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Public Bill Committee

EDUCATION BILL

Sixteenth Sitting

Thursday 24 March 2011

(Afternoon)

CONTENTS

SCHEDULE 6 agreed to.
CLAUSES 22 to 24 agreed to.
SCHEDULE 7 agreed to.
CLAUSE 25 agreed to.
SCHEDULE 8 agreed to.
CLAUSE 26 under consideration when the Committee adjourned till
Tuesday 29 March at half-past Ten o'clock.

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chairs: †MR CHARLES WALKER, HYWEL WILLIAMS

- | | |
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| † Boles, Nick (<i>Grantham and Stamford</i>) (Con) | † Hendrick, Mark (<i>Preston</i>) (Lab/Co-op) |
| † Brennan, Kevin (<i>Cardiff West</i>) (Lab) | † Hilling, Julie (<i>Bolton West</i>) (Lab) |
| † Creasy, Stella (<i>Walthamstow</i>) (Lab/Co-op) | † McPartland, Stephen (<i>Stevenage</i>) (Con) |
| † Duddridge, James (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>) | † Munn, Meg (<i>Sheffield, Heeley</i>) (Lab/Co-op) |
| † Durkan, Mark (<i>Foyle</i>) (SDLP) | † Munt, Tessa (<i>Wells</i>) (LD) |
| † Fuller, Richard (<i>Bedford</i>) (Con) | † Rogerson, Dan (<i>North Cornwall</i>) (LD) |
| † Gibb, Mr Nick (<i>Minister of State, Department for Education</i>) | † Stuart, Mr Graham (<i>Beverley and Holderness</i>) (Con) |
| † Glass, Pat (<i>North West Durham</i>) (Lab) | † Wright, Mr Iain (<i>Hartlepool</i>) (Lab) |
| † Gyimah, Mr Sam (<i>East Surrey</i>) (Con) | Sarah Thatcher, Richard Ward, <i>Committee Clerks</i> |
| † Hayes, Mr John (<i>Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning</i>) | † attended the Committee |

Public Bill Committee

Thursday 24 March 2011

(Afternoon)

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

Education Bill

Schedule 6

THE CHIEF REGULATOR OF QUALIFICATIONS AND EXAMINATIONS

Amendment proposed (this day): 107, in page 74, line 5 [Schedule 6], after ‘Secretary of State’ insert ‘, subject to confirmation by the House of Commons Education Select Committee.’—(*Mr Wright.*)

1 pm

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

The Chair: I remind the Committee that with this we are discussing amendment 108, page 74, line 26 [Schedule 6], after ‘Secretary of State’ insert

‘, following consultation with the House of Commons Education Select Committee.’

When the Committee adjourned this morning, the Minister had responded to amendment 107 to schedule 6, with which the Committee was considering amendment 108, and Mr Wright was bringing his concluding remarks to a close.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): Good afternoon, Mr Walker. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I think that you were being slightly optimistic in saying that I was bringing my comments to a close. I might start again, just for your benefit. I was facing down an accusation from the Chairman of the Select Committee that I was devoid of principles.

Mr Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The point was that the hon. Gentleman’s principles were flexible, depending which way he was facing at any given time.

Mr Wright: I resent that. I am not a Liberal Democrat—*[Laughter.]*

I will move on, as I would like us to make a lot of progress this afternoon. Given what the Minister said about writing to the Committee on the proposal and the point that he made about trying to restrict pre-appointment hearings for the Select Committee on Education, I take reassurance from what he said. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr Wright: I beg to move amendment 110, page 75, line 22 [Schedule 6], at end insert—

9A Before commencement of this Schedule, the Secretary of State must report to Parliament on the need to separate the functions of the Chair and Chief Regulator of Ofqual.’.

I apologise, Mr Walker. You have me again.

The Chair: How is your mother?

Mr Wright: I am glad that you mentioned my mother, Mr Walker, as it allows me to put on record her gratitude to the Committee for wishing her a happy birthday. She had a wonderful day. It also allows me to wish my grandmother—sadly, she is no longer with us—a happy birthday as well; today would have been her birthday. We miss my nana enormously—she has not been with us for five years now—so I am grateful for your indulgence.

Amendment 110 is a genuinely probing amendment to determine the Minister’s thinking on changing the arrangements relating to the chief regulator, chair and chief executive of Ofqual. I do not understand the reasoning behind it. How will it help enhance standards for examinations in this country? How will it increase the perceived independence of the regulator of examination standards? How will it improve the governance of Ofqual as an institution? The amendment is designed to probe the Minister so he can provide the Committee with some outline of his thinking.

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Nick Gibb): Welcome back, Mr Walker. I will try to help the hon. Gentleman, who says that he does not understand the clause and schedule and why we are introducing the measure. The main driver for change is the benefits of consolidating the positions of chief executive and chief regulator. By combining the positions, we will clarify and strengthen the public-facing role of Ofqual’s chief executive and create a single figurehead for Ofqual.

As a full-time position with executive responsibility, the single figurehead will have the day-to-day knowledge of the sector and the organisation needed to lead Ofqual’s regulation of standards. That will reinforce the post holder’s credibility when speaking on behalf of the organisation and prevent confusion with the role of non-executive chair highlighted by Ofqual in its written submission to the Committee.

Mr Wright: Has Ofqual asked for the measures? Does it see a weakness and think that its objectives would be improved by changing the arrangements?

Mr Gibb: These are quality matters and are for Ministers rather than arm’s length bodies to decide. In its written submission to the Committee, Ofqual pointed out the confusion with the role of non-executive chair. Ensuring the credibility of Ofqual’s public figurehead and chief executive is vital if we are to secure the improvements needed for our qualifications to match the best in the world.

It flows from those reforms that we must have a separate chair of the Ofqual board. An authoritative and assertive regulator for qualifications and assessment is critical if our education system is to keep pace with the best in the world. These provisions ensure that the chief regulator has the understanding and credibility to lead Ofqual in securing the rigour of exam standards. With that brief explanation, I hope that I have persuaded the hon. Gentleman that this is the right course of action.

Mr Wright: The Minister has not done so yet. Can I probe him on the Government’s arrangements for the chair and the chief executive? The relationship between

a chair and a chief exec, and how that has harmony as well as tension, is essential for any organisation, and particularly one that is so important to the public in providing reassurance about standards. Will the Minister outline further how he imagines the governance arrangements will work? He touched on it briefly, but will he make it clear for my benefit whether the chief executive will be accountable to the chair, and through the chair to the board, or directly to the Secretary of State? Is independence being compromised in any way here? That is the reasoning behind the amendment. How does the Minister think the new arrangements will enhance the governance standards of Ofqual? I am not convinced that he has reassured me on that.

Mr Gibb: Of course, the chief executive is accountable to the chair, as in all these types of governance arrangements. I will quote the evidence Ofqual submitted to us.

“Ofqual is content with the change of titleholder, because it will avoid potential confusion with the role of non-executive chair. The chair will continue to have an important role in leading the board in governance of the organisation.”

If the hon. Gentleman will recall the evidence given by Sandra Burslem, she said:

“It is an equally common model for the chief executive to be the chief regulator, as in the case of the National Audit Office, where the Comptroller and Auditor General is the chief executive.”—*[Official Report, Education Public Bill Committee, 1 March 2011; c. 82, Q160.]*

It is on that model that we are basing Ofqual. As I have just indicated, it seems to have support from Ofqual.

Mr Stuart: Further to the intervention by the shadow Minister, who suggested that there would be either accountability to the board, which there obviously will be, or to the Secretary of State, there is also accountability to Parliament, normally through the Education Committee. Will the Minister spell out exactly how he sees accountability of Ofqual in the round?

Mr Gibb: Of course, there will be the pre-appointment issues that we discussed this morning. My understanding is that the Education Committee will interview the chief regulator annually and will have an inquiry into the annual report of Ofqual, as it does with other arm's length bodies that relate to education. The board will retain collective responsibility for Ofqual's function, allowing the board to hold the chief regulator properly to account. I wanted to get those precise terms on the record. I hope that I have answered everyone's questions and, on that basis, I urge the hon. Gentleman to withdraw his amendment.

Mr Wright: I do not wish to press the amendment to a division, but there is a degree of work to be done and I am not convinced of the reasoning behind the schedule. I understand that other parts of Government have similar models, and I accept that completely. The Minister has not, however, provided real reassurance to the Committee on how this will work. Ultimately, I think it will work, but I cannot understand the relationship between the chair, the chief executive and the Secretary of State and why there is a need, unless it is for consistency across Whitehall, for the arrangements to be changed. Is he suggesting that Ofqual has been ineffective in its governance arrangements and in the achieving of its

objectives in the first year of its life by having the current model? What is he trying to fix by changing things in the Bill?

Mr Gibb: It was slightly odd how it worked. Isabel Nisbet, who was the chief executive of Ofqual, was conducting the day-to-day operations of Ofqual. She would appear in the media to discuss issues. The chairman, Kathleen Tattersall, was the chief regulator, and she was a non-executive appointment. It seemed an odd arrangement, and Ofqual itself caused the worst confusion about who was the single face. We want to avoid problems arising, which could happen if people were not clear about Ofqual's position. Making the chief regulator a full-time position with executive responsibility will mean a single figurehead with day-to-day knowledge of the sector and the organisation. That is the key driver behind matters, rather than having the role of chief regulator wrapped up with the non-executive position of chairman. That seemed to be an odd governance arrangement.

Mr Stuart: For the record, it was anomalous that the non-executive chairman was the chief regulator, and the change makes more sense. We have the chief inspector of schools and other bodies coming before the Education Committee regularly who both represent that organisation and are in day-to-day control and charge of it, and to have something similar for Ofqual seems right in principle.

Mr Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that information. He is right. Safeguards will be in place, including the work of Select Committees; Ofqual's annual report to Parliament on its functions; and pre-appointment scrutiny. We have got the model right and, on that basis, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will withdraw his amendment.

Mr Wright: I thank the Minister for his further reassurances, and I am glad that he mentioned Isabel Nisbet's role when there was heavy snow in January or February 2010, when she appeared before the media as the public face of Ofqual to reassure students and their parents that they would be able to take their exams. I understand what he is saying. I do not want to press the amendment to a Division, and I am grateful for his supplementary reassurances. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question put forthwith (Standing Orders Nos. 68 and 69), That the schedule be the Sixth schedule to the Bill.

Question agreed to.

Schedule 6 accordingly agreed to.

Clause 22

THE QUALIFICATIONS STANDARDS OBJECTIVE

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Welcome to the Chair, Mr Walker. I bring to the Committee's attention my membership of the all-party parliamentary group for China and the support given to it by Cambridge Assessment, a not-for-profit organisation which is attached to Cambridge university and provides English language

[Mark Hendrick]

standards globally and, in particular, sets examinations globally in English. It has several worries about the clause. Under the current Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, Ofqual has five objectives: the qualification standards objective, the assessment standards objective, the public confidence objective, the awareness objective and the efficiency objective.

I have several probing questions. Given the emphasis in the Bill on comparing standards of our own qualifications with those internationally, to what extent should Ofqual's priority be its qualification standards objective above the other objectives given to it under the Act? Does he consider that Ofqual's public confidence and awareness objectives form naturally out of the actions taken under its qualification standards objective, and that public confidence and better awareness will emerge if Ofqual is allowed to focus on a primary function of standards regulation?

The Government have emphasised the role of higher education in developing post-16 qualifications in their recent White Paper, but that emphasis does not appear in the Bill. Does the Minister agree that those interested parties who use qualifications—such as subject communities, professional societies, employers, higher education, schools, colleges and teachers—should have a greater role in determining the content of qualifications than they do at present and therefore a greater role in determining their standard? Does he consider a system that incorporated those views to a greater extent would have an impact on the role that the regulator would then be required to play? Does he agree that the detail of individual qualifications is something that should concern primarily those who use qualifications, such as higher education and employers, or should the regulator or the Government look at each qualification in turn?

Finally, does hon. Gentleman think that international comparisons are always helpful? For example, higher education requirements are likely to be different given the types of demands made for different subjects in different HE systems throughout the world. The standards to be reached for a four-year degree course, as taken in many countries around the world, or for a non-specialist degree are likely to be very different from those demanded by three-year specialist degrees, in which the UK is dominant. Does that mean we should be looking more to the demands of the qualification users, rather than comparing qualifications internationally?

1.15 pm

Mr Stuart: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Walker.

I am sympathetic to a number of the points made by the hon. Member for Preston. As I have said before in Committee, clause 22 appears to be poorly drafted. It could contain tensions between the different requirements on Ofqual, pushing in different directions, in particular if we look at proposed new subsection 2(b)(ii), which states that the qualifications standards objective is to secure

“a consistent level of attainment (but not over time) between regulated qualifications and comparable qualifications (including those awarded outside the United Kingdom) which are not qualifications to which this Part applies.”

The provision requires a consistency of attainment between regulated qualifications in this country and comparable ones outside. Different territories have different needs and different structures of education. I will be interested to hear from the Minister what exactly he means by “comparable”—it is hard to work that out. If, in Committee, we are looking at the clause but struggling to get much concrete meaning out of it, it is hard to see it as well drafted law.

I do not know if the Minister has had chance or occasion to look at the clause again, perhaps asking civil servants to think some more or talking to Ofqual, and to come up with something clearer. Good sense might be buried deep within the tangled meaning of the words, but it is far from obvious. I hope that any such meaning, if it is consistent and sensible, can be drawn out by rephrasing—a rephrasing that I have not been able to come up with myself, which is why I have not tabled an amendment, because I found the intent of the clause so hard to divine.

