



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill:
Autism NI

17 June 2015

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Peter Weir (Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Robin Newton
Mrs Sandra Overend

Witnesses:

Dr Arlene Cassidy	Autism NI
Ms Pamela McCrossan	Autism NI
Ms Donna McWhirter	Autism NI
Ms Audrey Mullan	Autism NI

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): I thank the representatives of Autism NI for being so patient. I welcome you all here. We have Arlene Cassidy, chief executive of Autism NI; Pamela McCrossan, family support project officer; Donna McWhirter, family support manager; and Audrey Mullan, project coordinator. I ask you make a short initial presentation of maybe 10 minutes, and then we will open up the meeting to whatever questions members want to ask in relation to it.

Dr Arlene Cassidy (Autism NI): Thank you, Chair and members, for giving us the opportunity to contribute to this process. In addition to giving evidence on the special educational needs and disability (SEND) legislation, there is additional correspondence. If you bear with me, I should like to address that now.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): You are responding to the departmental correspondence.

Dr Cassidy: Yes. Is that OK?

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): Yes, that is fine. I just wanted to clarify, when you made reference to correspondence, that we are all talking about the same correspondence.

Dr Cassidy: Yes. Sorry.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): That is OK.

Dr Cassidy: Before I do that, I just want to say that I do not want to take up too much of the Committee's time. I am taking it for granted that some of you know of the work of Autism NI. This year is our twenty-fifth anniversary. Our main areas of activity are family support, training, lobbying,

advocacy work and the necessary fundraising. We are here today representing the work that we do regarding family support.

You have stolen my thunder in introducing my colleagues, so I will skip directly to the matter of the departmental correspondence, if I may, in two parts and very quickly. In summary, the question was what change there had been since the autism legislation came about. I would like to just refer to the actual correspondence and make two or three points. In the correspondence from Mr Russell Welsh, there is a reference to the Middletown Centre for Autism and the Education Authority work regarding building schools' capacity and training provision. We would just like to make the point that it is our experience that a lot of schools do not know the service that the Middletown Centre for Autism provides, so there is something wrong with its PR and marketing. There is also an inherent difficulty in that the system dictates that schools are responsible themselves for the decisions that they make regarding training. That is the first point regarding the particular point that was made in the correspondence.

On page 2 of the correspondence, in the first full paragraph, there is a reference to collaboration. They refer to collaborative working with health and social care, and they use as an example early intervention work, but they do not make it clear whether that is a regional service. I suspect that it is maybe a partnership in one particular geographical area, maybe with the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. Is it Keyhole early intervention training? That is the result of a six-year partnership across the voluntary health and social care and education sectors, which has been led by Autism NI and the Ulster University. If it is not the Keyhole early intervention programme, the six years were wasted and this reference indicates that a wheel is being reinvented. They are not specific on whether this is in a geographical area or regional.

The final point regarding the correspondence is that there is an omission in the second full paragraph on page 2. The Department has neglected to include its very valuable activity within the Northern Ireland autism strategy research advisory committee, on which it is also represented. In that research is one of the issues that is also mentioned as an area of responsibility for the Department of Education in the action plan. It is a shame that the Department did not give it recognition in its letter to the Committee.

The other point is slightly wider, regarding what progress has been made on the autism strategy. Yes, in terms of collaboration, the cross-departmental strategy is about interdepartmental working and planning. As regards the structures, DE is represented on the implementation panel, as it has indicated, and also, as I have said, on the research advisory committee. There is an autism strategy interdepartmental senior officers group, on which it is represented as well. So the structures are there, but I will just remind everyone that this is the first action plan under the autism strategy, and the aim is that by the time the third action plan comes about, there will be a very integrated joint funding and planning strategy for autism services. That is the aspiration that is in the strategy. Where are we now with regard to this action plan? I am focusing on the DE aims. Very quickly, I want to give an example and restate the point that was made by a number of the autism organisations in Northern Ireland at the time of the consultation on the autism strategy, which was that a lot of the Departments put aims into the action plan that were very generic. That was pointed out to the Department of Education, and it came back with slightly more specific aims, but you could still drive a cart and horses through quite a few of them. If you have very wide targets they are very hard to measure. Who measures them? The regional ASD coordinator has a role in that, but, unfortunately, that post has not been filled due to long-term sickness, so there is a gap there.

