity of esteem.

The minister said that after 10 years of dramatically falling pupil numbers, structural reform was unavoidable, but it need not mean vast amounts of new capacity. For example, extended access to professional, technical, general and academic courses could be achieved through the process of school and further education collaborations, and the careful management of the schools estate at a time of falling school numbers. She said that there would be no 11-plus transfer test in the 2009-10 school year. Pupils transferring to post-primary school in September 2010 would do so overwhelmingly on the basis of preference for certain schools, in much the same way that primary schools and preschools were currently chosen. From 2010, the criteria would include community, geography and family.

Mrs Ruane said that she hoped that all grammar schools would see a positive future for the continuation of academic excellence in her vision for education. But she warned that if any school chose to operate independent admission arrangements that lay outside the new system of transfer, there would be no obligation on her Department to assist with funding.

The chairman of the Committee for Education, Sammy Wilson (DUP, East Antrim) said that there would be a gap between the old and new arrangements, between 2008 and 2011. He asked the minister how places would be allocated after 2011, if schools were oversubscribed. He wondered how the Minister would ensure that her vision of equality and fairness would be met if people simply bought a house close to the school of their choice. He also wondered what specific structural changes would be necessary, how many schools that currently accepted pupils aged 11 to 18 would be required to change to accept children aged 11 to 14 or children aged 14 to 18, and how much the structural changes would cost. Mr Wilson also asked the minister how she intended to get her proposals through the House.

Ms Ruane said that there would always be popular and oversubscribed schools, but children would attend the nearest local school. On the question about a postcode lottery, she argued that there was currently a life lottery. She said that in regard to structural change and cost, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, it appeared that some politicians in the Assembly knew: "the price of everything, and the value of nothing."

Basil McCrea (UUP, Lagan Valley) asked the minister if she would undertake to fully involve the House and give it an opportunity to debate her proposals. Mrs Ruane said that she looked forward to working with all Members in building a new, dynamic education system.

Dominic Bradley (SDLP, Newry and Armagh) asked the minister what plans she had to ensure that pathways that were chosen at the age of 14 genuinely reflected the ability and aptitude of pupils, rather than primarily coinciding with social and economic advantage. Mrs Ruane said that choice was a key principle and young people knew what they wanted, along with their teachers, career advisers and parents.

Trevor Lunn (All, Lagan Valley) said that the Alliance Party broadly welcomed the Minister's statement, as far as it went, but it would await concrete proposals. The Minister had referred to what would happen if grammar schools opted for independent admission arrangements. He asked if the effect of the statement was that there was no obligation on the Department to assist with funding related purely to the setting up and administration of those tests, or was there an implied threat to the funding of grammar schools. Mr Lunn also questioned the proposed timescale, which he thought was too short to develop the area-based planning which the minister had mentioned. He also questioned whether the minister's proposals would require cross-community support.

Mrs Ruane said that in the new year, she would make a further statement on progress towards an agreement for transfer arrangements in 2010. On securing the agreement, she would prepare draft regulations to underpin it, and would bring that to the Committee for Education, and the Executive, for consideration. She repeated that if any school chose to operate independent admission arrangements that lay outside the new system of transfer, there would be no obligation on her Department to assist with funding. She said that the programme of change would be structured, phased in over several years and locally developed. Parents would be part of that, as would teachers, trade unions, different education sectors and the various Churches.

Lord Maurice Morrow (DUP, Fermanagh and South Tyrone) said that not only would the minister fail to get her proposals through the Assembly, but she had no chance of getting them through the Executive either. He also said there was no rural equality in her proposals.

Dawn Purvis (PUP, Belfast East) welcomed the minister's commitment to ending the 11-plus, but she was disappointed that the vision was a new system of social selection.

Mrs Ruane said that one size did not fit all. A range of provision would be looked at, and the minister did not accept that it was a postcode lottery. She said that rural areas were different from urban areas, and she would be seeking the views of all the different stakeholders in relation to the provision that would be required. Mrs Ruane said that the government must show political leadership to match that of the principals and teachers in schools, who were crying out for it. She was confident that her proposals would have the support of the vast majority of secondary and grammar schools.

Alban Maginness (SDLP, Belfast North) said that he would like to be able to support the minister as his party wanted an end to the 11+, but the minister had created more confusion and a further lack of clarity on the future of the education system. He said that creating a range of schools and a range of options was antipathetic to the ideal of equality for people in education. Mrs Ruane replied that her proposals offered local solutions, because different areas had different needs.