In the broadest possible sense, we want to ensure that our qualifications are not dumbed down over time. The Bill, perhaps, responds to a sense of that happening, as borne out by the recent Wolf report, which suggested that the explosion of vocational qualifications has meant that some courses have been rather too poor and are leading hundreds of thousands of young people in the wrong direction, to somewhere from where there is no progression into further education or work.

As the clause stands, it is flawed, so I hope that the Minister will take that on board and, whether in Committee or the other place, might suggest improvements. On the face of it, the clause looks like it needs improving.

Mr Wright: I have one broad question and one specific question. My broad question follows nicely, like a dovetail joint, that of the Chair of the Select Committee.

Everyone probably agrees on the need for consistency and for comparing our education system with others. However, on my broad question, which I pursued in our oral evidence session with the Ofqual representatives, can the Minister give some clarity about what he means by the international comparison, bearing in mind that, as the Chair of the Select Committee said, other countries will have different needs, requirements and objectives for their examination systems? We will not be comparing apples to pears when doing so. What form will the reviews take? Which countries will be used? Which research methods will be incorporated?

My specific question relates to comparisons between regulated UK and international qualifications, and how they provide reasonable adjustment provisions for disabled examination candidates. The Alliance for Inclusive Education told us that it is seeking assurance from the Government as to how they will ensure that Ofqual is mindful of its equality duties when determining which countries' qualifications it wants to use when setting appropriate educational standards under the standards objectives clause.

That seems reasonable, and I hope that the Minister will be able to give further information about how the Government will provide a level playing field for comparisons with disabled examination candidates.

Mr Gibb: The clause amends Ofqual's qualifications standards objective to add the further objective that it ensures that regulated qualifications indicate a consistent

level of attainment with comparable qualifications, including those awarded outside the UK. It ensures that the importance of international comparability of qualification standards is properly recognised by Ofqual. It will enable Ofqual to raise the standards of qualifications to keep pace internationally, rather than being bound to look only at keeping them consistent over time.

The quality of education in England has fallen behind while our competitors, such as China and Singapore, plough ahead. The 2009 PISA results, which compare countries' performance in key subject areas, show that we are falling behind in the international rankings as other countries move more quickly, as we discussed this morning. Without wanting to raise the ire of the hon. Member for Cardiff West, we are now 25th for reading, 28th for maths and 16th for science, which is around the international average for OECD countries. We are therefore looking to maintain standards, and comparing them with the past is not enough. Candidates need to be sure that a qualification has a highest possible value in the international job market. Unless our exams keep pace, they run the risk of acting as a ceiling of ambition for our students, thus robbing them of the opportunity to compete with their counterparts in other countries.

The hon. Member for Preston asked to what extent the standards objective should be a priority. The clause amends only subsection (2) of section 128 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. All the other objectives—the qualifications standards objective, the assessments standards objective, the public confidence objective, the awareness objective and the efficiency objective—that are set out in section 128(1) will still be in force. Section 128(2) of the 2009 Act refers to giving

“reliable indication of knowledge, skills and understanding, and...indicate a consistent level of attainment (including over time) between comparable regulated qualifications.”

Clause 22 adds to that a further requirement that qualifications indicate

“a consistent level of attainment (but not over time) between regulated qualifications and comparable qualifications (including those awarded outside the United Kingdom)”.

That will allow Ofqual to judge our qualifications not just by how they compare with 2009 or 1999, but by looking abroad and widening our horizons beyond this country to ensure that we continue to raise standards.

I turn to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness. Every time I read the clause—I almost agree with him—its wording seems somewhat cumbersome and awkward, given its reference to

“a consistent level of attainment (including over time)”

and

“a consistent level of attainment (but not over time)”.

A lot of thought went into that, and while my immediate reaction when the first draft came to me was precisely as my hon. Friend said, the provision is correct. There is a difficult tension between sub-paragraphs (i) and (ii). We need Ofqual to use its judgment to determine whether standards are high enough. The measure allows Ofqual to do just that—to raise them when they are not high enough and to stop them from drifting downwards if they are of a high standard internationally. Ofqual made clear in its evidence that it will be able to manage what is required. Its deputy chairman, Sandra Burslem, said in her evidence:

“There could be a tension between those two”,

meaning sub-paragraphs (i) and (ii). She continued to say:

“The current drafting leaves it, we think, to Ofqual to determine when to prioritise which of the two...That is a tension that we are quite happy to take on.”

I think it is right to say that there is a creative tension. Dennis Opposs from Ofqual told us:

“A lot of thought is needed to try to determine what we mean by comparable qualifications so that we are making a fair comparison. Clearly, different countries operate in different ways. If we look at 18-year-olds, as we are at the moment, we will find that in some countries students take many more subjects than they do in this country. That raises some questions. For example, if someone here is doing history and someone somewhere else is also doing history but the subject forms a much smaller part of their curriculum, how do you make the comparison?”—[*Official Report, Education Public Bill Committee*, 1 March 2011; c. 83, Q162 and 165.]

Those are the intellectual issues with which Ofqual is grappling, and it did not grapple with them before. As a consequence of the Bill, it is now looking abroad, and it is very important to bring that information into our deliberations.

Mr Stuart: I am grateful to the Minister for his efforts to explain the phrasing of the clause, although I think he has gone native on it. The provisions that we put in a Bill should involve a great degree of clarity. The clause could have said that Ofqual should in future judge the currency or value of UK qualifications against other jurisdictions to ensure that they remain relevant internationally. As I said, I struggled to come up with alternative wording, which was why I did not table an amendment, but it should be possible for the provision to be a little clearer.

The clause specifies that Ofqual must include qualifications awarded outside the UK, which it does not regulate, and also some within, so we are asking Ofqual to compare the qualifications that it does accredit with those that it does not. Is there a tension in that? Are we setting it a rather peculiar task?

Mr Gibb: My hon. Friend raises important issues. The fact that he, with all his experience and eminence as Chair of the Education Committee, could not draft his own amendment explains the difficulty that parliamentary counsel had when drafting the clause. The final wording is deliberately drafted so that there is a creative tension between the two. One can ask what will happen if standards over time are fine but they are not fine internationally—which of those two compete? My understanding is that such judgments are for Ofqual, but it will want to ensure that we compare internationally if there is a conflict between the two.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Is it possible that the impenetrable drafting that the Minister's eminent and hon. Friend—

Mr Stuart: Your Eminence.

Kevin Brennan: Yes; we had cardinals this morning.

Is it possible that the impenetrable drafting identified by the hon. Gentleman is to do with the Minister's desire not to create any new legislation but simply to amend existing legislation? Is that why the drafting is almost as difficult as creating a dovetail joint with a bevelled chisel? It seems extremely difficult to make any sense of this.

Mr Gibb: The clause is not difficult to understand, if we are being frank, even though it looks clumsily worded because of the parentheses. However, it implies a contradiction, and we are not resiling from the fact that there is a contradiction. There is a deliberate creative tension between ensuring that standards in our qualifications are maintained over time and ensuring that there is a consistent level of attainment between comparable qualifications, including those available abroad.

Kevin Brennan: Whenever my students came across a piece of impenetrable text or a difficult question, I used to tell them to rephrase the question. For the record, if it is not possible to redraft the clause, will the Minister tell us, in his own words—in plain English—what it means?

Mr Gibb: It means that Ofqual, as well as obeying all the objectives in section 128(1) of the 2009 Act, has to ensure that our qualifications must at least maintain their standards over time and also that they are comparable with the best regulated qualifications abroad. It is almost a question of the highest of those two requirements. I think that Ofqual is clear that that is what it means. Its challenge is to take into account all the factors raised by the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness about how we compare like with like, given that a history student in one country may be spending 10% of their curriculum time on the subject while such a student in another country spends 15%. Ofqual is ideally suited to tackle those issues. I am confident that the work it is conducting will be of a very high quality. It means that, for the first time, we are taking into account what is happening in countries, given that many school leavers and graduates will be competing for jobs in the world market in the years ahead.

1.30 pm

Mr Stuart: I apologise for extending the discussion further and moving on to slightly different territory, but I want to deal with proposed new subsection (2)(b)(i) and the issue that

“a consistent level of attainment (including over time)”

should be maintained “between comparable regulated qualifications”. As we know, newspapers come out every year with stories about dumbing down and how exams have become easier. It always strikes me as a rather sterile debate, because the number of people who take qualifications is now much higher than it was 50 years ago. If we have a measure that differentiates between the top 60% of the population, rather than the top 7%, it will necessarily be less accurate. It is a different qualification for different times and different needs.

Is there a danger if things can freeze in time? Suppose that Latin became phenomenally popular because it was proven by research to be the best subject ever and we wanted a vast percentage of the population to study it. It would make little sense to have a standard that could not be reached by most of the population. Instead, there should be a qualification that people can pass and is proven to be good for them—I do not know whether that made any sense. My point is that, over time, it might not always be appropriate for a qualification never to be dumbed down, if it needs to serve a different purpose from the one it serves today.

Mr Gibb: My hon. Friend goes to the root of the problem. Some of our qualifications do not have the public support—no, “support” is the wrong word. The public have lost some confidence, however, that a number of qualifications have maintained the standards of previous years. To an extent, there has been a deliberate policy of widening access to qualifications and enabling a wider proportion of the cohort to get a pass in certain subjects. There has been a tacit acceptance that we do precisely what my hon. Friend describes. If that is the objective, however, it is not the right approach if we are to maintain public confidence in our exam system. If that is the objective, we should say so, but when Ofqual or the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority—its predecessor—have been asked, they have said that there has been no dumbing down of the qualifications over the years. Such statements undermine people’s confidence in the exams, and we are trying to get away from that. If there is a desire for an exam that everybody is able to pass, it should be called something different. I do not disagree with the objective suggested by my hon. Friend, but we need honesty in the exam system to restore public confidence.

Mark Hendrick: Is it not the case that dumbing down would be less likely to occur if communities of interest, as Cambridge Assessment calls them, were more involved in determining the content of many of the qualifications? By communities, I mean professional societies, employers, higher education institutions, schools, colleges and teachers. If they had a leading role in determining the content of each qualification, dumbing down would not take place. We could give awarding bodies greater ownership over the development, design and content of qualifications that were previously under the remit of the QCDA.

Mr Gibb: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman. It is crucial that HE and employers are involved in the design of qualifications, and he is right to raise that point. Standards of qualifications are important, which is why we need effective regulation. He is also right to suggest that less central Government diktat over qualification content is necessary, and that is the thrust of what we are trying to do. He is right that exam awarding bodies need an important say in the content of the qualifications, and that is the direction in which we seek to move.

On special needs education, Ofqual will look at all aspects of comparability in pursuing a standards objective, and that includes issues of disability. It has a general statutory duty to have regard to the needs of students with disabilities, and that will be relevant in the work it carries out under the new objective. I hope that I have covered all issues raised by members of the Committee and that they will support the clause.

Mr Wright: The Minister has convinced me that this provision is completely impenetrable. He mentioned creative tension, but I suggest that there is an inherent contradiction. I think that he used that phrase about making sure that

“regulated qualifications indicate...a consistent level of attainment (including over time) between comparable regulated qualifications, and...a consistent level of attainment (but not over time) between regulated qualifications”.

To pick up what my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West said, is it possible for the Minister and his officials to redraft the clause? I know what he wants to

achieve, but the Bill as drafted provides an inherent contradiction rather than a creative tension. Will he return to the clause at a later stage in the Bill's passage through the House and the other place to ensure that he actually achieves what he wants?

Mr Gibb: No, I am afraid that I will have to disappoint the hon. Gentleman. We spent a long time drafting the clause and the tension in it reflects the tension in the real world. We want to have standards that are equal to the best in the world as well as qualifications that are usable. That is the challenge that Ofqual faces, and it is capable of delivering on that challenge. It fully understands what the clause means—as I do, and as I think the hon. Gentleman does—and it is well equipped to deal with that challenge. It is an important step forward that we are asking a UK regulator for the first time to look at what is happening in other countries. We need a less insular and more global approach in the new global economy.

Mr Wright: Which has top priority or primacy among the objectives—the level of consistency on domestic qualifications or international comparisons?

Mr Gibb: It is both. If, through this work, we discover that our qualifications are lagging behind those of comparable nations abroad for rigour and standards, the priority will be to ensure that our qualifications rise to those standards. Ultimately, as an independent regulator, it is for Ofqual to decide what is best for students in this country. The clause sets out clear objectives to ensure that there is consistency over time, that the best qualifications around the world are looked at, and that standards are comparable with other non-regulated qualifications. Those are Ofqual's objectives, and I am absolutely confident that, based on the wording of the clause, it is capable of delivering them.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 22 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 23

ABOLITION OF THE QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Mr Wright: I beg to move amendment 111, in clause 23, page 26, line 15, at beginning insert 'Subject to subsections (2) and (3).'

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 112, in clause 23, page 26, line 16, at end insert—

'(2) The Secretary of State must not bring this section into force before 31 March 2013.'

Amendment 113, in clause 23, page 26, line 16, at end insert—

'(3) Before the Secretary of State exercises the power to commence this section under section 78 he must lay before Parliament a report which sets out which QCDA functions, programmes and activities he intends to—

- (a) transfer to himself,
- (b) transfer to other bodies,
- (c) close down.'

Amendment 114, in clause 24, page 26, line 18, at beginning insert 'Subject to subsection (4).'