An example that I would give to you of a target that is too wide to measure is target 5.2.2 from the action plan, which refers to a commitment to:

"Revisions to Middletown Centre for Autism's parent/carer training model scoped and developed and implemented."

It gives a target time of three years to complete that; 2013 to 2016. That is close to our heart. Autism NI is an accredited ASD training agency, and we do that routinely and on an ongoing basis with fewer resources. That is the example that I would give of a wide target.

I could go on, but I would encroach on my colleagues' time. However, I am happy to address that in a fuller way on another occasion. With that, I hand over to my colleagues.

Ms Pamela McCrossan (Autism NI): My background was originally in education. I was in education for over 10 years through primary, secondary, special education and outreach, and I have since joined Autism NI.

Through consultations with colleagues and other organisations, and reflecting on the evidence that has been provided through the Autism NI advice line, we acknowledge that aspects of the Special Education Needs and Disability Bill will be a positive development in establishing a greater link in meeting the needs of children with SEN. However, aspects of the Bill will need further consideration to ensure that it successfully meets the needs of children with SEN. Those are threefold: training, funding and working in collaboration.

First, a mandatory rolling training programme that upskills not only teachers but the whole school staff must be applied and further monitored to ensure that staff are equipped with the knowledge that they need to support pupils with SEN. Autism NI has received numerous calls about education and a lack of understanding or training portrayed by staff in schools whilst supporting pupils with autism. That not only prohibits the child with autism from receiving an education that is tailored to their needs but also adds undue stress and anxiety to pupils, parents and staff as they do not have the skills to ensure that pupils with SEN receive an inclusive education.

Too often, pupils with ASD are sent home early or have a reduced timetable as schools are not equipped with the knowledge or resources required to help to meet the needs of the individual. That is not only unfair to the child but is against the law. The working partnership between schools and parents is then strained, as the school is failing to make reasonable adjustments to include children with ASD. In one case, a parent contacted Autism NI, concerned that the school was using the explanation that her child posed a health and safety risk through their behaviour as a valid reason to ask the parent to take the child home. However, the parent felt that the school's real reason was that it did not have the staff to support her child for the whole school day and explained how her child was a very passive individual who did not display behaviour deemed to be a health and safety risk.

Other difficulties that parents and school staff have include the application of the individual education plans (IEPs), which contain detailed targets and strategies that will be put in place to ensure that the child with SEN can progress. However, staff are not skilled in implementing IEPs, and therefore struggle to ensure their effectiveness in progressing pupils based on their individual difficulties and not that of a generic approach. Too often, Autism NI receives calls from parents who explain that the targets that are set are not appropriate and may remain on the child's IEP for an entire year. For an IEP to be successful, it must have realistic targets that are updated and regularly monitored. If those targets are not being met, it is the responsibility of the school to ensure that the IEP is a working document that is there to meet the needs of the child and does not act as a tick-box exercise.

For there to be effective training and to provide a greater understanding of SEN and how support can be implemented and differentiated within the classroom, there needs to be sufficient funding in schools. Schools struggle to meet the increase in training needs for their staff due to a lack of funds. Schools need to have a sufficient budget that reflects the demands of a mandatory SEN training programme. Schools also need to have a budget that reflects the resources that are required to support the individual needs of pupils with SEN. Without training and resources, schools will continue to struggle and, in the long run, it will be the children who suffer.

