

Cross Party Group on Dyslexia

Minutes of the meeting of the Cross Party Group on Dyslexia held in the Scottish Parliament on Wednesday 21st May 2014.

1. Welcome and Introductions

Margaret Mitchell MSP welcomed members to the meeting.

Attendees

Claudia Beamish MSP, Lisa Ross, Mairi MacIntosh, Jenny Guise, Susie Agnew, Janette Cameron, Lynn Dobbie, Joe Moran, Bill Sadler, Liz Tangney, Elspeth Dow, Rosemary Bowe, Fiona Dickinson, Cathy Magee, Mary Evans, Margaret Crombie, Margaret Glasgow, Fran Ranaldi, Yowann Byghan, Stuart Lucas, Martin Davis, Margaret Crankshaw, Samantha Gray, Julie Ross, Jay Kirkland, Monica Gribben, Mike Gibson, Anne Mortowioz, David Jones

Apologies

Stuart McMillan MSP, Julia Trotter, Elaine Smith MSP, Linda Kerr, Kathleen Clark

3. Minutes of previous meeting held on Wednesday 5th February 2014

The minutes were approved. Proposed by Elspeth Dow and seconded by Lynn Dobbie.

4. Business arising from previous minute

Claudia Beamish MSP stressed the importance of dyslexia being discussed across committees and the potential for joint meetings on areas of common interest.

5. Education Scotland Report: Making sense: Education for Children and Young People with Dyslexia.

Claudia Beamish MSP outlined a question she had tabled in the Parliament in relation to the Scottish Government's response to the report in terms of equalities.

David Jones provided an overview of the conclusions and recommendations in the report. A large number of contributions were made by members of the group.

The CPG welcomed the report and acknowledged that it gave an accurate but frustrating picture of the inconsistency of policies and practices across and within local authorities. The recommendations were considered to be helpful and, if actioned and appropriately resourced, they would make a significant difference to the lives of children and young people with dyslexia and their families.

The following issues were raised during discussions:

- The report refers to the Scottish Government Cross Party Group on Dyslexia. It should read the Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Dyslexia.
- The report repeatedly describes progress in terms of 'meeting the additional support needs of children and young people, including dyslexia.' Members acknowledged that there had been significant developments in relation to overall additional support needs and specifically since the 2008 report in terms of dyslexia at a national level, but that there was little evidence of the same degree of progress in relation to dyslexia at a local level. Concerns were raised about the very disappointing and worrying picture of the inconsistencies across and within local authorities resulting in virtually a 'school post-code lottery' in terms of attitudes, policies and practices. It appeared that many of the areas for development included in the 2008 report had not been addressed by a significant number of local authorities.

- The Group were interested in how data had been collected to inform the report and wished to seek clarification on the following:
 - a. With reference to information from school inspections during the period (Easter – October 2013), what specific questions and measures were taken to enable specific information about dyslexia to be gathered over and above the normal information gathered relating to additional support needs? If this was simply part of the standard inspection process, how did inspectors know if pupils were dyslexic?
 - b. How many parent's focus groups took place and how were the parents identified?
 - c. How many 'Focused visits' took place, in what areas and how many pupils were involved?

- The report (Page 62) identified North Lanarkshire Council as having the lowest recorded levels of dyslexic pupils in Scotland yet it is quoted in the report giving the impression of good practice (Page 10). This was concerning as in previous Parliamentary debates on dyslexia the situation in North Lanarkshire Council has been raised by members of the Scottish Parliament and at the meeting of the CPG in June 2013, to discuss the scope of the review (attended by Ken McAra) a specific request had been made from a young person from the area that the review should consider the Council's practices. The CPG could not understand why, given prior knowledge and information, this example was used as it potentially detracted from the credibility of the report.

- It was noted the report failed to include or reflect the views of young people. The Group felt this was a flaw in the report given the Scottish Government's own commitment to engaging and empowering young people and involving them in their own learning, central themes in the Curriculum for Excellence.

The report included the views of parents and carers and noted suggestions on ways in which the system could be improved. It failed to acknowledge that young people have a voice or include suggestions for improvements from their perspective.

The Group were of the view that young people with dyslexia should be engaged and included in the co-design and co-production of actions in response to the report.

- The Group felt the report rightly placed a focus on links to literacies. It did, however, only include a small reference to non-literacy impacts of dyslexia such as health and well-being. This was felt to be disproportionate to the significant affect dyslexia has on daily life, on self-esteem, mental health, on ambition and aspirations and on behaviours resulting from frustration etc. The importance of this had been highlighted at the launch by pupils at Kyle Academy when they clearly stated that although reading and writing were issues and important, ‘emotional impact’ had the biggest impact on young people with dyslexia.

The Group strongly supported the Scottish Government’s current work exploring the concepts of ‘dyslexia friendly authorities’ and ‘dyslexic friendly schools’.