Amendment 115, in clause 24, page 26, line 23, at end add—

'(4) Before the Secretary of State exercises the power to commence this section under section 78 he must lay before Parliament a report which sets out arrangements which demonstrate he has put in place sufficient resource and expertise to undertake the QCDA functions which are transferred to him by this Act, and those additional functions he is proposing to undertake.'

Mr Wright: Amendment 111 would delay the abolition of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency. With its demise, most of its functions will reside with the Department for Education, including the development of the national curriculum and the accompanying supporting materials. Given the current development of the new curriculum, it would be entirely sensible to delay the abolition of the QCDA slightly to ensure a continuity of expertise and experience. Will the Minister confirm his intention on when the QCDA will be abolished? How will he ensure that the transition of functions to the Secretary of State will be smooth and that the current work of the QCDA is completed?

I have a copy of the letter sent by the Secretary of State to the chair of the QCDA on 15 September 2010. Essentially, it sets out the revised remit of the agency and its funding for 2010-11. The Secretary of State wrote:

"I should make clear that where an activity is continuing during this financial year, it should not be assumed that the activity will continue beyond March 2011 either at the QCDA or elsewhere. However, there are some activities that will need to continue up to the point of closure."

It might just be me, but that seems to be as clear as mud.

In addition, schools are expected to follow the core programmes of study from September 2013 and the other curriculum areas from September 2014. It is understood that the curriculum materials will be made available, to enable proper preparation by schools, at least one year before the curriculum's introduction. It would be helpful if the Minister clarified whether that will happen if, by then, the functions have been transferred to the Secretary of State. We tabled amendment 113 to seek clarity on the specific functions that will be transferred from the agency to the Secretary of State. I shall take your advice, Mr Walker, about whether we need a stand part debate on that matter.

It is not clear why the QCDA is being abolished, although I fully appreciate that the Secretary of State is not a friend of the agency—he has never much liked it. Will the Minister share with the Committee the evidence that the Secretary of State considered that led him to abolish the body? It is unclear which functions will be transferred to the Secretary of State, which will go to other bodies and which will cease. Will the Minister clarify that? Will he tell us what will happen to the existing functions? On the functions that will transfer to the Secretary of State, how does the Minister intend to consult to ensure that his decisions are informed by the views, wishes and needs of the teaching profession?

Amendment 114 would ensure that the Secretary of State had sufficient resources and expertise to carry out the new functions that will transfer to him from the QCDA. I do not wish to rehash or recycle previous debates in which we have discussed the Training and

[Mr Iain Wright]

Development Agency for Schools, the General Teaching Council for England, and so on, but the same principles apply. Parliament must be satisfied that the Secretary of State is demonstrably capable of taking on such functions. How will the Minister ensure that the Secretary of State is able to carry out each of the new functions that he will undertake as a result of the abolition of the QCDA? The centralising aspect of the Bill is a concern, bearing in mind every other function and agency that he will take on. Again, what consultation will he have with the profession when he makes decisions on matters such as curriculum development? It would be most helpful to have a clearer outline of what functions will be transferred.

Mr Gibb: Amendments 111 to 115 were tabled to seek clarity about the future of the QCDA's functions and reassurance that those areas that are due to transfer to the Department will be adequately resourced and efficiently transferred. The detailed consultation with the QCDA and staff from its representative, the Public and Commercial Services Union, has already begun. Through that process, staff will be informed whether their job is at risk or whether they are likely to transfer to the Department. At this stage, it would be wrong to pre-empt that process by giving specifics on structures, or on how many jobs will be available for a specific function. The staff who are affected should hear first, in a manner that is consistent with protocols agreed between the Cabinet Office and the PCS. I am happy to commit to writing to hon. Members with further details before Report, but I shall give a summary now, which I hope they will find useful.

A new Executive agency, the standards and testing agency, will be established in Coventry to develop and deliver statutory assessments of children up to the age of 14. The QCDA's functions in that area will transfer to that agency, along with the relevant staff who currently work on statutory tests and assessments. We have made it clear to the QCDA that our priority is to effect the transfer as smoothly as possible, thus minimising any risk to test delivery. Clear and robust arrangements involving senior QCDA representatives are in place to manage that change and keep a close eye on any potential risk. The independent examinations regulator, Ofqual, will have an important role, as it does now with QCDA. It will keep under review the agency's functions in relation to statutory assessments and it will ensure the integrity and impartiality of national curriculum tests.

Part of the QCDA's work is to support the effective delivery of examinations. That work will also transfer, but to the Department itself rather than to an Executive agency. That function will continue to include collecting and delivering exam scripts, as well as the key elements of the central service that the QCDA provides to support examination offices. The collection of exam scripts is a vital service that the Joint Council for Qualifications and Ofqual were keen to see continued for fear that its withdrawal might jeopardise the system.

I also confirm that, at the request of the Joint Council for Qualifications and in consultation with Ofqual, we have agreed, in principle, that the access arrangements online tool, which supports schools and colleges in requesting and tracking reasonable adjustments for pupils

in respect of qualifications, should transfer to the JCQ. The JCQ has agreed to maintain that service and continue to meet the expense of funding it.

1.45 pm

Since the introduction of the national curriculum, responsibility for the curriculum has always rested with the Secretary of State, both under the previous Administration and this, and nothing is changing as far as that is concerned. The QCDA simply acted on behalf of Government in advising and helping to design the curriculum and, as such, no functions are transferring from the QCDA to the Department. It is simply that the QCDA's often duplicative functions in keeping the curriculum under review are ceasing. In future we will appoint directly the curriculum expertise we need as and when necessary to support specific tasks such as curriculum and qualifications reviews. This is just the approach we have taken already in the current national curriculum review. We will also make better use of the expertise of teachers and subject experts in universities and industry to support our policy-making, rather than relying on intermediary bodies such as the QCDA to provide curriculum advice.

The QCDA's production and publication of 566 separate pieces of curriculum guidance overwhelmed teachers. That activity had to be stopped. We want teachers and head teachers involved in setting the curriculum in their school to use their professional expertise, not be bound by reams of guidance. The slimmed-down curriculum we intend to introduce will be simpler to understand and focused on core subject knowledge. It will give schools the freedom to design a full curriculum that is rigorous, relevant and engaging, without the need for interference from the Government or their agents.

Turning to the QCDA's role in developing qualifications, its role was already reducing as a result of the creation of Ofqual as an independent regulator. Our intention is to move away from centrally set exam requirements over and above the necessary core that will be established by the curriculum. Instead, we want to encourage more direct influence by universities—and learned societies, reflecting a comment by the hon. Gentleman—over the content and design of exams. We need much less state involvement in the design of qualifications. I hope that the Committee will find that useful.

The hon. Gentleman asked when the QCDA will close. It will close soon after Royal Assent, subject to the will of Parliament, and we are winding down anything unnecessary. That is already happening. The staff have stopped doing things that are not good value for money for the taxpayer. We have halved the QCDA's budget since we came to office in May last year.

Mr Wright: Given the winding down of the agency's functions, has there been a reduction in staffing numbers of the agency?

Mr Gibb: Of course, if the functions decline there will be fewer activities taking place and, given that the budget is reducing, there will ultimately be fewer staff performing these functions. How we manage that decline is subject to negotiation and there is obviously a desire to minimise any compulsory redundancies. In May 2010, 509 people were employed by the QCDA and as at

the end of January 2011 that figure was 326. Much of that fall was achieved either through natural wastage or transferring staff to other functions within Government.

In conclusion, the abolition of several departmental arm's length bodies, including the QCDA, signals a reduction in centralised control over aspects of education where there is no need for the Government to be involved and supports greater devolution to localities and the front line. Abolishing the QCDA is vital to allow improvements in standards to be driven by professionals—school leaders and teachers. It will ensure that Ministers, rather than unelected officials, are clearly accountable for those national functions which are continuing. It will maximise the amount of the education budget that goes directly to schools and colleges.

We must not delay in moving towards the abolition of the QCDA, as proposed by one of these amendments. Unnecessary work has already ceased and arrangements are in place to transfer any essential remaining functions over the course of the coming months. It serves no one, least of all the taxpayer, to prolong the closure process unduly. I hope that with those few remarks, I have assured Members of the Committee that this transfer is happening efficiently and sensitively, that the Department has the resources, the expertise and the capacity to take on those new responsibilities and that it is setting up a new executive agency to do some of those important functions, such as national curriculum testing. On that basis, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be able to withdraw his amendment.

Mr Wright: I shall not press the amendments to a Division. I maintain that the Bill has a centralising aspect—into the hands of the Secretary of State—which is at odds with what the Minister has outlined. However, his invitation to keep the Committee informed about what is going on is a welcome and positive step. On that basis, and with the proviso that we might return to the matter on Report to see what progress has been made, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 23 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 24 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 7

ABOLITION OF THE QCDA: CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Mr Wright: I beg to move amendment 117 to schedule 7, page 77, leave out lines 39 to 41 and insert—

'(3) The Secretary of State must publish the proposal in such manner as, in the Secretary of State's opinion, is likely to bring the proposal to the attention of any other person concerned with education in schools.'

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 116 to schedule 7, page 78, line 2, leave out from (3) to 'evidence' in line 3 and insert—
'a 12-month period to submit'.

Mr Wright: I will speak first to amendment 116—
[*Interruption.*] I thank the Committee for that warm noise.

Amendment 116 is intended to probe Ministers about what is meant by a "reasonable opportunity" to submit evidence about any changes to the national curriculum. The Department for Education has said:

"Our intention is to undertake a systematic and comprehensive review of the National Curriculum, and ministers have considered carefully how best to do this in a structured way, to ensure coherence and consistency in our approach and make sure that we are taking the time necessary to consult widely and to give serious consideration to the complex issues involved."

The Department goes on to say:

"We want to hear from as many people as possible as we take this review forward, and to generate a lively debate about what is taught in our schools. In the first instance we have launched a Call for Evidence to which anyone can contribute their views and experiences."

We will also be taking forward work with subject communities and other experts over the course of the review to build an evidence base on which recommendations and proposals will be built, and we will be working to engage with teachers and their representatives to secure their input. Once we have published our proposals there will be further wide-scale public consultation before final decisions are made."

I am probing the Minister about whether, as amendment 116 suggests, a 12-month window of opportunity would be classed as reasonable. If not, how long is he intending?

Amendment 117 is intended to probe the Minister about the consultation arrangements relating to changes in the national curriculum. The explanatory notes to the Bill state:

"Paragraph 15 replaces section 96 of"

the Education Act 2002

"so as to change the way in which persons must be consulted before the Secretary of State makes certain orders or regulations relating to the National Curriculum. Under section 96 as substituted, the Secretary of State must give notice of the proposal to specified persons and other persons whom the Secretary of State thinks it is desirable to consult."

What are the Minister's intentions to consult actively in the development of any proposal by the Secretary of State to change the national curriculum? In particular, I would like the Minister to outline whether and how he intends to consult with the teaching profession, parents, employers, unions and other interested parties. It would be helpful if he could outline his thoughts further.

The Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning (Mr John Hayes): The amendment, as the shadow Minister said, seeks to specify the period in which stakeholders can submit evidence for representations relating to proposed changes to orders or regulations relating to the national curriculum, and suggests that that time should be 12 months.

I agree that we should encourage contributions from those concerned in the matters if a change in the national curriculum is being considered. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there should be a robust process for ensuring that any such changes are consulted on widely, and there must be a proper opportunity for people to comment and discuss. He will know that in the previous regime, of which he was part, the Government developed and introduced a code of practice on consultation in 2000, setting out how consultation exercises are best run. The third version of the code was published as late as 2008, setting out the approach that the Government should take when they are involved in

[Mr John Hayes]

a consultation and the timetables concerned. The current Government take the same view as the previous Government on consultation and support the code. The code recommends that such consultation should normally last 12 weeks, not 12 months—that is the practice adopted by the previous Government.

I am sensitive to what the hon. Gentleman said and I accept that there are circumstances where time scales will need to be varied because of feasibility. For example, if a consultation takes place over Christmas or summer, it is absolutely right to have flexibility about the total time that it takes, to account for those events. Consultations that the QCDA managed in the past on the national curriculum have been in line with the guidance set out in that code of practice, and we intend to continue the precedent established—in this respect, at least—by the previous Government.

We mentioned Catholicism briefly this morning in your absence, Mr Walker, and you missed the interesting contribution on that subject. Strangely and coincidentally, I was reading a recent biography of Cardinal Newman this morning over breakfast, which was given to me by the Secretary of State for Christmas. I was reading about Newman's use of empiricism. I am not a great fan of empiricism; I like the mystery that Chesterton said is an essential component in happiness. Notwithstanding that, it is important that we look at evidence. If the hon. Gentleman has evidence that stakeholders are uncomfortable or unhappy with that code of practice, I am prepared to listen to it. If there were difficulties with the period of consultation in the past when responding to changes to the national curriculum, we should know about them. If the previous Government were plagued with complaints, let us get them on the record here, because we want to improve on what has gone on before, where necessary. I see that the hon. Gentleman has been passed a note about Catholicism, and I know that he will use it with the assiduity for which he is known in this place.

What is seriously important for schools and other stakeholders is that they are able to offer any views that they have on proposals about the national curriculum. We share that view—it is absolutely right, as the hon. Gentleman says, that those views are fed in in a timely way and that we see the results of such consultation reasonably quickly. Specifying a period of 12 months for those consultations is likely to be seen as pretty cumbersome, not by the Government, but by stakeholders, and would delay the completion of procedures for making and implementing changes related to the national curriculum. I think that that would generally apply to most such changes, given what I said about precedent and about the national code. In practice, it would mean that the implementation of a change to the national curriculum would take a full year longer than under the previous arrangements—arrangements that will be continued under the Bill.