UA 2007/0459

Student Fees

Ulster Assembly • Delegated Legislation, Prayer of Annulment •
10 December 2007

The Northern Ireland Assembly considered a prayer of annulment of the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007. The chairman of the Committee for Employment and Learning, Sue Ramsey (SF, Belfast West) said that the statutory rule was made under the powers conferred by articles 4(8) and 14(4) of the Higher Education Order 2005.

The Order had capped fees at £3,000, subject only to inflationary increases. The effect of the statutory rule was the application of an annual inflationary increase to the basic and higher fees that were charged by higher education institutions for qualifying courses in the academic year 2008-09. The statutory rule would increase the higher amount from £3,070 to £3,145, and the basic rate would increase from £1,225 to £1,255. Other rates for other specific prescribed courses would increase on a pro rata basis at around 2.5 per cent. She said that under article 4 of the Higher Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, increases to basic and higher fee rates were subject to rises linked to inflation until 2010. Ms Ramsey reminded members that the motion was to annul proposed fee increases, but it did not address the principle of variable student fees. If the statutory rule was annulled, the current higher rate fee of £3,070 would be payable by students in 2008, and other fees would remain at their present levels.

She said that the Department had proposed to conduct a review of student finance, including fees, some time during the academic year 2008-09. The review had been presented as a reason why fee increases should go ahead, in line with the primary legislation, in advance of the research and review findings being made available. But, she argued that fee increases could not be justified without knowing what impact they would have on take-up or drop-out rates on prospective, or existing, university students. Ms Ramsey said that there was concern that disadvantaged students were being put off by fees, particularly when they saw increases coming forward in the absence of due consideration of their impact. She said that the members of her Committee had agreed that the need for research and review was paramount, and she called on the Department to bring the work programme forward at the earliest opportunity.

Jimmy Spratt (DUP, Belfast South) believed strongly that the best way forward, in the interests of both the universities and the students, was to await the impending review. By proposing to annul rises in line with inflation for the next three years, he said that those parties in favour of such a proposal were engaging in headline-grabbing opportunism without thinking through the consequences of their actions.

Basil McCrea (UUP, Lagan Valley) asked members to reject the prayer of annulment. He said that although everyone was keen to encourage people from socially deprived areas into further and higher education, the accepted wisdom in such areas argued against taking risks. He said that the real challenge for the Assembly was to confront lack of ambition and find ways to break the cycle of deprivation and enable all the people of Northern Ireland to unlock their potential.

Alex Attwood (SDLP, Belfast West) said that the draft Budget had stated that there would be 300 more PhDs by 2011, yet there was no funding in it to fund those PhDs. Although the Irish Government had offered the Assembly £34 million of their money to enable Queen's University and the University of Ulster to participate in an all-Ireland science foundation, there is no money in the draft Budget for that either. He said that regardless of the motion, there should be agreement throughout the Chamber that if the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was to be the driver of the economy, the Department for Employment and Learning, and FE and HE colleges must be its partners. Mr Attwood said that regardless of the loss that might be incurred by Queen's University and the University of Ulster if the prayer of annulment was agreed to, it was not as significant as the funds that FE and HE colleges needed from this year's Budget to ensure that they were at the heart of the economy. He accepted that if the annulment motion was passed, there would be a loss of funds to universities in the North. He had told Queen's University that it should fund that loss from its reserves as a way of informing students, pupils and parents that those institutions had acknowledged that student debt and loans were a major concern. The public would then have to accept that, for a period of time, there would be a shortfall in University budgets. He said that Queen's University would avail itself of any opportunity to increase student fees when the cap was removed, or even before that because it had joined the Russell Group, so fee increases were bound follow.

Mr Attwood said that another reason why the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 should be annulled was that there was no evidence as to how access to universities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds was being affected. He said that the evidence from England was that intervention was necessary to mitigate the impact of student fees and although that would come in part through the Minister's review, other measures could be taken now, such as stopping the student-fee increase on the basis of inflation. He urged the Assembly to vote to annul fee increases as outlined in the motion.

New Labour's bankrupt social policies

Anna Lo (All, Belfast South) said that the Alliance Party supported the prayer of annulment. She said that tuition fees were not a product of Northern Ireland's political system; they were a product of New Labour's bankrupt social policies, one of the hallmarks of which had been to be more Thatcherite than Thatcher herself would have ever dared to be. She pointed out that tuition fees had trebled in the past few years, and there was a danger of moving to the American model whereby universities were for the rich, and where social mobility was frozen. Ms Lo said that Northern Ireland had been vastly more successful than England in ensuring that young people from low-income backgrounds went to university. Therefore it would be necessary to develop a Northern Ireland solution that reflected its unique circumstances, perhaps by look towards the Scottish system for a working model. That system did not encumber students with upfront debt, and would free those who had received higher education but who chose to go into poorly-paid but socially worthwhile occupations such as social work, the clergy and the voluntary sector from carrying debt for the span of their adult life.

The Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey (UUP, Belfast East) was opposed to the motion. He argued that Northern Ireland had an excellent record in attracting people from less-favoured backgrounds to higher education. In the universities, 41 per cent of students came from such a background, compared with 29 per cent in Great Britain. Through the CSR, he had secured an additional £500 for the grant, which was unique to Northern Ireland. The Department worked with the universities, and its access agreements with them meant that students had access to bursaries that had been set at £300. Those agreements included a legal liability on the universities to pay those £300 bursaries and both universities currently paid bursaries of £1,000. The minister said that if the motion was agreed, £2.5 million would be taken out of the universities' pockets on top of, unfortunately, the £3 million that they would not receive next year as a result of the CSR. At this stage, it appeared that in year 1 of the CSR, the funding for higher education would decrease by 5.2 per cent in real terms, which was a substantial reduction, although he said that it would pick up in subsequent years.

The second area in which the motion would create an anomaly related to students from Northern Ireland who studied in England and Wales. He said that they paid more towards the upkeep and success of the universities there than they would if they studied in Northern Ireland. He believed that the value of those students' loans would be based on levels that had been set in Northern Ireland and that they could face a shortfall as a result. He claimed that the motion was part of a haphazard approach that may pre-empt the review that had been announced. The minister said that because the Higher Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 had set out the level of tuition fees until 2010, fees would be the Assembly's responsibility, and the universities will not be able to set fees unilaterally. He pointed out that Northern Ireland universities had no reserves to meet revenue deficits and he was keen to defend the £500 differential in the maintenance grant that had been secured. As regards to the announcement by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the minister said that he was reviewing all questions and would bring suggestions to Members in due course. Until the comprehensive spending review was complete, he was not in a position to determine the Department's internal priorities. With respect to PhD's, he was consulting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Department because there were funding issues that were outside the CSR process.

The question was put to the Assembly, and the motion was opposed.

UA 2007/0477

North/South Ministerial Council

Ulster Assembly • Ministerial Statement • 11 December 2007

The Minister of Education, Caitriona Ruane (SF, South Down) reported on the first North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in education sectoral format since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly. The report had been agreed with Edwin Poots MLA.

The council meeting was held in Dublin on Wednesday 14 November 2007. Mrs Ruane represented the Executive as Minister of Education, along with Edwin Poots, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Irish Government was represented by Mary Hanafin, Minister for Education and Science, who chaired the meeting.

The Council welcomed progress in addressing educational underachievement, including successful initiatives to promote literacy and numeracy in schools. Officials were requested to develop proposals for consideration at the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format. The ongoing co-operation in the area of school, youth and teacher exchanges was welcomed by the Council, and it was noted that a formal review of co-operation on education exchanges and supporting mechanisms, including the North/South Exchange Consortium, was shortly to commence.

Ministers welcomed a report on the establishment of a centre of excellence for autism at Middletown. The chief executive and chairman of the centre outlined the significant progress made to date, and informed the Council of a consultation exercise, involving all stakeholders, to determine how services would be delivered. The Council endorsed the centre's future plans, which included training, advisory and information research services and education. The Council discussed proposals for a 2008 joint conference on autistic spectrum disorder, and welcomed the distribution of parent-teacher videos, CD-ROMs and guidance material on autism and dyslexia.

Other joint projects in the field of special educational needs were discussed, including the cross-border school and parent community partnership programme, which was supported by the EU Peace and Reconciliation programme, and co-funded by both Departments of Education. In respect of teacher qualifications and superannuation, the Council noted the progress that had been made by the teachers' qualification working group, and said that teaching councils would co-operate on the issues, as appropriate, in future.

The Council recognised the significant changes to Irish language proficiency requirements for teaching posts, and highlighted a specific professional development programme, funded by the Department of Education and Science, and developed in Marino College of Education, Dublin, which had been introduced to address the needs of primary school teachers who were taking the scrúdú le haghaidh cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge, Irish proficiency examination. Ongoing co-operation between the inspectorates of both Education Departments in relation to sharing of best practice and research was welcomed and the Council acknowledged the outstanding contribution made by the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS), which provided support for all-island conferences; social, scientific and environmental education; initial teacher education; citizenship education; special educational needs; and for cross-border research projects.