Introducing a working partnership whereby the Education Authority requests support from the Health and Social Care body will also require additional funding, not only for the Education Authority to acquire the support that is needed from the Health and Social Care body but for the funding that will be needed by the Health and Social Care body to ensure that it is fully equipped and staffed to meet the demands and needs from schools that request and seek support from it. This would be a positive development for schools to work in collaboration with the Health and Social Care body, but it must be properly funded and monitored to ensure its effectiveness in meeting the individual needs of children with SEN.

Working in collaboration is also a main factor in ensuring that the SEND Bill is implemented effectively. Schools and parents need to understand the important role that children play in providing essential information regarding the support that is required to meet their needs. Schools are required to share information regarding the targets that are set in the IEPs with pupils so that they know what they are working towards. However, that information is very often not shared with pupils and, even more so, it is not shared with the relevant persons who are concerned about the child's education. How can pupils progress if not all parties, including themselves, are aware of the targets and strategies? Parents struggle to understand what their children are working towards as, at times, information is not

shared or discussed with them. For the application of IEPs and the introduction of the personal learning plans, parents, staff and pupils must work together and listen to everyone's voice to develop a programme that is differentiated to the individual needs of the pupil with SEN. Schools need to be reminded that parents are also professionals in their child's welfare, and must take on board any information that they have in relation to the strategies and targets that need to be put in place to fully support the child.

For the Education Authority to work in collaboration with the Health and Social Care body, there must also be a body that is responsible for ensuring that both parties are working towards supporting the pupils with SEN. That body will need to take responsibility for ensuring that the Education Authority is seeking the support that it needs from the Health and Social Care body and that the Health and Social Care body is not struggling from demand, with an increase in waiting times causing undue stress to the child and everyone concerned with the pupil.

In summary, for the SEND Bill to be implemented successfully, it must take on the three key issues of training, funding and collaboration. Training is essential in schools, within the Education Authority and for any outside agency that requires the skills and knowledge not only to meet the needs of the pupil with SEN but to support the struggles that a parent-carer faces in ensuring that their child receives a quality, full-time education that all schools are legally bound to provide, including children with ASD. Secondly, to meet the demand for training, the SEND Bill will need to ensure that there are sufficient funds in place to not only execute an effective and beneficial SEN training programme, including training in ASD, but provide the many valid and necessary resources that are required to support the individual needs of pupils with SEN. Finally, there needs to be an emphasis on effective collaboration. The SEND Bill needs to highlight and enforce the importance of working in partnership with parents, schools, the Education Authority and the Health and Social Care body and how the pupil's views are implemented. Without those key issues, any person who is concerned with the child's education will struggle to adapt and provide the beneficial support required to meet the individual needs of the child.

Ms Donna McWhirter (Autism NI): My background is in business management. My role within Autism NI is as the family support manager, and I have been with the organisation for over 10 years. I am here to represent the parents whom we in the family support team meet.

Calls to our helpline last year totalled more than 2,000. That figure has been steadily rising in the past few years and has seen an increase of 130% from 2010. The highest percentage of those calls are on issues of education. Those statistics correspond with the increasing number of diagnoses being made across Northern Ireland, with the HSC trust figures in April 2015 showing that 1,449 children were waiting for assessment for autism. Of that number, around 60% to 70% will be diagnosed with autism. From the number of diagnoses, it is likely that all teachers should expect to teach a child with autism and should therefore receive appropriate training to best support their needs.

The key issue around education is training. At present, there is no mandatory training for all teachers, especially observation training. It appears that Middletown's model does not seem to fit its purposes. There are parents who receive training from Middletown and are satisfied; however, information from our advice line shows that many teaching staff and parents do not know that Middletown exists. I will give you an illustration of that, which came from one of our parents. Three weeks ago, we had a call from a parent who was asked to attend the school with her child. There were no other pupils or staff with them in the classroom. This showed that the teacher was not equipped with the knowledge or the resources to address the child's issues, but the school and the board thought that it was OK as this was keeping the child in the school.