Amendment 117 would place a duty on the Secretary of State, requiring him to make orders or regulations related to the national curriculum in such a manner as to be likely to bring those proposals to the attention of any person concerned with education in schools. I am sympathetic to what I interpret to be the intended effect of the amendment and I agree that those who are

interested in the national curriculum should have the opportunity to comment on any proposed changes to it. We must be open-minded about such matters, and drawing on the expertise, the understanding and the proper concern of important stakeholders is important. I understand why the amendment has been tabled and I respect the purpose behind it.

2 pm

I recognise that what is taught in our schools, particularly the elements that require the national curriculum, is of the utmost significance and generates interest. It generates debate, too, and inevitably dissent from what is the natural part of life in a democratic and civilised society. It is a good measure. We should care about what is taught in our schools, and I want as many people as possible to be involved in the process. I am open-minded about such matters, as members of the Committee know—[*Interruption.*] I do not know whether my hon. Friend the Minister of State is nodding or shaking his head.

We have made a commitment to ensure that the review of the national curriculum we launched earlier this year is carried out in an open, consultative and inclusive way. The change proposed under the Bill is who conducts the consultation, not the nature and quality of the consultation itself. We are committed to ensuring that, when exercising powers in relation to the national curriculum, there should be widespread and thorough discussion. That is why we have been careful to leave the current arrangements for consultation to those groups that must be consulted under proposed new section (96)(2) under the schedule. It names local authorities, governing bodies and other representative organisations. In addition, subsection (3) of the proposed new section requires the Secretary of State to “give notice of the proposal”

through, for example, the Department's website as well as through other channels relating to the national curriculum to any other persons

“with whom consultation appears desirable”.

That is important. The hon. Gentleman is asking for a more open process. The Bill specifies that anyone who desires to consult should be included in that consultation, in addition to the names and organisations that it outlines. That is the slightly more permissive approach that he wants. It will, of course, include parents, pupils, representatives of further and higher education, and employers. We heard about some of those in our earlier discussions and it is absolutely right that those affected by such changes should be party to the discussions and consultations that take place. I imagine that was what the hon. Gentleman wanted to tease out. The measure will achieve the same effect as intended by his amendment.

Finally, the code of practice on consultation sets out that discussion on policy proposals must be targeted at and made accessible to those likely to be affected by or have a particular interest in such proposals. I am gaining a reputation in Committee for being a fair, open-minded, responsive and listening Minister, and I do not want in any sense to demur from those observations. I confirm absolutely that we will adhere to the guidance under the code. In the light of my immensely reasonable response, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will withdraw the amendment.

Mr Wright: My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West passed me a note when the Minister was speaking which said, “The Minister is often a mystery to us and always a source of happiness”—[*Laughter.*] The Minister’s remarks have been positive. He is right about precedence in consultation and flexibility so that we do not have major consultation on a big piece of the national curriculum at, say, the start of July. On the basis of his having made encouraging noises, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule 7 agreed to.

Clause 25 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 8

ABOLITION OF THE QCDA: TRANSFER SCHEMES

Mr Wright: I beg to move amendment 118, page 80, line 8 [Schedule 8], at end insert ‘, or a charity’.

Mr Walker, I seek your guidance on whether you consider that we will have a clause stand part debate on the schedule, as it will shape my remarks to amendment 118.

The Chair: I am taking advice. It depends how wide-ranging the debate is. It is a limited amendment, so there is every chance that we will have a clause stand part debate.

Mr Wright: That is very helpful and fair, Mr Walker. You are always a source of happiness.

The purpose of amendment 118 is to enable the Secretary of State to transfer any property to a charity. The Minister and I debated that with regard to the TDA. Will the Minister explain whether that would be possible in respect of the QCDA? Could it cover intellectual property, for example? Could it cover the non-statutory framework for, say, religious education? If the Secretary of State does not wish to maintain this framework as part of the functions that are transferred to him, the amendment would enable it to be transferred to a charity that supports religious education in schools. That is the purpose of the amendment. I hope the Minister will feel positive and able to accept the amendment. He can put something on the record and explain how amenable he is to the content of the amendment.

Mr Gibb: Amendment 118 would allow Ministers to transfer any residual QCDA staff and assets at the time of closure to a charity, as well as to Ofqual and the Department, as we have in the Bill at the moment. The provision for the making of a transfer scheme allows residual staff and assets that remain in QCDA immediately prior to closure to be transferred to the Department or Ofqual in a simple and efficient manner. I can assure members of the Committee that in the process of transferring and disposing of assets, the Department is actively considering the benefits of transferring some assets to charities, including awarding bodies and their representatives, particularly where the benefit brings about savings to the public purse. If that is the intention behind the amendment, I can readily confirm that we have sympathy with it.

However, we do not need a transfer scheme to provide for such transfers, as they would be sorted out well in advance of the closing date. For example, I outlined

previously that we have already agreed in principle, at the request of the Joint Council for Qualifications, that the access arrangements online tool will continue and transfer to the Joint Council for Qualifications. In addition, we are planning to transfer curriculum resources in the form of video to educational forums such as TES Connect, so that it can build them into its existing resource catalogue under the open government licence. As we work through the details, we will of course ensure that those assets are disposed of and protected in accordance with statute and Cabinet Office requirements.

The key point is the timing of the transfers. There is no need to introduce legislation to allow for a transfer scheme between the QCDA and a charity, such as an awarding body, as transfers of this nature will take place as part of the ongoing closure process. The transfer scheme in schedule 8 will only be required for residual staff or assets, where those need to transfer to the Department or Ofqual as part of the final closure arrangements. With those remarks, I hope that the hon. Gentleman can withdraw his amendment.

Mr Wright: That is incredibly helpful. Thanks to the Minister’s positive remarks, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question proposed, That the schedule be the Eighth schedule to the Bill.

Mr Wright: In keeping with previous practice on similar provisions in the Bill, I want to discuss the schedule in relation to staff, premises and liabilities. I have looked at the annual report—you can take the boy out of the boy—and, as of 31 March 2010, there were 675 staff. The Minister has been helpful on staffing, because in an earlier intervention he said that there were about 325—I might have got the precise figure wrong—as a result of natural wastage and the transfer or cancellation of functions. Will he update the Committee further? Given what he has previously said about other organisations, such as the General Teaching Council for England and the Training and Development Agency for Schools, will he give us some reassurance, because staff will be concerned about whether their jobs will continue and the possibilities for future employment? Is he able to give any reassurance, through the Committee, on how that is going?

On premises, I think the Minister said earlier that the new agency will be based in Coventry. I have been to the QCDA’s headquarters there, which is in a relatively new building. As I will come on to say, lease payments still have to be made for a long time. Will the Minister outline, in relation to the estate strategy, what is happening? Off the top of my head, I understand that the agency has premises in London—in Piccadilly, I think—so what will happen to that?

The balance sheet or “statement of financial position”, as it is called for a Government agency, shows that the QCDA has net liabilities of almost £56 million—£55.8 million. That is an astonishingly high figure. Will the Minister confirm that that liability position will be transferred to the Department? That will again leave the Department at risk of financial exposure, and to such a large degree that it might impact on other elements of its work. What is the Minister doing about that £56 million?

[Mr Iain Wright]

That figure includes £34 million owed in balances with bodies external to the Government, which has significantly increased from the previous year's figure of £27.9 million. Is it the case that organisations might think, "The QCDA is being wound up. That's great—I don't have to pay my debts"? Will the Minister reassure me that, as a matter of debt management, the liability owed will be brought down as much as possible?

On commitments, the accounts state that there are "Obligations under operating leases" for a period of "later than five years" to the tune of £13.2 million. A note to the accounts states that for

"the premises at Coventry an annual rent of £1.423m per year is effective to 31 July 2024."

That is a long time for the Department to be committed but, given what the Minister has said about the agency being moved into the Coventry office, will he confirm that that is the case? Will the Minister explain how those difficult financial pieces of information and the fact that the agency has a net liability position of some £56 million are included in the impact assessment—the one which accompanied the Bill rather than the White Paper? It states:

"Direct costs will include approximately £7m relating to the cost of redundancy settlements for expected job losses, and approximately £5m relating to the cost of setting up the executive agency."

There does not seem to be any mention of the net liability position or of operating lease commitments going on beyond five years. How can that be explained, and is there a transparent view of the Department's financial exposure? It would be helpful if the Minister answered those questions.

2.15 pm

Mr Gibb: I will deal with some of the hon. Gentleman's comments. First, I have already given the number of staff currently employed by the QCDA, which has been reduced to 326. In line with Cabinet Office protocols, we are taking all reasonable steps to avoid compulsory redundancies, but obviously cannot rule them out. We must be sensitive in handling staff reductions, as we are being. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand that when we debate these issues across the Committee. The numbers have reduced, as I have said, through loss of contractors and temporary staff, through natural wastage and through access to other vacant positions. Also, some functions have transferred to Ofqual and a number of people have left through voluntary arrangements. That number will be reduced further through the more comprehensive voluntary redundancy scheme.

Mr Wright: Will there be any compulsory redundancies? Does the Minister see a virtue in a much smaller state and, with regards to the QCDA, a much smaller complement, given that functions will be transferred elsewhere?

Mr Gibb: I do not want to comment on that issue at the moment, but staff consultation under the voluntary redundancy scheme began yesterday and we should let those negotiations continue. The future of the QCDA's building in Coventry is currently being assessed as part of our estate strategy relating to the reduction in the

number of arm's length bodies and the associated buildings. Some arm's length bodies are still being reviewed so the final strategy will not be ready until the summer, although we aim to have preliminary findings ready before then. A number of functions of the agency will reside in Coventry.

This is not the place to comment on the details of liabilities, and I will cover those financial issues in the note that I have already committed to send to the Members of the Committee before Report.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Can the Minister offer further clarification or assurance that any transfer of functions, staff or estate from QCDA to Ofqual will not in any way distract or detract from Ofqual's bespoke engagement in relation to vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland? I want to make sure that mission creep, or mission expansion, does not diminish the quality of Ofqual's work in consideration of its responsibilities in Northern Ireland.

Mr Gibb: I can absolutely give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. I want to cover one final thing about the financial position. We will be managing very closely all aspects of the abolition of QCDA, including the financial aspects. Issues such as debt management, raised by the hon. Member for Hartlepool, will be managed vigorously, as we manage all such matters. I hope that I have reassured members of the Committee that the transfer of assets, liabilities and staff from the QCDA to either the executive agency, the Department or Ofqual will be managed efficiently and with sensitivity with a view to ensuring that staff are properly looked after and that we deliver value for money for the taxpayer.

Mr Wright: I understand and appreciate what the Minister has said. I remember quite vividly, when I was in the Department, listening to the speech of the Secretary of State, then the shadow Secretary of State, to the Conservative party conference in 2009 in which he really had a go at QCDA. The Secretary of State is no friend of QCDA. He mentioned 76 spin doctors employed by QCDA, but figures, real figures, for the communications department said that the figure used by the Secretary of State—those 76 spin doctors—included all staff in the communications department, QCDA and Ofqual customer service departments. They included switchboard and helpline operators, web and publishing editors and people who support schools and local authorities. Is it not the case that the Secretary of State wanted to abolish QCDA and made up some figures in order to justify it? Will the Minister put on the record that he realises that, actually, staff have played an invaluable role in making sure that schools, local authorities and others get assistance with the national curriculum and that this does not do the Secretary of State any favours whatsoever?

Mr Gibb: The Secretary of State was making a valid point in opposition. We have to be far more careful about how we spend taxpayers' money. Had the previous Administration been more careful, we would not have the current budget deficit. That is why we have to make some difficult decisions, which would not have been necessary had we not had that approach to public spending.

I have met a number of QCDA staff since last May and have been hugely impressed by the quality of the people who I have been dealing with. The senior staff at the QCDA have worked effectively and co-operatively with the Department in managing the transition to the agency, the Department and Ofqual. I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the work carried out by staff at the QCDA. However, we object to the continual production—whatever the quality of the product—of the large volume of guidance and revisions to the curriculum that I think have overwhelmed the teaching profession and schools. We are trying to stop the permanent revolution in curriculum review, which was an explicit objective of the QCDA. That is what we are trying to change.

Kevin Brennan: I welcome the tone that the Minister has taken on the staff working in the QCDA, and take on board the point about the importance of spending public money. Will he take the opportunity to withdraw what the Secretary of State said on Second Reading? He said:

“How can it be right that we can find money to employ 76 people in communications—76 spin doctors?”—[*Official Report*, 8 February 2011; Vol. 523, c. 174.]

That is just not true.

Mr Gibb: I find it difficult that we have arm’s length bodies that have large communications departments. [*Interruption.*] People do not object to switchboard operators. We object to large communications departments in arm’s length bodies outside the Department. The reduction in communication spend and resource is consistent with the Government’s marketing and advertising freeze. That is why we have been able to reduce expenditure effectively without any diminution of the quality of service on the front line.

Kevin Brennan: Every one in the Committee and outside understands the difference between someone working, for example, on a switchboard and a professor of rotational medicine, such as the type that politicians employ to spin their messages. It was simply a bit of spin on the part of the Secretary of State himself. Is that not correct?