Under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development — the OECD — the two Education Departments jointly hosted a conference of participating countries in Dublin in November. As a result, a joint research initiative aimed at attracting and developing school leaders would be developed. Joint professional-development programmes for agreed groups would also be explored.

The Council discussed teacher superannuation, particularly the question of transferring superannuation entitlements between both jurisdictions. It noted the decision that the North/South Ministerial Council had made at its meeting in institutional format in October 2007 that the Council's joint secretariat would convene a working group of officials from relevant Departments to consider the transfer of pension rights on a cross-border basis. The Council also agreed that officials from the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Education and Science would participate in that working group and would report back to the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format. The next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format would take place in spring 2008.

Poor performance of literacy and numeracy strategies

Sammy Wilson (DUP, East Antrim) said that the Northern Ireland Audit Office had published a report on the poor performance of the numeracy and literacy strategy. The Committee for Education had

identified that of the 660 teachers that had been trained in reading recovery, only 160 were being used in schools; and unrealistic targets had been set for numeracy and literacy in the Programme for Government. Given those circumstances, he asked the minister what the successful initiatives were that she had discussed with her counterparts in the Irish Republic and what good practices had she learned from the Department of Education and Science that could be applied to the serious problem of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Ruane said that at the conference she had heard from people from Finland, Norway and other countries that had very good education systems. She said that her Department had been reviewing the school improvement policy and the literacy and numeracy strategy.

Ken Robinson (UUP, East Antrim) noticed that there had been no mention of the pre-school sector in the statement. He asked the minister to assure the House that at the next ministerial meeting she would raise the issue of pre-school and early-years education.

Mrs Ruane said that pre-school education had not been one of the areas discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council because there were agreed topics in place. But she said that she would ask officials to explore how the subject might be added to the agenda of the next NSMC meeting.

Dominic Bradley (SDLP, Newry and Armagh) asked the minister what plans she had to address the reduction of funding for North/South teacher and youth exchanges in 2010 after the IFI funding, which accounted for over 40 per cent of the total, was to cease. He also asked what discussions had taken place between the minister and her counterpart in Dublin about plans for initial and in-service training of teachers for the Irish-language teaching qualification to be available in Northern Ireland colleges.

Mrs Ruane said that both Departments were committed to making progress on North/South exchanges. Although some funding was coming to an end and the North/South work was being reviewed. The minister had not had discussions with her counterpart on teacher training.

Trevor Lunn (All, Lagan Valley) asked if the South had a programme similar to the reading recovery programme and had there been cross-border discussions about the value of such programmes.

Mrs Ruane said that special educational needs was one of the most prolific areas of North/South co-operation. The South also used the reading recovery programme, and both sides were working together on best practice. CDs had been produced, which would be used in every school, in the North and the South. A toolkit for children with additional language needs had recently been launched and the Department of Education was currently reviewing the entire area of special needs.

Michelle O'Neill (SF, Mid Ulster) said that as the migrant worker population grew, teachers could share good practice by organising a conference to ensure that all children had equal access to education and equal outcomes. Mrs Ruane said that a conference had been held in Cavan that involved primary-school principals from across the island.

Mervyn Storey (DUP, North Antrim) asked the Minister how school-, youth- and teacher-exchange programmes would be funded. He also asked what the minister was doing about transient children, especially those from families from the British Army community. Mrs Ruane said that currently the children of British Army personnel were at 1.2 units on the LMS funding scale.

Mary Bradley (SDLP, Foyle) asked what actual progress had been made in dealing with underachievement that distinguished the return of devolution from the previous period of care and maintenance. Mrs Ruane said that lessons could be learned from the South and from England, Scotland and Wales.

Barry McElduff (SF, West Tyrone) asked what was being done to make educational psychology services available to more children. Mrs Ruane said that since 1999, the number of educational psychologists in training at Queen's University had been increased from five to 12 each year through the provision of additional resources. That increase in trainees had been sustained following the move to a three-year doctorate course, which had replaced the one-year Masters course in 2006.

Danny Kennedy (DUP, Newry and Armagh) said that the minister's statement failed to include any reference to the Irish-language qualification required by the education authorities in the Republic, which specifically discriminated against Northern Ireland-trained teachers and prevented them from obtaining jobs in that jurisdiction.