Schools are reporting that, to release a teacher to receive training at Middletown, even though the training is free, the school has to pay for a substitute teacher for that day. There are also issues about IEPs, especially training for implementing and managing an IEP. At present, an IEP format can be downloaded from the CD-ROM, but the targets on the download are too loose and need to be individualised. A number of schools ignore the diagnosis in view of the statement, so generic statements lead to a generic statement. Each child should have his or her own individual targets. At every training event, Autism NI says that, when you have met one child with ASD, you have met one child with ASD. Through our advice line, parents are reporting that a number of teachers still do not know that they should be informing parents about the IEP. They should be giving parents a regular report and asking them for their input, as well as the input of pupils, in their own understanding.

Just last week, a parent from Magherafelt told us that she had not been given any report over the past year about her child's statement. However, for next year, the teacher had sent a message home that two new extra targets were to be added to the original statement. There was no one-to-one

consultation and no report on why the other targets had not been reached. This is not an isolated case.

Another significant concern for parents is that many children are being held at stage 2 of SEN. If a child needs to move to stage 3, a school has to engage with outside professionals at an additional cost. Parents also found that schools are reluctant to ask for the autism advisory team to assess a pupil to put an effective plan in place. We feel that schools are under pressure to keep within their budgets and appear to decline to ask for specialists to assess the needs of pupils who require extra support if they are to move to stage 3.

Another big concern for parents is that they are being asked to take children home early from school. One young boy's parents were asked to pick him up at lunchtime every day as he could not concentrate on his work. This child may need only a few strategies to help him to maintain focus in the classroom, but the school thought it best for the pupil to be excluded from the school in the afternoons and thus made to feel isolated. The school did not attempt to address the issue and did not discuss with his parents how they could put strategies in place to deal with the underlying issues and behaviour. Packing up pupils before school is dismissed deprives them of educational benefit and allows for them to be treated differently from other students.

We realise that there are certain situations in which, once in a while, it is fine to take a child home early, but daily, weekly or monthly calls are not acceptable. We say to parents that, when they get a phone call from the school requesting them to pick up their child, they should ask whether the child has been suspended or has sustained any physical injury or harm. If the answer is no, they are not required to come to the school. They are not being hard-hearted or uncaring but merely want their child to be educated like all other students in the building. If their behaviour is an ongoing issue, discussions must be had to find the proper placement for the child.

School is challenging for special education pupils, and some would rather be at home than at school. These pupils quickly learn the behaviours that will get them picked up early, and they will effectuate those behaviours more frequently, but this isolates pupils. The best place for a child is in a school setting with other children. Calling parents for early pick-up can be a quick route for schools that may not want to deal with the underlying issues and causes. School personnel and professionals often have far superior training in dealing with behavioural issues stemming from disabilities than some parents do. That is why school is the best place for the child during the school day.

Autism NI would like you to consider the following points. The Health and Education Departments have their own autism strategies, and we feel that there should be more collaboration as we do not see evidence of this on the ground. All teaching staff, especially teachers and classroom assistants, should have previous training and experience of working with pupils with autism. All staff should know how best to integrate their knowledge and apply it to their individual assessment, planning and educational practice. All staff should be aware of how to integrate visual teaching methods, communication strategies, behavioural interventions and sensory-based interventions to best meet the needs of individual pupils. Accredited training should be given to teacher training staff and others who will be involved in the decision-making for a child with autism, the priority being that training should be part of the curriculum in teacher training colleges.

Ms Audrey Mullan (Autism NI): I do not have a statement. I have a degree in education and a master's degree in autism. I worked in the education sector for seven years, and I have been with Autism NI for the last eight years. My role today is to support my colleagues and maybe answer questions.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): Thank you, Audrey. My main question, particularly in light of your experience, raises an issue that we are very much dealing with: the extent to which there should be statutory obligations, particularly for collaboration. In the Autism Act, there is an obligation to plan strategically. You also have experience of collaboration. I would like your view on the benefits or weaknesses of putting in place a statutory requirement to collaborate, whether that makes the difference or the practical outworkings on the ground make the difference, as opposed to any high-level statutory requirement.