Mr Gibb: No, I do not accept that at all. We have to be careful about arm’s length bodies having a large department that is about reputation management of the arm’s length body. That is what the Secretary of State was concerned about. [*Interruption.*] If we get down to what someone’s particular job is in a communications department, of course it sounds benign. The question is should such arm’s length bodies—there are many of them, as they grew significantly under the previous Administration—have such large communications departments to manage the reputations of those bodies? I do not think that that is what taxpayers believe their money should be spent to deliver.

Mr Stuart: It may be understandable that people at the QCDA have large communications staff, because of what happened to the former head of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, who was hung out to dry by the previous Government in every effort to avoid any culpability for the SATs fiasco. All too often, they and the previous Secretary of State used spin, and allowed

the reputation of people such as Ken Boston to be damaged unfairly. We need to move to a culture in which we do not need spin doctors because one arm of the Government is not smearing another.

Mr Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention. I think that I have covered the issues raised by Opposition Members, and on that basis, I urge the Committee to agree that schedule 8 be the eighth schedule to the Bill.

Mr Wright: Briefly, I give the Minister, who is a fair and reasonable man, the opportunity to apologise for his Secretary of State’s remarks on “76 spin doctors”. People in the Committee and elsewhere will quite rightly have a perception of what a spin doctor is. Someone operating the switchboard and providing a help line and advice is not a spin doctor. Will the Minister confirm that that is the case and that the QCDA employed three press officers, which is different from the Secretary of State’s claim that there were 76 people employed in the communications department? How many switchboard operators does the Department for Education have and have they been redesignated as spin doctors?

The Chair: Order. May we have a brief response from the Minister, because the Chair’s patience is being tried?

Mr Gibb: The Secretary of State was citing the fact that the communication department of this arm’s length body employs 76 people. If the hon. Gentleman wants to drill down to find out what their roles are, whether it is a switchboard operator, personal assistant or whatever, he can. The Secretary of State was rightly asking why arm’s length bodies have communication departments employing 76 staff. That is the problem, and we are right to tackle it.

Question put and agreed to.

Schedule 8 accordingly agreed to.

Clause 26

EDUCATION AND TRAINING SUPPORT SERVICES IN ENGLAND

Mr Wright: I beg to move amendment 121, in clause 26, page 26, line 29, at beginning insert ‘Subject to subsection (7),’.

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment 100, in clause 26, page 27, line 9, at end add—

‘(7) The Secretary of State must produce a transition plan to highlight how he will assist schools, colleges and local authorities in the transition from the current system of careers guidance to the new all-age careers service.’.

Amendment 122, in clause 26, page 27, line 9, at end add—

‘(7) Before the commencement of this section, the Secretary of State must report to Parliament on arrangements for the funding of careers guidance between the end of ring-fenced Connexions funding and the establishment of the All Age Careers Service.’.

Mr Wright: We now come to an important part of the proposed legislation—the radical changes to careers guidance in England. The Government intend to abolish the current Connexions service and introduce an all-age careers service for young people aged 13 to 19, and for adults some time in the future. I pay tribute to the Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning on this matter. The measure has received wide-ranging praise from stakeholders in the sector. This amendment grouping is designed not to reinstate, or even to delay, the abolition of Connexions, although there could be a case for that, but to probe the Government for more detail on the important transition period between the abolition of Connexions and the start of the new all-age careers service.

Time is running out. Many Connexions staff have received redundancy notices, and will lose their jobs on 31 March, which is just a week away. Unison estimates that a quarter of Connexions centres have already closed, and that some 8,000 professionals are in the process of imminently losing their jobs. It is clear that once that expertise and professionalism is lost to education, it is difficult, if not impossible, to get it back. There is a risk that these professionals will be lost to education, and to the cause of helping to raise the ambitions and aspirations of young people, for ever. At a time of record unemployment and genuine heartfelt fear from young people and their parents on the prospects of a lost generation, we need excellent careers advice now more than ever. It is not the time to leave the careers service in limbo.

Mark Hendrick: Does it not seem peculiar that a Government, who came to office castigating the previous Government for their record on youth unemployment, should set about abolishing organisations that are there to find young people employment?

Mr Wright: I would go much further than my hon. Friend on that. I know that there is a case for the abolition of Connexions; we are not here to determine whether that is suitable. Things like the future jobs fund, which was abolished and which helped 720 young people in my constituency alone get a foot on the job ladder, are essential. This Government have no strategy for young people. It is a real shame that this country will have to pay the costs of that for decades and decades to come.

Mr Hayes: I am intervening, because it is widely known that I am an admirer of the hon. Gentleman, and I do not want him to become seduced by his own rhetoric, so that he loses the force of his argument. Although the future jobs fund is not within my purview, apprenticeships are. I give him the opportunity to welcome the fact that we announced a further 50,000 apprenticeships yesterday, some 40,000 of which are targeted at young people.

2.30 pm

Mr Wright: The Minister is a committed champion for young people in a Government who do not have a strategy for them and who regard them as a soft target. I pay tribute to what he has done. The welcome steps on apprenticeships in yesterday's Budget have his mark on

them, so I pay tribute to his policy and his strength in Whitehall. To be fair, he is building on the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West and I carried out when we were in government, but I believe that he is passionately committed to this issue. Now is not the time to ask, but I would be interested to know whether the money to fund those apprenticeships is new or recycled, and whether the targets are different.

Mr Stuart: It is a little harsh of the hon. Gentleman to make accusations against this Government given the previous one's record. People can argue about the economic performance of this country under the previous Government before the credit crunch. There is no doubt, however, about what happened to young people who ended up in unemployment, which did not go down throughout the period of economic growth, and went up when we reached the credit crunch. A humble atonement is required from an Opposition Member. I welcome additional apprenticeships. I know that the shadow Ministers genuinely tried to tackle that matter, but they failed. We all need to take a tone of humility, because, collectively, we must do a lot better for young people. We do not want a lost generation.

Mr Wright: In the previous Government, I was the Minister with responsibility for the Connexions service. I remember being before the hon. Gentleman's predecessor's Select Committee, and the Chairman questioned me harshly on that matter. The hon. Gentleman is quite right. Throughout the good times and the bad, 10% of young people have been disengaged—they have not been in employment, education or training—and successive Governments have found that difficult to solve.

We can look at the various segments of young people who are not in education, employment or training. It is the nature of some to go in and out of jobs. They might not have responsibilities to family and so on, so if they do not like a job, they can go. Depending on the fluidity and flexibility of the job market, they might be able to get another one. To do so, however, is becoming increasingly difficult in the current economic situation. A core segment of approximately 30% of young people found it more difficult to choose a suitable career or training pathway, for which careers provision is essential. If we get that right, we do an awful lot to reduce that core 10%—which is rising—of young people who are NEET.

At some point in future, there will be a transition period between the abolition of Connexions services and the rise of the all-age careers service. During that time, people who might really benefit from an efficient, effective and personalised careers service will be lost through the cracks, and we may not see them re-emerge as economically active people for decades to come. That is a tragedy for the people concerned and for our economic growth as a nation, too.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Given that we are having this discussion, has my hon. Friend read the work of Paul Gregg from the university of Bristol? He has discussed how not getting into employment early on becomes a scar on young people's employment prospects throughout the course of their life. They become less qualified and less attractive to employers, even if they subsequently get into the labour market. It is important to have a career service that helps stop that

process in its tracks. It is worrying that we might lose those staff who could put people on the right path before we get to the stage of having an all-age careers service. If we try to intervene when people are age 25 or 26, we are already dealing with people who will never earn as much as their contemporaries, because their career trajectories have been scarred.

Mr Wright: My hon. Friend is right. I am familiar with the university of Bristol work. I imagine that although her constituency is in a London borough, her experience is similar to mine. I want to put on the record that she is considerably younger than I am, but we are in the same ball park—there are only five years between us, I think. I grew up in the 1980s, when industry in my part of the world—the north-east—was closing fast. Some people whom I went to school with have never worked to their potential. They have embarked on low-paid, low-skilled jobs. It is an absolute tragedy for them, their families and the economic growth potential of my region. One of the reasons that I wanted to come into politics was to ensure that that would not happen again. Given the global economic circumstances and the economic policies pursued by the Government, despite the best efforts of the Minister, I fear that we will see a return of a lost generation. The tragedy will be difficult to estimate.

Mr Hayes: This is the beginning of an interesting and important debate. I have two things to say at this juncture. The hon. Member for Walthamstow is right—about the academic evidence, the long-term effect of people's first experiences of engagement or non-engagement in the work place—and the hon. Member for Hartlepool is right that the connection between Departments, throughout Government, is important.

I want to inform the hon. Gentleman's contribution by telling him about something I am doing that he would not know about. I am trying to forge an unprecedented level of co-operation between the DWP and my other Department, BIS, on the subject, for just such reasons as he gave. If we can get the engagement of disengaged young people through good joint working—work experience and the first taste of employment—we can change people's prospects and help them to fulfil their potential. That is why both contributions were right. I want to assure him that we are engaged in such a process.

The Chair: Order. Was that was an intervention?

Mr Hayes: That was an intervention—long but rich.

Mr Wright: I welcome the Minister's intervention, and his work in the Department for Education and in BIS and the DWP. To be fair, he is building on my work and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West and Jim Knight, now Lord Knight, who was a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions in the previous Government. We came together to discuss things regularly and, as a result, produced an apprenticeship subsidy, to ensure that employers could be incentivised to take on young people.

Returning to the transition period between the abolition of Connexions, which is in a matter of days, and the establishment of the all-age careers service, can the Minister put more meat on the bones? As I understand

it, some services will be available from September, with the full service up and running by April 2012. Will he clarify more fully the timetable for setting up the new careers service? What will be the handover period between Connexions and the new careers service, given that we are days away from wide-scale redundancies and loss of expertise to the careers service? Such a handover service does not seem possible. In any case, is September too late for the setting up of some services? We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow that the longer someone, in particular a young person, is out of the job market, the more difficult it is to get gainful, meaningful employment.

The risk of the current plans is that students might be in the last year of a qualification—they might be examined in May or June this year—and will soon be thinking about their next steps, perhaps for entry to a new course in September. Where, perhaps in July or August this year, will they get advice from on their various options? What is the Minister putting in place with regard to that? Does the all-age careers service require primary legislation, and if not, why not? If it does, why is nothing planned in the Government's legislative programme? Would that mean a further delay?

A further very important point is funding. How will the careers services be funded? I asked a written parliamentary question a few days ago—

Kevin Brennan: Did my hon. Friend get an answer?

Mr Wright: The number is now down to 499, because I did get an answer. I asked if the Minister could make additional funding available to prevent redundancies in local authority and Connexions services before 31 March and before the establishment of the all-age careers service. The Schools Minister responded kindly—

Mr Gibb: And promptly.

Mr Wright: And promptly—this only took a matter of months. The Minister responded:

“The new Early Intervention Grant will provide a substantial funding stream (a total of £2,222 million in 2011-12 and £2,307 million in 2012-13) with new flexibility to enable local authorities to act more strategically and target spending early, where it will have the greatest impact. The organisation of services is for local authorities to determine, in the light of their statutory responsibilities. Any changes that may be necessary in the current provision of careers guidance services will be for local authorities to work through, involving, where appropriate, Connexions service providers.”—[*Official Report*, 18 March 2011; Vol. 525, c. 727W.]

That sounds great. No one could disagree with that. But if we look into it, the new early intervention grant is being cut by 11% this year and a further 11% the year after. The Connexions budget now sits within the EIG, but that replaces 22 separate funding streams, including teenage pregnancy and children's social care work force funding, to which we in the last year of the previous Government provided £2.8 billion. So there has been a £311 million cut already this year. As I said, there will be an 11% cut the following year. That money will not be available, given what else needs to be funded as part of the early intervention grant. I plead with the Minister—will he consider more fully the transitional agreements and the loss of professionalism and commitment to the ambition of young people that will happen in a matter of days unless we get a very full and clear idea of what the Minister plans to do?

Mr Gibb: Does the hon. Gentleman remember why we have to make such difficult decisions in all these funding areas?

Mr Wright: Yes, because the Government want to go too far too fast in ensuring that their first, second and third priority is deficit reduction. I am concerned, as I think the Minister is, that that will be at the expense of the young people of this country being able to get suitable training, opportunities and careers advice. It will plague this country for decades to come.

Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that, unfortunately, there is a pattern and this is not the only area where services have been stopped before something new has started up, leaving a gap and losing the skills of people? That was due to happen with the debt advice workers, but it was realised that that was a big mistake and the Government fortunately rowed back on that. Does he agree that this is about not losing the skills of people who have become extremely skilled in this area, who will have to find other work and may subsequently not be available to help our young people?

Mr Wright: I mentioned this in my earlier remarks. We are days away from wide-scale redundancies in the Connexions service. We still have very unclear and ambiguous messages with regard to the start of the all-age careers service. In that time people will quite rightly be trying to look elsewhere, and that professionalism will potentially be lost for ever.

Stella Creasy: Is my hon. Friend, like me, concerned about schools having to deal with a whole range of new provisions, whether it is organising the football matches because they are now responsible for school sports, or organising careers advice on a school-by-school basis? That will be a lot more complicated than using the professional service that is delivered in partnership with a number of schools, which is what we currently have at the moment. The economies of scale that were produced by working in such a way may no longer be realised by schools. It is a false economy.

Mr Wright: I absolutely agree. We will be discussing that when we consider amendment 119. Given that the Government profess to trust professionals, they are doing their level best to keep professionals out of schools. It makes no sense. I hope that my hon. Friend will contribute to the debate on amendment 119.