Mrs Ruane said that the meeting had identified the Irish-language requirement for recognition as a primary-school teacher as one of the obstacles to cross-border teacher mobility from North to South. Lack of proficiency in the Irish language represented a shortfall in the range of qualifications of primary-school teachers that would need to be made good. Significant changes had been made to the previous requirements for proficiency in the Irish language in respect of teaching posts and the ending of previous differential rates of pay, pending the acquisition of a recognised qualification. She said that significant obstacles to teacher mobility had been removed.

UA 2007/0478

Transfer Procedure

Ulster Assembly • Private Members' Debate • 11 December 2007

During the introduction of his motion, Sammy Wilson (DUP, East Antrim) said that if the minister had offered a clear vision about the transfer procedure last week he would have withdrawn the motion. Others shared his view, and on 5 December 2007 the *News Letter* had described the minister's announcement as a "package that will create school chaos".

On the same day, the *Belfast Telegraph* had printed a report card for Mrs Ruane in which it awarded her a grade D for clarity; grade C for practicality; grade B for long-term vision; grade C minus for adaptability; grade C for choice; grade D for equality; and grade D for fairness.

Fra McCann (SF, Belfast West) accused Mr Wilson of being selective in his choice of articles and said that the newspapers had also printed articles in support of the minister's announcement. Mr Wilson replied that the minister could not outline where she was going, or how she was going to get there. By 2011 the minister had said that there would be a system of 11-14 schools, 11-18 schools, or 7-14 schools, but it was not clear what the age limits in the schools would be and if they would be different in different places. It was also unclear what would happen between 2008 and 2011, as all the minister had said was that the revised curriculum would be used. Mr Wilson was not sure what the admissions criteria would be for oversubscribed schools after 2011, because according to the minister by that stage admissions would be based on community, geography and family. He accused the minister of hypocrisy because she had chosen to send her daughter to an oversubscribed grammar school in another country. Mr Wilson also argued that a viable school for 11- to 14-year-olds could not be implemented in rural parts of Northern Ireland without reducing the number of schools to about one in a 30- or 40-mile radius.

Dominic Bradley (SDLP, Newry and Armagh) said that many people had welcomed the ending of selection, including the SDLP. But the minister had been very coy about coming out and saying that academic selection had actually gone. He said that there could be no reorganisation without area planning, and there could be no area planning without a sustainable schools policy. Mr Bradley pointed out that the sustainable schools consultation process had finished last Easter, but as yet no policy had been published. He said that the minister had not even bothered to take her proposals to the Executive, but had written to her Executive colleagues half an hour before reading her statement. The questions that still remained were, in 2009, which post-primary schools would children be transferred to and what infrastructure would be in place to facilitate choice at age 14.

Basil McCrea (UUP, Lagan Valley) said that wanted the minister to explain what she had meant in the last debate when she said: "a process of formal, structured election". He said that it would also be helpful to know by what process schools would be identified as serving 11-year-olds to 14-year-olds, 11-year-olds to 19-year-olds and 14-year-olds to 19-year-olds. He wondered why the age range of five years of age to 14 years of age had not been considered, as some people considered that to be a viable option. He also wondered what the minister had meant when she said in her statement last week that she would support grammar schools, and other schools, that were not yet ready for the change.

Mr McCrea claimed that the evidence did not support the notion that 14 was the age at which people should be making decisions about their future. He said that when it came to academic selection, again, the Minister was ambivalent and unclear. She had come up with the notion of matching children to suitable provision, but Mr McCrea argued that children could not be matched to suitable provision without some form of selection. He pointed out that 4,000 children left school each year after 12 years of compulsory education without adequate levels of literacy and numeracy, and he suggested that they should not even be going beyond Key Stage 1 if they had not reached their targets. He said that academic selection was a red herring and the real issue should be about tackling cycles of social deprivation.

Paul Butler (SF, Lagan Valley) welcomed the fact that none of the amendments, nor even the original motion, had mentioned the phrase "academic selection". Therefore, he believed that the debate had shifted towards what Cairiona Ruane, the Minister of Education, had asked Members to do, which was to consider her visionary statement of 4 December 2007 on future transfer arrangements from primary to post-primary education. In the *Belfast Telegraph*, the principal of Millburn Primary School in Coleraine had said that he found: "Education Minister Cairiona Ruane's vision for the province's education system extremely refreshing." Mr Butler said that many people in the education system had accepted the need for change.