Dr Cassidy: I will start off, and other folk can chip in. We were the lead campaigner for legislation, as you are aware, and that was about getting a high-level statement of the requirement for collaboration, because it was hit-and-miss on the ground. There is a weakness, as I indicated in my initial statement. With the legislation, we had campaigned for someone to be in the role of an advocate to

monitor the collaboration and its effectiveness. However, that did not come forward, so there may be a need for someone with an enforcement role. The closest that we were able to get through lobbying was the regional ASD coordinator. The post is funded by DHSSPS, but the job description gives that Department some role to liaise with other Departments regarding the effectiveness of the autism strategy. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety heads up the lead Department responsible for the autism strategy and the level of collaboration. So there are structures, although not the structures that we would have liked. We would like to have seen an autism advocate role, but at least there are some mechanisms, although, to my knowledge, no evidence of proactivity. I am aware that the Minister has to make a statement to the Assembly within the next year about the progress of the autism strategy, when there will be an opportunity for questions from Members.

Mr Craig: I declare an interest as vice-chair of the all-party group on autism. I will pick up on what you said about the duties of the board of governors. I have been sticking to this one, because I am on two boards of governors. As I look at this, I ask myself, where on earth is the expertise among the board of governors to fulfil that role? In the years that I have been involved with you, I have become aware that you would need a medical degree to understand fully the difficulties in special educational needs, bearing in mind that each child is completely different. What difficulties do you envisage for a board of governors as it takes on the role of ensuring that these personal learning plans are in place for each child? It strikes me that, at present, it is the SENCO or, in a primary school, more or less the principal who has that responsibility and who has in-built protections through their jobs. Someone on the board of governors has no protection.

Ms McCrossan: It is very important, as you say, that somebody on the board of governors has extensive experience with special educational needs and even qualifications in the area. In my experience, SENCOs sometimes do not have qualifications in special educational needs or perhaps even experience, because it may be a role that has been put on them. It is essential that SENCOs have the qualifications and experience to be able to fill the position and support teachers in schools who perhaps do not have as much experience or lack qualifications.

I have also found that SENCOs are not allocated appropriate time to do their duties, so we may have SENCOs who are also on full-time teaching hours and are trying to execute their other challenges. The ratio of SEN children in a school should coincide with a SENCO's non-contact hours, so that a SENCO can work with the children with SEN and also work alongside their teachers to upskill them with the strategies and skills that they need to be able to succeed in the mainstream classroom. That illuminates the fact that schools are ringing up parents to bring children home early, because the mainstream teacher is not equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. If that does not come from a higher source — for example, the board of governors — or if the SENCO is not on the school management or leadership team, we sometimes find that it is difficult for teachers to put in place the necessary strategies and interventions.

Mr Craig: That is interesting. You have also recommended that an outside body should keep an eye on the PLPs so that they are equally implemented right across the board. Do you have evidence that each school treats this differently at present? I think that that is important and that the Committee needs to take it on board.

Ms McCrossan: From phone calls that we have received through our advice line, and from parents, the information that we get is sometimes differentiated through the support that they receive with IEPs, statements, the understanding of that and what their role is, and how the staff in the school understand their roles. Also, from my experience of teaching in different schools, each school has a different format and engages with it differently. They look for different outcomes from it. There is no uniform approach across schools or across boards to ensure that everyone is looking for the same outcome.

Mr Lunn: Thank you for your presentation, ladies. Both Arlene and Donna mentioned the Centre for Autism at Middletown, along the lines that you perhaps think that it is a hidden jewel. It surprises me that, at this stage of the process, people do not know about it. Do I take it that, when Middletown is involved, you are perfectly satisfied with the service that it provides?