As I said, this is a huge gamble. The Government are taking a massive leap in the dark. Young people, as in many services in the past few months, are losing provision, and it is not clear how it will be replaced. Once again, we get an announcement from the Department for Education and the Secretary of State that looks bold and is designed to curry favour with a certain element of the media, but their policy is muddled, ambiguous and ill-conceived and fails to consider the legislative, administrative, logistical and financial implications of such an announcement. This is a big issue. I know the Minister is committed to the ongoing ambition and aspiration of young people, but as the measure currently stands, he will fail in his task if he allows that to happen. Can the Minister provide any further clarity?

2.45 pm

Mr Stuart: It is a pleasure to follow the shadow Minister. Amendments 100 and 122, which are the substantive amendments in the group as chosen by your good self, Mr Walker, focus on the transition between the current provision to the new all-age careers service. Reading between the lines of the shadow Minister's speech—or perhaps one does not have to—one can tell that there was an acceptance that Connexions, despite the good work that it carried out, has not delivered in the careers arena in the way that we would all like to see, and that a move to an all-age careers service is one of the positive steps of the Bill. A lot of the devil is in the detail, and there is a certain amount of devil in the transition as well, which I will focus on.

We all know—or ought to know—how important careers guidance is. It contributes to young people getting on the right pathway in life and being able to progress educationally and ultimately in employment. If we are to reverse our position on unemployment, particularly for young people, and the calamitous fall in our manufacturing, it is important that we get it right. The shadow Minister mentioned, as Opposition Members frequently do, the terrible decade of the 1980s when manufacturing was, according to them, put to the sword. However, despite the earlier high-minded speech of the hon. Member for Cardiff West about not being selective with information and always mentioning everything regardless of whether it is helpful to one's case, they never mention the fact that manufacturing suffered worse under the Labour Government than it did under the Government of Mrs Thatcher in the 1980s. The Labour Government did not inherit, as Mrs Thatcher did, a bankrupt economy on its knees, but a golden legacy. I am aware of my need to return to the amendment, and I will swiftly do so.

The whole point of good careers advice is to ensure that people do not end up unemployed and that manufacturers and others find people who have been guided through the pathways to the right education and skills so that they can be employed. It is well worth hammering home that Opposition Members should remember the Labour Government's poor record on manufacturing, which we need to turn around.

Mark Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Stuart: If the hon. Gentleman ceases to frown quite so deeply, I will happily give way to him.

Mark Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman forgive me for looking slightly perplexed at his remarks? I am sure that he would agree that manufacturing fell significantly, but in the 1980s, we saw a country that was good in manufacturing. Since then, we have seen the European Community and globalisation develop, so the world is a very different place. Also, there are fewer jobs in manufacturing because of mechanisation and computerisation. It was not down to the Government, but the development of industry and our competitors.

The Chair: Order. I like history as much as the next man, but we are having too many history lessons here. Can we return to the amendments?

Mr Stuart: I will be mindful of your points, Mr Walker. When we look at careers advice and vocational qualifications, it is important to remember that countries such as Germany, whose systems we might want to adopt, seem to have maintained their manufacturing employment rather than losing it, so the hon. Gentleman's point is entirely redundant and untrue. That definitely moved to geography and not history, and so, I hope, kept within your strictures, Mr Walker.

We have talked about how important high-quality careers guidance is for young people to understand the multiple routes into higher education, further education and skills-based training. If we are to reverse the decline in social mobility that occurred under the previous Government, we must ensure that all students—especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds—fully understand their educational options and are encouraged to have aspiration and to be ambitious. I am pleased that the Government announced that young people aged 13 to 19 and adults would be able to begin accessing new arrangements for careers guidance from September and, as has been said, that service will be fully operational by April 2012. That will provide a comprehensive and co-ordinated careers service for all age groups for the first time. That is to be celebrated.

I want to push the Minister on what will happen in the interim and, especially at a time of such high youth unemployment inherited from the previous Government, what we will do to ensure that a lack of careers advice does not lead more people down the wrong pathway, as Alison Wolf spoke so powerfully about in her recent report. We must ensure that young people have advice at the key time, so they do not end up in the wrong place.

May I also ask the Minister about budgets, following up on the shadow Minister's question? People in the sector—they have made representations to me, as Chair of the Education Committee—are not clear what the budgets are, whether they have been finalised and, if not, when they will be finalised. Will the Minister clarify how the services will be funded?

I also want to push the Minister on the online offer. As the shadow Minister was keen to make clear, a lot of work is being done building on the work of Ministers in the previous Government, and so it should be, where that work is of value. There was a lot of work on the online offer, but that was not targeted at young people. How will the online offer be made suitable for young people? What is the budget for that? What is the time period? Does the Minister recognise the importance of getting that right and soon, so that we minimise any negative impact of the transitional period before the new all-age service is running?

Will the Minister also clarify, for the sake of the Committee, the role of local authorities? What duties do local authorities have in this period? Is there a role for MPs or Ministers in ensuring that local authorities, schools and others, particularly during this transition and the move to the new all-age service, are aware of their responsibilities and that we ensure that everyone does everything they can to ensure that young people have the direction, support and information that they need to make the right judgments for their future lives?

Julie Hilling (Bolton West) (Lab): Forgive me if I repeat things that have already been said, but this is an issue that I feel extremely passionate about. As a former

youth worker, I work closely with Connexions workers. When I worked for Wigan, we were in Positive Futures, in a department all together, delivering work to young people. It is a shame that these clauses are in the Bill, because it has totally destabilised the careers and Connexions service at this time, when it is not clear what the all-age service will be and what the other arrangements will be around it. It is a shame that the responsibilities for schools and local authorities are not in a later Bill on the all-age service. We are in a context of enormous unemployment among young people. We are destabilising things at a time when nearly a quarter of young people are unemployed.

Stella Creasy: It is worth expressing the concern that all of us have about the 30,000 increase in the number of unemployed young people in the last quarter alone: there are now nearly 1 million unemployed young people. Getting the right career services is never more important than when our economy is stalling and there has been a recent dramatic increase in youth unemployment.

Julie Hilling: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I do not want to digress too much, but I worked with unemployed young people over a 10-year period in the 1980s and 1990s and those young people had their future lives destroyed by that period of unemployment, because when employment rises again, does an employer take on a 16-year-old who has just come out of school, all keen, still used to getting up in the morning, or the 26-year-old who has never worked and has got into poor patterns of behaviour? It is crucial that young people get the right advice and support to get them into employment as soon as possible.

A gap is developing where there are these enormous cuts. I have heard some of the information coming through: no service now in central Bedfordshire; Essex to go down to six or seven staff from 150; Newcastle to have a 50% cut; Cheshire Connexions to have no funding from 31 March. Those are just a few examples of what is happening to Connexions services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool said, Connexions had this dedicated funding and now it is all in the early intervention grant, a much reduced pot, but we know the emphasis that people rightly put on early years, on Sure Start and those other programmes. Connexions is now competing with pregnancy services, with drugs and alcohol services, with youth services and all those other services within the early intervention grant. Because of the Bill and the all-age service, local authorities believe that they can cut staff and projects now.

Cynics among us might think that that is something to do with the fact that if staff are cut now, there will be no TUPE obligations to come along in the future. I am sure that that is just a cynical view and that it is not what the Government are thinking about, but we clearly need to remind local authorities that they still have a statutory duty and will continue to have a statutory duty to provide certain services. As my hon. Friend said, we need to look at enforcement and say to them, "You cannot do what you are doing; it is against the statute."

We need clarity and I hope the Minister will talk, in his response, about what the all-age careers service will cover. What will be available in schools; what are schools expected to buy in? Will the personal support currently

[Julie Hilling]

provided by personal advisers still be there? Will schools be given that by the all-age service? Will they be able to buy it in? What will happen in the future? There is an absolute lack of clarity about what shape the service will have. I accept—I am sure we all accept—that pure careers guidance suffered under Connexions, but the targeted support part of Connexions is crucial, was crucial and will continue to be crucial in the future. Where is that going to come from?

I want to talk briefly about Thomas, whose mum and gran came to see me in my surgery. Thomas had not been diagnosed with a disability, and there was a threat to take his mum to court because Thomas would not attend school. Eventually, through our intervention, Thomas was diagnosed with an autism-related condition, but he would not leave home, go to school or do anything else. He had a Connexions adviser who came to the house regularly and, using the funding available, was able to take Thomas out to the library, to various other activities and to experience work programmes. Thomas's life has been transformed. His mum and gran are now desperate about what will happen to him if Connexions goes.

Andrew Thomas in Bolton was moved to write to *The Bolton News*—which is quite something for a 23-year-old to do—about how he was at risk, because of his family environment and where he lived, of taking the wrong path. He says that he left school with very little confidence when it came to talking to people and selling himself at interview. At 16, he was put into contact with a personal adviser who helped him with those skills. Now Andrew is in employment, but he says that if it had not been for that intervention—it was not about qualifications; he left school with decent qualifications—he would not be in work.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): The hon. Lady seems to be suggesting that the Connexions system is being used as a way of helping those children who have been failed by the current education system over their special educational needs and behavioural problems and that it is not focused on helping the large number of young people who require career guidance to move on and get jobs.

3 pm

Julie Hilling: The hon. Gentleman does not seem fully to understand what Connexions delivered. It was about universal services, but it was also about targeted support. For background reasons—about being in poverty, being a young carer or coming from a difficult family background—young people may have needed additional support to help them into employment, education or training. But it was also about the universal service of providing careers advice. As I acknowledged earlier, pure careers advice suffered through the Connexions programme. However, that is not to say that we do not need that programme; it means that we need to harden up careers advice for everybody and to ensure that all young people receive the support they need. Connexions was also about providing general support to people—for example, with careers interviews and options for the future.

What will happen to young people who are currently making decisions about university or college places and where they should be going? Have we got another lost group of people? The duty on schools about the new service will not be in place until September, or whenever the Bill comes into force, and the all-age service starts in 2012. What will happen to young people who are making choices now?

In its submission to the Committee, Careers England stated:

“The new era needs to build upon solid foundations from today. Those foundations are being rapidly eroded. Hence Ministers need most urgently to remind Local Authorities that their current statutory duty to provide universal careers advice and guidance for young people remains in place today, and does so until such time as the new legislation is not only enacted but implemented. Failure to do this would amount to condoning LAs cutting statutory services and failing in their duties.”

We need to call a halt to Connexions cuts. We need to ensure that a quality service for individuals that is sufficient to meet the required statutory duty remains. We need to ensure that there is clarity on roles and responsibilities in relation to local authorities and the transition towards implementation of the new all-age service. We need to ring-fence dedicated funds to ensure that the service continues at least until the new service is in place. We need to establish robust management systems to retain qualified and competent careers practitioners.

Where is the consultation of young people in all those changes? A key plank of Connexions was about young people defining, contributing to and being deeply involved in the service. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 provides a statutory duty to consult young people on services and cuts to services. What are we doing about consulting young people on what they currently need from Connexions? I look forward to the Minister's response on all those issues, but I hope he recognises that if he does not act very quickly we will be in a deep mess, and that young people now and in the future will not receive the advice and support that they need.

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): I welcome you back to the chair, Mr Walker. If I follow up our earlier discussions about birthdays in the Wright family by congratulating some friends of mine on having a new addition—Eda Scarlett York—to their family this morning, you would be quick to jump on me and I will therefore move on to the amendment.

The Chair: Order. What is her name?

Dan Rogerson: Eda Scarlett York and, for completeness, we should congratulate her brother Oscar as well.

The Chair of the Education Committee spoke earlier about his amendment 100, which poses an important question for the Minister. On Second Reading, I and others raised the point that we have to get the transition period absolutely right. The direction in which the Government are going with the all-age careers service is not only right but vital in addressing problems that have been clearly identified. Hon. Members in all parts of the House have discussed those problems.

If I look back to my experience of careers lessons at school, which was not that long ago, but still quite a while, sadly—more recently than some Committee

members, although it would be unfair to point that out—I remember them as a fairly cursory thing, with little in-depth advice about the breadth of careers that might be open to us or the experiences that it would be important to gain in order to get access to those careers, as well as the academic or vocational routes that might lead to them. Things have improved hugely since then—Connexions made great progress in addressing such issues, as well as in tackling the barriers in the way of some young people. However, a lot more needs to be done. The issue of all-age careers advice is important, to ensure that young people at earlier stages of their education and development are not closing off options. We need to address that.

There are skills out there already, in schools, the Connexions service and other professionals and agencies. Voluntary agencies, too, want to offer advice and to work in this field. In responding to the probing amendment tabled by the Chair of the Select Committee, which is part of the group, I hope that the Minister can reassure us about the message going out from Government, to ensure that the work continues in the interim and that the skills and talents among those professionals are made best use of in the future.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I want to raise briefly the current transition and future funding of the independent careers advice services. I will welcome the Minister's response and, hopefully, his reassurances.

I have real concerns, which are shared right across the education field, about what is now happening in the careers services. As we have heard, funding for Connexions was previously ring-fenced, but has been amalgamated with 22 other previously ring-fenced grants into the early intervention grant, which the Local Government Association tells us has been cut by 25%.

We are told that the same early intervention grant will fund Sure Start, the cost of extending free education to two-year-olds, the cost of short breaks for disabled children, all support programmes targeted at preventing children from engaging in crime and at tackling substance misuse, and all support programmes for teenage pregnancy. It also has to provide support for children with mental health problems and learning difficulties, and for all transition arrangements—into education, between primary and secondary, and between secondary and FE or employment. The grant has to support all behaviour support services in schools and local authorities, as well as local authority-led child and adolescent mental-health services and children's community paramedic services, such as speech therapy, and special educational needs, youth services and the transition funding to an all-age careers service.