Trevor Lunn (All, Lagan Valley) said that the minister's statement had at least confirmed the end of the 11-plus and academic selection, and had placed an emphasis on pupils' making choices at the age

of 14, which was very much in line with Alliance Party policy. He said that with or without the Minister's statement, the traditional structure of post-primary education was undergoing radical change. That was a matter of simple demographics because the birth rate was falling rapidly. The 2001 census had recorded more than 13,000 14-year-olds, but fewer than 11,000 one-year-olds. That trend of a declining birth rate had continued since then, and had resulted in empty desks in secondary schools, and grammar schools having an increasingly comprehensive intake. Mr Lunn said that the rapid expansion of third-level education meant that more pupils from secondary schools were attending university. As a member of the Alliance Party, it would be remiss of him not to mention the excellent work of the integrated sector in educating children of all abilities, religions and cultures to the highest standards. He pointed out that the Irish-medium sector also saw no need to select by academic ability. With so many excellent non-selective schools successfully educating pupils of all abilities, including the most academically gifted, Mr Lunn could not understand the argument that an end to the 11-plus would lead to declining standards or reduced social mobility. But he agreed with other members that the minister's proposals were still dangerously sketchy. For instance it was unclear what would happen on 1 September 2009, when the first post-selection cohort arrived in secondary schools.

Failing the majority

The Minister of Education, Caitriona Ruane (SF, South Down) said that if the education system was not changed, it would continue to fail the majority of children. She said that George Bain had reported that the schools estate had 53,000 surplus places, and that number was expected to rise to more than 80,000 — more than a quarter of the current school population — over the next 10 years. For the 144 undersubscribed schools that would mean reduced funding, teacher redundancies and shrinking opportunities for children in a school that was struggling to survive. None of the 36 post-primary schools in the North that had fewer than 300 children were grammar schools. The cost of educating one child for one year in those schools was, on average, almost 20 per cent more than in the 41 schools that had 1,000 or more children — 26 of which were grammar schools.

She said that the last transfer test would be held in November 2008, and the last children to sit the transfer test would be those starting post-primary school in September 2009. The transfer of children who would be starting post-primary school in September 2010 would operate under new arrangements that would be based largely on family, community and geographical criteria. The new arrangements would extend to grammar-school admission processes, and the minister said that she would discuss their nature with the grammar schools. Some grammar schools may require time to adjust to the new vision, and she was ready and willing to work with them on that. But she assured members that it would be a well-managed and well-planned transition and there would be no postcode lottery. She said that in September 2009 children would be successfully matched to the correct post-primary places by managing the current spare capacity in the system and by working with post-primary schools in all sectors to ensure that that happened.

In 2013, the key education decision for a young person would be taken at 14 years of age, and it would be reached through a formal and structured process of informed selection, drawing on three years of post-primary schooling and the advice of parents, schoolteachers and careers professionals. The provision for post-14 education would be accessed either by transition within the same, collaborating institutions or by transfer to other institutions. Area-based planning would design an area's provision to ensure that it had the capacity to match young people to suitable provision post-14 years of age, potentially with models catering for 11-14 year-olds, 14-19 year-olds and 11-19 year-olds. The area-based planning criteria would be decided through a short consultation process, which had already begun. The choices available to young people at 14 years of age would be expanded by the entitlement framework, and would provide new opportunities for access to academic, professional and technical courses. The Minister said that she would make a statement in the New Year on how work was progressing, and would include an update on the development of area-based planning. In January 2008, she would also publish her strategy for school improvement *Every School a Good School*. She said that she would also bring proposals for the future of post-primary transfer to the Education Committee and the Executive Committee, and her draft admissions criteria regulations for transfer in 2010 and beyond would be subject to statutory consultation. The main question was amended and agreed to. Resolved: That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to present the details of her proposed process of formal structured election, including the process by which schools will be selected; to indicate what support will be offered to schools in relation to the proposals; to outline the policy for selection and allocation of teaching staff; and to further outline her proposals to avoid selection by postcode.