Dr Cassidy: Yes. The feedback that we have had is extremely positive on the quality of its training. We are absolutely satisfied. Colleagues will agree that we are continually surprised at having to tell schools and parents that Middletown exists. It is not our role to publicise Middletown, but, obviously, it is one of the services to which we signpost people. I know that there are capacity issues at Middletown in terms of direct one-to-one working and issues with agreements with the education and

library boards and now with the Education Authority. I do not know the details of that, but I know that, at one stage, it limited them to direct one-to-one contact with one child from each education and library board. I do not know whether that has increased to two from each board area. There seems to be a bureaucracy that maybe impeded progress.

Mr Lunn: If Middletown was not constrained by capacity problems and, perhaps, budget, is there anything that you could suggest that might add to the process there at present?

Dr Cassidy: All of us are being lobbied by families who are not getting the service. It is an inconsistent service from school to school, especially in mainstream education, because of a lack of training and resources — a lot of the points that we have highlighted. There is an increase in home teaching and organisations being set up to lobby for autism schools and all sorts of things. I think that that is happening because of a vacuum in our education sector. Autism NI has always had an issue with the Middletown model. It is not that it exists in itself, but there is so much need out there, and school exclusions are increasing, especially in the autism sector. There is a real need for intervention.

Mr Lunn: I think that Middletown operates different models in the South and the North. I presume that you are familiar with that. Do you think that there is something to learn from the way in which it is operated in the Republic? I think that they operate more directly with parents and children.

Ms Mullan: I am not sure, Trevor, of the way in which they work in the South. You can definitely go down a different diagnostic route in the South. Private diagnoses are more welcome and so on. Certainly, any parents whom I have come across from the South seem to have a freer service. They seem to be able to access things more easily. That might be my perspective, and I do not have any evidence to support that.

Mr Lunn: You might be right.

Ms Mullan: That is just how I view the conversations that I have had with parents.

Mr Lunn: For the record, I think that Middletown does a terrific job, North and South, and I wish that it could be expanded, but budgets are what they are. I do not have anything else to ask you. It is quite refreshing to speak to a group that does not have a problem with clause 1. *[Laughter.]* You are the first.

Mr Newton: I thank the group for attending. I am a keen supporter of Autism NI. I have a young man in my office at the moment who is autistic. He is doing qualifications in administration. I have had several autistic guys on work experience with me, some more than once, and I have to say that it is a delight to work with them. I know that parents whom I have become involved with have a great deal of respect for Autism NI.

I will pick up on a small point that Ms McWhirter made about the need for the Education and Health Departments to work together. How might we consider that aspect in the Bill to satisfy or resolve your concerns?

Ms Mullan: I worked in a school for seven years, and I worked with a lot of parents. It is difficult, because sometimes principals get in the way and do not allow people in. You would need a body or person to oversee that. Schools are sometimes reluctant to allow outside agencies in because it looks bad that they are not able to provide the service that they should provide. It becomes quite difficult, but there is a need for speech and language therapists and occupational therapists to be allowed access to schools and maybe for a training programme — I know that you have heard a lot about training — so that schools see the benefit of the work of specialist speech and language therapists or occupational therapists. However, our big concern is the funding, because Health and Social Care and Education are stretched to the limit. Who will pay for the extra work that needs to be done? Where will the money come from to provide this? It is essential, especially access to occupational therapy and helping teachers to understand that a lot of behaviours come from sensory issues, which can be adequately dealt with through occupational therapy and specialist sensory integration programmes. However, there is the matter of paying for it, never mind setting up another person to oversee it all. We have a problem with that, but it is definitely high on our wish list. We want more integration work between the Education and Health Departments, but who will oversee that?