I recall the Chancellor telling the House that he would not balance the books on the back of the poor, but I am sure that all of us in the room agree that there is little within the list that would be suitable for book balancing. Given that, it is not surprising that Connexions is disappearing before our very eyes. Those staff who are not taking the opportunity of early retirement or voluntary redundancy on 31 March face redundancy next year. Will the Minister explain what action he will take now to stop careers disappearing because, if we do not do something, the careers guidance service in this country is unlikely to recover from what is happening today?

Mr Hayes: As I said when I intervened briefly, we are discussing an important subject. As I was listening to the contributions to the debate, I was trying to remember the Yeats quote:

“Joy is of the will which labours, which overcomes obstacles, which knows triumph.”

I hope that in overcoming the obstacles that have been well-articulated in Committee and in labouring to achieve the objectives that the hon. Member for Hartlepool has generously identified with me, we will indeed know triumph in respect of careers advice and guidance. That is not in the brief—civil servants get nervous when one starts speaking off the brief, as Ministers and former Ministers know—but it is so important, because of the difference that good advice and guidance make to those that otherwise would not get it.

It is true that most people who are already advantaged benefit from pretty good advice through familiar contacts or social networks. They do not tend to struggle to fulfil their potential. That is an advantage that, I guess, most of our children—I am thinking of my children in particular, because one thinks of one's own children first—are likely to benefit from, but it was not an advantage that I benefited from any more than the hon. Members for Cardiff West and for Hartlepool or my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage, because our parents did not have the knowledge. It was not that they did not care or that they did not have the aspiration; they did not have the wherewithal. Good advice and guidance makes the marriage between ambition and outcome, through the advent of wherewithal. That is why it is so important for social mobility and in assisting those who start with the fewest advantages to gain, through that wherewithal, their chance of glittering prizes. That is why I am so passionately committed.

I am not alone in that commitment. If one looks, for example, at the report produced by the former Cabinet Minister, Alan Milburn, entitled “Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions”, which was essentially about broadening access, he specifically highlights advice and guidance as being salient to the purpose that I have described. He is not alone. Lord Browne, when asked to look at access to higher education, again highlighted advice and guidance as being critically important. His report stated:

“Students will be better informed about the range of options available to them. Their choices will shape the landscape of higher education.”

The hon. Member for Hartlepool was extremely generous in what he said about what I believe in. I think it was Ruskin who said that greatness is defined by humility, so I had better not dwell on it too much, but he was generous both in terms of the principle and in terms of what I am trying to do about that principle. The points that have been raised in Committee about the details deserve a full answer, and they will get one today. It is important that young people in schools and in further education and beyond have access to the kinds of life-changing advice that I have described and that the Committee cares about. Therefore, I want to speak at some length—you will be delighted to learn, Mr Walker—to reassure the Committee about our plans for careers guidance and to address all of the points that have been made so far.

First of all, let us be realistic about Connexions. I do not want to condemn it, because a lot of good work was done by people in that service, and it would be quite

[Mr Hayes]

wrong to stigmatise Connexions as having failed. In all kinds of ways, Connexions did not fail and did good work, but we asked too much of it to be a jack-of-all-trades and to excel in every area. It is a big ask to expect people to be high-quality, professional careers advisers as well as being able to offer good advice on a range of lifestyle issues. That is not merely my own view. I have mentioned Alan Milburn's report "Unleashing Aspiration" in which he recommends:

"Abolishing the Connexions careers service and replacing it with a dedicated, professional and flexible careers advisory service in every school and college."

That was part of what was necessary to achieve the objectives that he set out in his report.

3.15 pm

I liked all the people whom I shadowed, but the hon. Member for Cardiff West was the most effective of them. I do not want to offend anyone, but luckily most of them have left the House now, so it is not going to cost me a great deal. I know that the hon. Member for Hartlepool, who was responsible for Connexions, also took these matters very seriously. The previous Government made some strides in this area, and I would like to put on the record that I inherited a rising tide in the number of apprenticeships. We can go much further, and this Government will do so, but the previous Government made considerable progress. That was perhaps partly provoked by my almost tedious concentration on the subject—no, not tedious; I am now being too humble, and if I get too humble I will become too great—because I banged on about apprenticeships for five years. We are looking to build on that, to extend it and to go much further. That needs to be put on the record, because these Committees, and debates in the House generally, are often too partisan and not good enough at recognising the achievements of previous regimes.

I do not think that anyone would say—indeed the hon. Gentleman was careful not to—that Connexions was doing the job that is necessary in order to provide the kind of quality advice that is essential to delivering the social mobility that we all seek. Its focus on a minority of vulnerable young people was a distraction, or at least a displacement, from providing proper careers advice and guidance to the much larger number of young people who need it. It required a radical rethink. Responsibility for securing advice needs to go back to schools and colleges, which are in the best place to know the people who study there. We will be discussing shortly how the primary responsibility for securing provision of independent careers advice for young people will in future lie with schools. That is in the Bill, and we will be debating it.

Let me be clear about local authorities. They will retain the responsibility that they currently have under section 68 of the Education and Skills Act 2008 to "encourage, enable, or assist" the participation of young people, and of young adults with learning difficulties and disabilities—people such as Thomas, if I may say so—in education and training. These are significant and necessary changes to the way in which young people gain careers guidance, especially the all-age service, as has already been mentioned. I am aware that well-informed voices are calling on the Government to ensure an effective transition to these new arrangements. Much

work has already been done. We set out when we published details of the early intervention grant that it would support local authorities' responsibilities in respect of careers guidance for young people in advance of the establishment of the all-age service. Local authorities retain their statutory responsibility to make available

"such services as it considers appropriate to enable, encourage and assist the effective participation of those young persons in education or training."

Clearly, local authorities must decide locally how they fulfil their duty, but it is a statutory duty. In a number of local authorities, of which Northamptonshire is a good example, action is already being taken to secure careers guidance services to young people until April 2012 and to develop a well thought-through transition process. I acknowledge, however, that we could do more to guide local decision making. That is why we intend to support local authorities and schools by setting out more clearly how responsibilities will change over the next 12, then 18, months.

Julie Hilling: How will all that be measured? Who will decide what is appropriate and how will we measure whether it is?

Mr Hayes: That is a perfectly fair question. In the end, it will be measured by destinations. Once the change is effected and the service is in place, we want the kinds of improvements that Alan Milburn wants to see, that Lord Browne has argued for, that I have articulated many times, and that a number of colleagues from the Opposition have argued for. If destinations do not change and there is not clear and palpable evidence that the advice that people receive under the new system improves the link between people's ambitions—their potential—and its fulfilment—frankly, what we have offered will have failed. All the evidence from other countries, the academic evidence, the advice we have received, and the consensus of opinion, which the hon. Member for Hartlepool generously acknowledged, suggest that the measure will not fail and that it is the right strategy.

To be fair to the previous Government again, an adult careers service has been introduced. I take a sliver of the credit for pressing for that for a number of years, but none the less, the plans were laid to introduce that service before we came into government. When I became a Minister, I had to make the decision whether to allow the process to continue and to roll out the next steps service that came into effect last summer, or whether to do something else. I chose to go ahead, because a lot of work had been put into it. It seemed the right stepping stone towards what I ultimately wanted to achieve, which was the all-age service. The service has been well received, and I hear positive messages about it in reports from careers professionals. Destinations will be the ultimate test of the effectiveness of the measures.

Mr Stuart: May I take the Minister back to the matter of local authorities? I recognise and admire the self-discipline of this Government in not bombarding local authorities and schools with endless letters and instructions. However, in a period of flux on careers guidance such as we are entering now, would it not be appropriate for him to write to local authorities specifically on the measure? If he does so, the whole Committee

will be reassured that local authorities will be reminded how seriously they should take their duties, not least in the transition period.

Mr Hayes: I like to think that my oratory is a bit like a Wagnerian opera, with a series of peaks building up to a great summit. Along the way, the satisfaction of my hon. Friend is high among my priorities—it will be one of the peaks that I attempt to ascend. I will do the same with fellow hon. Members during the course of this all too short response to the debate.

Let me be clear about the steps that we will take. First, we will issue short, focused guidelines to local authorities regarding their continuing duties under section 68 of the Education and Skills Act 2008. It is essential that local authorities are absolutely clear about what needs to be done for them to meet such duties. Currently, the response is patchy. I have described Northamptonshire and the arrangements that it makes. Other local authorities are retaining their Connexions service, but taking out the careers part, which will subsequently be dealt with by the new service, and others are considering creative ways in which to provide the service. It is essential, however, that they all know that they must continue to meet their statutory requirements.

We welcome collaboration between schools and innovative solutions, as long as they are in line with providing an effective and efficient service and meet statutory requirements.

Mr Wright: I do not wish the Minister to peak too soon. When will the guidance be published?

Mr Hayes: It will be published as soon as possible. I am not attempting to not answer that question. I understand the urgency, and it will be published urgently. I felt that people would want to draw the matter to my attention today. I wanted to get to this part of the Bill to have this debate, and I want the guidance to be informed by the debate. It will be done following the debate as a matter of urgency.

Mr Wright: With the greatest respect to the Minister, jobs and professional expertise are being lost now. Connexions will be dismantled in many parts of the country in a little over a week. We are at the 11th hour. Can the Minister categorically guarantee that we are talking imminently rather than as soon as possible? Tomorrow or today?

Mr Hayes: Imminently. We are here until 4 o'clock. I want you to know the extent of my responsibilities, Mr Walker. I am meeting the Mexican Minister this afternoon, and as soon as I have done that, I will discuss with my officials, on the back of this perfectly proper debate, how we can move forward imminently with the advice that the hon. Gentleman seeks. I understand the urgency that has been stressed by a number of Members.

Tessa Munt (Wells) (LD): May I ask the Minister whether those councils that will go into *purdah* shortly, approaching their elections, might have difficulty in making any announcements? He may wish to allow them some time, until 6 May.

Mr Hayes: As a former county councillor, my experience suggests that local authorities make arrangements to deal with their statutory responsibilities when they are in *purdah*, just as Governments have to do. All local authorities, as a matter of course, put in place arrangements that allow them to continue the proper exercise of their functions. I hear what my hon. Friend says, but none the less, the imminence that the hon. Member for Hartlepool called for is the significant issue.

I want to set out clearly that schools will need to think about how they will fulfil their responsibility in ensuring access to careers guidance in advance of the commencement of the Bill's provisions. It would have been perfectly proper for the hon. Gentleman—I do not know whether he was saving this for a later amendment, but I will put this on the record now as this has not yet been mentioned so far—to point out that because of the Bill's timetabling, it is important that schools start to reflect on what they are going to achieve before they are statutorily obliged to do so. I want to make it clear to schools that they need to plan the fulfilment of their responsibilities in the way that I have described.

Hon. Members raised concerns about funding through amendments 121 and 122. I take this opportunity to correct the misunderstanding that is apparent in amendment 121—it is obviously inadvertent; I am not suggesting that it is anything else. Funding for Connexions has not been ring-fenced since 2008, contrary to what was said earlier. That decision was taken by the previous Administration before the hon. Gentleman was the responsible Minister, to provide local authorities with greater flexibility in the use of their resources. In bringing a number of funding streams together into the early intervention grant, which will be introduced this year, we are simply taking that decision a step further. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the character and size of that grant and its substance, and I do not want to repeat what has been said. He knows that it is there to enable authorities to act more strategically and start the investment early, where it will have the greatest impact, with greater flexibility in response to local needs and to drive reform.

The grant is not ring-fenced, to enable local authorities to target resources at the areas of greatest need. Of course, as I have said, schools have responsibility for securing guidance for their pupils. Members of the Committee have made reference to the pressure on schools budgets, and I do not want to suggest that schools, like all of us, will not face difficult decisions over the coming years as we seek to get our finances back on track. That is about as partisan as I get, by the way, so do not worry. I will not talk about the sorry record of the previous Administration in the running of the economy.

Whereas the Government have had to reduce funding in many areas, we have protected school funding. In addition, the pupil premium, which lies at the heart of our overall schools programme, provides £2.5 billion of extra money by 2014-15, following poorer children directly at the school they attend. There will be clear transparency requirements to ensure that it is spent on improving the life chances of our poorest young people. More than that, it is important that we communicate what the new arrangements will mean for schools, and we will do that as a matter of urgency. I want schools to understand their responsibilities under the new arrangements.

[Mr Hayes]

Although there are other amendments where we can explore this issue further, I will put it on the record now for the sake of clarity.

3.30 pm

Mr Stuart: The last time the Minister kindly gave way, my question was immediately answered in his speech—by his text, from his presentation of it—with an announcement that he would do what I asked him to. I do not know whether that was a late change in his speech that he made out was already in the content. He has now said that he will contact schools. Can I confirm that the Minister will write imminently to every school to ensure that they are aware of the responsibilities that they will have and to ensure that young people get the appropriate advice and guidance?

Mr Hayes: Certainly we will communicate with schools through the appropriate channel. I do not know whether we will write a letter or how we will communicate with them, but we will communicate as a matter of urgency. I want to go further—and this is not in my notes, by the way. Look at the shocked faces all around the Committee, mainly from the non-members, actually. This is not in my notes, so I am playing fast and loose here. I want to go further and suggest, as a result of the comments that have been made this afternoon, that we put together a summit of interested parties, including local authorities, career professionals and representatives of the education sector to talk through the transitional arrangements and the set-up of the new service to make sure that they are seamless.