UA 2007/0479

Index of Part 1 - Reference

<u>Item</u>	<u>Section</u>	<u>Page</u>
11+ exam to be scrapped in Northern Ireland	Events	813
14-19 reforms, National Audit Office warns of substantial risks regarding	Events	815
A-levels, pupils shun science	Events	813
Academic journals published in December 2007	Publications	820
Academics earn over £50,000, more than a fifth of	Events	818
Academies, answer to written parliamentary question on	Events	815
Adult learners, nearly 700,000 fewer, attended evening classes than last year	Events	818
Answers to written parliamentary questions, December 2007	Written PQs	821
Association of School and College Lecturers publications in December	Publications	819
Brightest poor children 'outperformed by least gifted wealthy children'	Event	816
Building Schools for the Future, headteachers believe in positive effects of	Events	817
<i>Children on Care Standards</i>	Publications	820
Children and Young People Committee met in December	Committees	826
<i>Children's Plan: Building brighter futures, The</i>	Publications	819
Children's Plan, Government launches	Events	815
Committee on Culture and Education meeting	International	827
Commonwealth, activity in December 2007	International	827
Commonwealth of Learning's chairman dies	International	827
Commonwealth Teacher Research Symposium, third	International	827
<i>Consensus View on Food Competences for Children and Young People</i>	Publications	819
<i>Confidence in Standards: Regulating and developing qualifications and assessment</i>	Publications	819
<i>DCSF Autumn Performance Report 2007: achievement against public service agreement targets</i>	Publications	819
Degrees, inquiry launched into funding cut for students taking second	Events	814
<i>Delivering Improved Outcomes for Children, Young People and their Families: The crucial role of the new local performance framework</i>	Publications	819
Department for Children, Schools and Families publications in December	Publications	819
Department for Communities and Local Government publications in December	Publications	819
Department of Health publications in December	Publications	819
Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills publications in December	Publications	819
Diplomas will be worth a maximum of three-and-a-half A-levels	Events	817
Dyslexia, Welsh report on approaches to and treatment of	Events	816
Early Years guidance states that it is okay for boys to play with violent toys	Events	818
Education Committee met in December	Committees	826
Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee met in December	Committees	826
Education and training participation age, parliamentary question on cost of	Events	817
Employment and Learning Committee met in December	Committees	826
Enterprise and Learning Scrutiny Committee met in December	Committees	826
Evening classes, Nearly 700,000 fewer adults than last year attended	Events	818
Exam results for 11-year-olds have risen once again	Events	814
Food Standards Agency publications in December	Publications	819
Foreign modern languages, Government encourages take-up of	Events	817
Government Office for Science publications in December	Publications	819
Graduate endowment fee, Scotland will not scrap	Events	816
Handwriting, Children do worse in exams with neater	Events	813
Higher education, Government takes steps towards widening participation in	Events	815
Higher education to meet employers' skills needs, funding to help	Events	813
<i>Implementing Youth Matters: Continuing the dialogue with young people</i>	Publications	819
<i>Indices of Deprivation 2007</i>	Publications	819
<i>Innovation: Share your ideas with us</i>	Publications	819
Inquiry launched into funding cut for students taking second degrees	Events	814
Inspection must be overhauled, ASCL claims	Events	814
Inspections, Ofsted propose lightning	Events	815
International Baccalaureate, answer to parliamentary question on	Events	816

<i>Investing in the Children of the Islamic World</i>	Publications	820
<i>Investment to Improve Services for Disabled Children</i>	Publications	819
Leaving age, parliamentary question on the cost of raising the	Events	817
<i>Local Authority Children's Services Funding: 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11</i>	Publications	819
Maths, Schools are having little impact on the progress of 11 to 14-year-olds in	Events	814
Maths and science staff shortage, Royal Society warns of	Events	814
National Audit Office publications in December	Publications	819
<i>Next Steps: The future of inspection of schools and colleges</i>	Publications	819
Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education has doubts over forging stronger links	Events	815
OECD publications in December	Publications	819
Office for Standards in Education and Children's Services (Ofsted)		
Publications in December	Publications	820
Ofsted propose lightning inspections	Events	815
<i>Partnering for success: preparing to deliver the 14-19 education reforms in England</i>	Publications	819
PISA survey shows Government's policies are wrong	Events	813
<i>Poetry in Schools: A survey of practice</i>	Publications	820
PricewaterhouseCoopers publications in December	Publications	820
Primary review, latest research from	Events	816
Private schools could receive Ofsted-style inspections, All	Events	817
Proposed Vulnerable Children LCO Committee met in December	Committees	826
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to be divided	Events	816
<i>Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland</i>	Publications	820
<i>REACH: An independent report to Government on raising the aspirations and attainment of Black boys and young Black men - Government response</i>	Publications	819
Rural schools in Scotland, written answer to parliamentary question on	Events	814
SAT results have risen once again	Events	814
<i>School Building Design, Resources and Finance</i>	Publications	820
Science A-levels, pupils shun	Events	813
Science and maths staff shortage, Royal Society warns of	Events	814
<i>Science Review of the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice</i>	Publications	819
Scotland will not scrap graduate endowment fee	Events	816
Scottish education priorities, parliamentary question on	Events	814
Select Committee on Education and Skills met in December	Committees	825
Select Committee on Innovation, Universities and Skills met in December	Committees	826
Sex education should be statutory, UK Youth Parliament claims	Events	813
<i>Six Million Pay Cuts</i>	Publications	820
Skills needs, funding to help higher education meet employers'	Events	813
Specialist Schools and Academies Trust ousts chairman Sir Cyril Taylor	Events	818
Targets, Government 'has missed half of its'	Events	818
Teachers, 270,000 qualified, moved to another profession from 2000-05	Events	818
Toys, Early Years guidance states that it is okay for boys to play with violent	Events	818
Trade Unions Congress publications in December	Publications	820
Truancy, official Scottish figures on	Events	816
UNESCO publications in December	Publications	820
<i>Valuing People Now: From progress to transformation</i>	Publications	819
Widening participation in higher education, Government takes steps towards	Events	815
World Bank publications in December	Publications	820
<i>Young Apprenticeships Programme 2004-07: An evaluation, The</i>	Publications	820