Dr Cassidy: It goes back to the Chair's point about who is overseeing the effectiveness of the collaboration that was and is the spirit of the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. When that legislation came into being, there were financial constraints, and there are financial constraints now, but there is a requirement on all bodies to be creative in how they work together, plan together, look at duplications and remove them and think creatively. I believe that money is a big driver, but it is about goodwill and a will to make it happen. If the requirement is not enforced and no questions are asked, nothing will change.

Mrs Overend: Thanks very much for your presentation. I want to expand on the point about there being an external oversight body. NICCY said that the statement should follow the child and that it should belong to the child rather than the institution. I am trying to work that out. Maybe the child should own it so that the family drives the personal learning plan, and they would then have support from the likes of you or that external body. What are your views on that idea?

Ms Mullan: I think that that would be quite complex, because you are then putting another burden on parents. Some parents are more than able to support their child's learning, but we would be really concerned about parents who are not able to support their child's learning and understand all the difficulties and problems that the child would have. Some parents find it very difficult to advocate for their children, especially with autism, and understanding the real needs. It would be another burden on parents, and all this would pass over to them. The educators and the people who write the statement have analysed the child's needs. To my mind, it would be the duty of the teacher and the SENCO to see that the statement is implemented and put in place. I would be concerned about parents. Some of our parents are struggling with the diagnosis and comprehending what it all means, and it might be quite difficult to put another burden on them. Some parents are more than able to support that, but I would be concerned that, if it were a general thing that they had to do, it would be difficult.

Mrs Overend: I am trying to balance the views.

Ms Mullan: I do not know whether I have answered your question, but I am coming at it from a parent's point of view as well. You look to the expertise of teachers and SENCOs to help to implement the statement, because an educational psychologist has provided the statement and knows what the child needs. I do not know about passing it.

Ms McCrossan: Parents look to professionals to take the lead, but we need to realise that professionals also have to listen to what parents have to say. Through phone calls and my experience, parents often say that professionals do not listen to them and that they do not take their advice on board. As Audrey said, some parents are more than capable of driving that forward, but other parents do not really know their role. It is the responsibility of the professionals to be able to support parents in understanding their role by taking the lead and helping them. At the end of the day, all children are entitled to the same education, not just when they have a parent who is capable of pushing it more.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): I have a couple of final issues, and, as I said to the other groups that gave evidence today, I am not asking for an instant response.

One issue that was raised is the fact that there is high-level legislation, but the meat and substance will be in regulations and the code of practice to make sure that the legislation is mirrored in the regulations. The groups that made submissions were concerned that they had been asked to comment on the legislation without seeing the other elements, and I suspect that that is relatively universal. The Committee has asked the Department for early sight of the regulations, because there is a concern about simply signing a blank cheque.

Another issue that was raised was the provision of reassurance on the legislation and seeing the constraints and restrictions that could be put in the legislation on the regulations — looking at high-level constraints on regulatory-making powers. Maybe you could give that some thought and come back to us if you have any suggestions on areas of the Bill where you feel that that would be useful. I appreciate that you have outlined the key components, but, if you have any views on any high-level constraints that should be in the clauses, the Committee would value that information. I appreciate that it is an unfair question to ask you to answer off the top of your head.

There is a concern that there is a complication with the code of practice in that it would not be subject to any Assembly procedure. It could be published and consulted on by the Department and then

simply put in place. Do you agree that there is value in adding an Assembly procedure to the code of practice to ensure that what is delivered on the ground is useful?

Dr Cassidy: We were talking about that prior to coming in and about the anomaly of having legislation but no code of practice.

The Chairperson (Mr Weir): We have been pressing the Department on that, and no decision has been taken. There is a concern, however, that the code could be left without any constraints, so maybe an Assembly process is needed.

Thank you very much for your evidence. If there is anything further that you want to submit to us at any stage, we will be more than happy to receive it. There will be detailed scrutiny of the clauses in the autumn. We are still receiving evidence, and your evidence has been very useful. You brought the expertise, particularly on autism issues, and the Committee appreciates that.