Specific Comments

Inconsistencies across and within local authorities

The CPG was not surprised at the conclusions regarding inconsistencies of policies and practices across and within local authorities. This had been an issue raised on many occasions. The group recognised that addressing these inconsistencies was, in the main, the responsibility of individual local authorities and that discussions with CoSLA, SOLACE and local authorities would be needed to secure any meaningful change.

Agreement of a definition

The Group were alarmed that some local authorities were still trying to agree a definition and regarded this as totally unacceptable. The Group believed this contributed to young people being denied access to appropriate resources and support including assistance with examinations.

The report's conclusions stated that *'there is evidence that local authorities and practitioners have moved closer to a shared understanding of what dyslexia is'*. Given the initial report was published in 2008 and a definition was agreed in 2009. The Group felt this was a totally unacceptable position and that the Scottish Government should be asked to challenge these specific local authorities and identify the issues which were preventing the adoption of the agreed definition in order that they can be resolved.

Use of the Toolkit

The members were alarmed at the variation in levels of knowledge, understanding and use of the online toolkit. The number of schools not promoting or using the resource was seen as unacceptable.

Information about dyslexia

It was of concern that some local authorities appeared to be failing to meet their statutory requirements in relation to the Additional Support for Learning Act in terms of available information on dyslexia and the requirement to involve pupils and parents or take account of their views.

Identification of dyslexia

The findings of the report relating to the levels of young people being identified at secondary schools compared to primary school gave rise to a number of contributions. It was felt that children in primary school are being denied appropriate support because of the views and attitudes of individual headteachers and other staff who refuse to acknowledge the existence of dyslexia or refuse appropriate access to assessments and resources. The consequences of this were seen in terms of learning but also the negative impact on self-esteem, self-confidence and frustration during those primary school years which would have a life-long impact.

The report highlighted the relationship between schools and parents and the journey when parents engage with the school about concerns. Members had many examples of parents having a negative experience leading to confrontation and aggressive meetings. The report, in the section 'Parents and carers views', used the term 'ongoing discussions' to describe the meetings

between parents and sometimes senior management. The Group felt this did not adequately describe or reflect the nature of those discussions and the frustration and anger felt by many parents because of the inconsistency of attitudes and practices of the school. The example in the report of two schools a few miles apart having completely differing attitudes and responses was one recognised by many members.

The Group were concerned with the section which stated *'eventually, most parents and carers realised that an assessment of some sort would be helpful in meeting the needs of their child appropriately'*. Member's experiences were that it is the parents who know very early that something is wrong but have to fight with the school to convince them that an assessment is essential, not just 'helpful'.

The Group were of the view that the example in the report of action being taken by a school only after parents had to pay for an independent assessment which confirmed what they had been saying to the school but which the school had rejected is totally unacceptable and raised a number of concerns including equality legislative issues.

Data Gathering

This issue had been raised at previous CPG meetings and members restated their view that the statistics on identification levels within schools (Page 62) demonstrated that the current methodology is flawed and requires urgent action. The Group felt that these figures do not reflect the reality of the situation and if used by local authorities to determine the allocation of resources based on identified need, children and young people may be being denied support which would help them reach their potential.

Teacher Training

The CPG supported the recommendations in terms of both initial teacher training and In-service training including opportunities for Scottish accredited qualifications. The report highlighted there had been a significant increase in training about dyslexia at the initial training stage including knowledge of the Addressing Dyslexia Toolkit. The value of this investment in training was seen

as potentially undermined however if for example a student either goes out on placement, probation or secures a post in one of 24% of primary schools in Scotland which, according to the report, is not aware of the Toolkit.

Members fully supported the recommendation that Dyslexia Scotland and others be involved in the development of a comprehensive dyslexia professional learning package which could be accessed by local authorities to increase the capacity of teachers to meet learning needs, specifically dyslexia.

As with the definition and the existing toolkit, members felt it was not the promotion or adoption of the resource that is the issue, rather the uptake of these opportunities in terms of accessibility and affordability by local authorities.

Qualification achieved and post-school destinations

The CPG was alarmed at the statistics within the report about differences in achievement and post school destinations for those who are dyslexic and those who are not and the subsequent impact on the ambitions and aspirations of young people with dyslexia. The wide inconsistencies even within authorities as to the ability of young people to access examination support was acknowledged as critical issue which required to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Members agreed to forward comments to David Jones and that a response would be forwarded to the Cabinet Secretary, copied to Education Scotland. It was also agreed that an invitation be sent to the Cabinet Secretary for Education inviting him to a future meeting of the CPG to discuss the Scottish Government's response and to explore how the cross party group could contribute to addressing the issues and opportunities present in the report.

6. Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed the next meeting should be held on a date when the Cabinet Secretary for Education could attend.