Index of Part 2 – Debates

<u>Debate</u>	<u>Place</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Page</u>
Abolition of SportsScotland	SP	Debate	854
Academy Sponsorship	HC	Oral Questions, Church Commissioners	837
Adult Learners	HL	Short Debate	842
Alcohol Consumption	SP	Oral Questions, General	859
Anti-social Behaviour	SP	Oral Questions, Justice and Law	856
Bullying	WA	Oral Questions, First Minister	865
Child Advocacy Services	WA	Ministerial Statement	865
Child Employment	HC	Oral Questions, DCSF	839
Child Poverty	WA	Ministerial Statement	863
Children's Commissioner	WA	Ministerial Statement	866
Children's Plan	HC	Oral Statement	833
Children's Plan	HC	Oral Questions, DCSF	840
Children's Plan	HL	Oral Statement	847
Christmas Adjournment	HC	Adjournment Debate	841
Class Size Reductions	SP	Oral Questions, Finance	860
Class Sizes	SP	Ministerial Statement	848
Closure of Small Schools	WA	Opposition Debate	867
Custody of and Access to Children	HC	Westminster Hall Debate	832
Deaf Children	SP	Oral Questions, General	855
Eco-schools	SP	Oral Questions, General	855
Education Funding	WA	Opposition Debate	864
Education Leaving Age	HC	Oral Questions, DCSF	838
Ending Selection	NI	Ministerial Statement	868
Fostering and Kinship Care	SP	Executive Debate	849
Foundation Phase	WA	Oral Questions, First Minister	862
Funding	SP	Oral Questions, First Minister	852
Graduate Endowment Bill	SP	Legislation, Stage 1	857
Higher Education: Adults	HL	Oral Question	844
International Comparisons	HC	Oral Questions, DCSF	838
Local Government Finance	SP	Ministerial Statement	856
North/South Ministerial Council	NI	Ministerial Statement	872
Nurseries	HC	Oral Questions, DCSF	839
Orphaned Pupils	HC	Oral Questions, DCSF	839
Public Service TV for Children	HC	Westminster Hall Debate	831
Respite Care	HC	Oral Questions, DCSF	839
Sale of Student Loans Bill	HC	Committee Stage	828
School Building	WA	Oral Questions, First Minister	862
School Funding in Shropshire	HC	Adjournment Debate	835
School Uniforms	WA	Oral Questions, First Minister	862
School and University Funding	SP	Oral Questions, General	851
Schools	HL	Short Debate	844
Schools in Swindon	HC	Oral Questions, DCSF	840
Scouting	SP	Members' Business Debate	852
Select Committee Membership	HC	Motions	841
Sex Education	HC	Oral Questions, DCSF	839
Small Schools in Rural Wales	WA	Oral Questions, First Minister	862
Student Fees	NI	Delegated Legislation	870
Support for Disabled Children	SP	Oral Questions, First Minister	856
Support for ProjectsScotland	SP	Members' Business Debate	860
Topical Questions	HC	Oral Questions, DCSF	840
Transfer Procedure	NI	Private Members' Debate	874
UK-Pakistan Protocol on Children	HC	Adjournment Debate	837
Unauthorised Absence	HC	Oral Questions, DCSF	839
Woodland and Green Spaces	SP	Executive Debate	853
Youth Volunteering	HC	Oral Questions, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster	836