I will hold a second summit of some of the users of the services. A good point was made by the hon. Member for Bolton West about the clients. She is not listening to me now. She made the point and now she is not listening. I am making a concession and she is not paying attention. This is a glorious moment. I think we should have a summit for young people—and other people, because this is all-age, after all—about the use of the service. I am conscious of what the hon. Lady said about getting good learner and user involvement in the process of shaping the service in the right way. As a result of today's discussion, I am happy to say that they should also be put together as a matter of urgency to facilitate the transition.

I can also say that—again, we will come back to this—the careers profession has done a great deal of work, since the policy was announced and since it knew that it was likely to be in the Bill, on clarifying its responsibilities and capabilities, so that capacity in the profession will be sufficient to meet the new demands placed on it. It is working from a good base, because the careers profession is a rightly proud profession. It is working on a set of professional standards, which is coherent to an unprecedented degree and which will inform the character of that service. I also think we should go further still. We need to be clear about what the architecture of the service will look like. We need to develop a narrative which can be communicated in addition to all I have said.

I will act not only comprehensively but urgently to address the perfectly proper concerns expressed.

Meg Munn: I am sure the Minister has studied in detail the comprehensive submission E61 which the Committee received from the Institute of Careers Guidance, setting out a lot of its concerns. From everything said, I am sure that the Minister, in his summits, wants to address those important points made to the Committee.

Mr Hayes: Yes. That is a good point, which adds to our conversation. The hon. Lady's point is perfectly reasonable and fair.

Tessa Munt: Can the Minister confirm that when he writes to schools, he will also write to middle schools? Middle schools often fall off the circulation list for matters that concern secondary-age pupils.

Mr Hayes: Further education colleges are etched on my heart, but there is a place too, in a big-hearted Minister, for schools, including middle schools.

In that spirit, and given the important and, I hope, reassuring announcements I have made today, I urge the hon. Member for Hartlepool to withdraw the amendment. I share his view that the matter is fundamentally important and needs to be addressed properly.

Mr Wright: I do not think that the Minister has gone far enough. He mentioned the abolition of Connexions and how that was recommended in the Alan Milburn report about access to the professions, and it is true. The Government of the day rejected the Milburn recommendation to abolish Connexions. I thought long and hard about that recommendation, and the reason I came to that decision was because I thought that Milburn, in producing his report, had not taken into account developments in the Connexions service over the past couple of years. In the new information, advice and guidance strategy “Quality, Choice and Aspiration”, which I produced in October 2009, I put the Connexions service on notice that we would be reviewing it within 18 months. However, I think Milburn failed to take into account the real progress that had taken place. For example, I went to Connexions in Merseyside and saw the fantastic work being done in a really disadvantaged part of the community. Connexions Merseyside has now been dismantled, with jobs and professional expertise lost, at a cost to the public purse of £900,000.

The Minister has said warm words about guidance that will be produced imminently and about a summit that will be provided for young people and interested stakeholders. As far as I can recall, he announced the establishment of the all-age careers service at the Institute of Careers Guidance conference in Belfast in November. We have had something like five months for him to pull together a comprehensive transition plan for between the end of Connexions and the start of the new service.

The Minister's speech failed to answer some of the key logistical and administrative points with regard to the all-age careers service. He has had the time to produce an effective plan, and he has failed to do so.

Mr Hayes: Let me say two things in response. The first is incidental but concerns a conversation with a careers adviser who worked for Connexions in the very area the hon. Gentleman highlighted, Merseyside. That

first alerted me to the need to set up an all-age service, because Connexions was not working, and that was five years ago.

The hon. Gentleman made a point about the timetable. During that period since November, over Christmas, January and last month, my Department and my officials have been working with members of the profession—with some assiduity on their part and some enthusiasm on ours—to put in place the necessary components to deliver the kind of quality service that I want to put together. We have not been standing still; a great deal of work has gone on. We are ready to go in September, but the truth is that transition is tough when a change of this kind is being made. I am determined to make the transition as effective as possible.

Mr Wright: I fully appreciate that the Minister has been working hard on this, but he has used some phrases, such as saying that he wants to pull people together so that they are clear about what the architecture of the service will look like, when this a huge leap in the dark. We will have nothing in place for a large part of this country for the best part of six months at a time of redundancies and the loss of service for young people. That is so important given the current economic circumstances. It is simply not good enough. On that basis, I want to test the opinion of the Committee on my amendment. I hope that the Chair of the Education Committee will also press his amendment to a Division.

Mr Stuart: The Minister has given a passionate and interesting speech on this subject, and I know that it will be a personal achievement of his when the new all-age careers service comes into being. I am not, however, entirely satisfied on the transition. We have not had answers to issues on the budget and finalising the detail. The Minister, stands like a colossus astride two great Departments of State—the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Education—and he does so with colossal charm and great literary references.

Mr Hayes: But not just that.

Mr Stuart: And more, as he rightly prompts me. I hope that he will be able to come forward, if not today, soon, with greater clarity on budgets and arrangements. If there are any blockages within Government, I hope that this Committee sends out a message today that that is not good enough and that we need to get this nailed down.

Mr Hayes: Being partially satisfied is not good enough; I want to satisfy my hon. Friend entirely. Communicating with local authorities and with schools will necessitate being clear about the things that he is describing. We will not simply say what we have already said; we will be adding new information about the shape of what is expected of them, otherwise there would be no point communicating with them. We will flesh out the issue that he has described.

Mr Stuart: I thank the Minister for that response. He has shown—I do not think that anyone was in any doubt—his commitment to ensuring that the online service is tailored to the needs of young people and that everything that can be put into place will be put into place for this transition. It is unfortunate that we do not yet have greater clarity. On the basis of the information

that the Minister has given and however much it may disappoint the shadow Minister, I will not press my amendment to a Division.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6, Noes 10.

Division No. 12]

AYES

Brennan, Kevin	Hilling, Julie
Creasy, Stella	Munn, Meg
Hendrick, Mark	Wright, Mr Iain

NOES

Boles, Nick	Hayes, Mr John
Duddridge, James	McPartland, Stephen
Fuller, Richard	Munt, Tessa
Gibb, Mr Nick	Rogerson, Dan
Gyimah, Mr Sam	Stuart, Mr Graham

Question accordingly negatived.

3.45 pm

Mr Wright: I beg to move amendment 119, in clause 26, page 27, line 3, leave out subsection (4).

The amendment would maintain the duty on schools and colleges to permit access, which clause 26(4) is designed to remove. I genuinely cannot understand the purpose behind the Government's intention. For all their rhetoric about trusting professionals, they seem rather intent on making life difficult for the careers professionals who are providing help and guidance to young people. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow mentioned this issue in an intervention in relation to the earlier group of amendments, and I will reiterate the points that I made then. It is important to trust the professionals. Why are they not able to have access to schools and colleges?

In written evidence, Brian Lawler, a careers advice practitioner, suggested that

“external Careers Guidance Practitioners cannot be effective unless provided with basic interviewing facilities in Schools”,

including, for example, a computer, telephone and, importantly, confidential interviewing space. The removal of the duty to allow access will reduce the likelihood of provision of such facilities and therefore risk a reduction in the effectiveness of the service.

Likewise, it is suggested that effective service is provided by face-to-face practitioners, as opposed to online advice facilities, and by someone who is able to build up a relationship with the student over time. Access by the practitioner is required to enable that effective level of service to be provided.

Of course online provision has its role in the 21st century, but we did not have online provision when I received careers advice in the 1980s. I met someone on a wet Wednesday afternoon I had never met before. He took a look at a one-page summary of me and said, “You're interested in politics. Have you ever thought about being a solicitor?” I said, “I'm not interested in the law at all.” He said, “Go on. Go and try to be a lawyer.” That just was not something that I wanted to do. I received completely ineffective careers advice and I always vowed that I would try to do something to ensure that other people did not have a similar experience.

[Mr Iain Wright]

Advice from the Department in response to an e-mail query from Professor Tony Watts, who is an eminent practitioner with regard to careers, suggested:

“Schools may not ask a teacher, supply teacher, or other individual employed by the school to be the sole source of careers guidance for any pupil. But they may still employ their own careers adviser or involve a careers coordinator or other member of the school staff in providing careers guidance, as long as pupils have access to an external source of guidance too.”

This is the key phrase as far as I am concerned:

“That might include (but would not be limited to) access to online resources, support via a helpline, or face-to-face guidance from a specialist provider.”

It seems to me that, with that last sentence, schools could just provide students with access to a computer for an afternoon and say, “Why don’t you look online and see what’s happening?” I hope that that is not the case. I made the point about building up a relationship with someone who can act as a signpost to different facilities and provision. That is the right way to go.

Another concern that I have relates to logistics and accessibility. Removing the duty to allow access risks reducing the accessibility of careers service providers. What do I mean by that? Let us say that someone who is independent comes in only on that wet Wednesday afternoon to which I referred. What happens if a student is doing a vocational course and is not in one location during normal school hours? What happens if someone is in a pupil referral unit during sporadic hours? What if someone is attending school or college part-time for another reason? In the modern world of learning and work, not everyone is in a classroom or even on the school or college estate during school or college hours. If a career adviser is allowed access, it is far more likely that the pupil will be able to access the service. There is a big risk with the provision that there will be element of, “If you’re not there when the careers adviser is there, frankly tough.” To that end, I ask the Minister to reconsider removal of the duty to allow access for people providing professional education and training support.

At the very least, I seek the Minister’s assurance that he will ensure that guidance is implemented and made available to schools and FE institutions, perhaps imminently and perhaps with the provision of a summit, to ensure that careers service providers remain accessible to all pupils, that career and training services remain effective, and that pupils—this is the key point—continue to receive the quality and level of service pending the transition from Connexions to the new all-age career service.

Mr Stuart: The shadow Minister is doing a good job of asking questions. I have had experience of FE colleges saying that they cannot currently gain access to schools, which seem to block them in case they poach pupils on to alternative courses. Are schools acting illegally, and does he have any idea whether they have a right to behave in that way?

Mr Wright: There is a statutory duty on schools to provide impartial information, advice and guidance. The Chairman of the Education Committee alludes to practices that all hon. Members are familiar with. I know that they happen. An FE provider may be allowed into a school to demonstrate to year 11 students what

post-16 courses are available, but it just so happens that the prefects for that day are out on a school trip. I know the practices that go on. It is a case of ensuring that we can hammer that as much as possible, and that the principle enshrined in legislation is complied with as much as possible.

Mr Stuart: The hon. Gentleman wisely chose a path other than that of a lawyer, so I will not unfairly ask him questions that he does not have phalanxes of civil servants to provide him with technical legal answers to, but I was not talking about someone coming to a school when not everyone is there. I was talking about someone not being allowed on the premises, and I wondered whether that was legal.

Mr Wright: I would seek guidance from the Minister, but my understanding from when I was on the other side of the fence is that that would not be legal, and that there is a statutory duty to ensure that providers give impartial information, advice and guidance to their students and young people. I was about to sit down. I hope that the Minister will consider the amendment favourably and positively in the spirit in which it is put forward, because it is essential that pupils continue to receive good careers advice and guidance, which is so important at their stage of education.

Mr Gibb: I was interested to hear the careers advice that the hon. Member for Hartlepool received. I, too, sought careers advice and was told that given my imagination, creativity and style, I should become a chartered accountant, so I did, as did he.

The hon. Gentleman highlighted the importance of ensuring that young people in schools and colleges have access to appropriate advice. We are introducing in the Bill a duty on schools to secure access to independent and impartial careers guidance for their students. We made it clear in the policy statement circulated to the Committee about clause 27 that we intend, subject to the consultation, to extend that duty in due course to all young people up to the age of 18 who attend schools and institutions in the further education sector. Simply put, that duty removes the need for us to place a separate duty on schools and FE institutions to permit access by those providing education and training support services. Schools and colleges will no longer be required to work in partnership with the local authority on the provision of careers guidance; they will be free to determine who to make those arrangements with in the best interests of their students.

I acknowledge that the current duty refers not only to careers guidance, but to advice and guidance on other matters impacting on a young person’s ability to participate in education or training, but it is time that we trusted schools to engage appropriately with other agencies—and with services provided by the local authority under section 68 of the Education and Skills Act 2008, to which the Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning referred in a previous debate—to ensure that their students receive appropriate support.

We are taking other measures; for example, we are developing a destination measure relating to key stage 4 and post-16 that will ensure that schools are held to account for the outcomes of their students, including their progress on leaving school. That is the new regime, and we do not need provisions in law to require schools

to give access to statutory services, because we want to trust schools to make those decisions. They have a statutory duty to provide independent careers advice, and it is for them to decide from whom to take that advice.

Mr Wright: That is an important point. Will the Minister put on the record his view on whether face-to-face advice is considered the cream of the provision of information, advice and guidance? Will it be considered acceptable if the advice is literally, “That’s the website that you need to look at, and there’s access to a computer—you’ve got access to that for an afternoon”?

Mr Gibb: It depends. The advice needs to be appropriate to the particular circumstances. Face-to-face advice would be appropriate for some students.

Mr Wright: But not all?

Mr Gibb: It would depend on the school, which might think it was appropriate for all its students. We are changing the whole approach to education policy, because we want to trust the professionalism of schools and to trust head teachers and teachers to make such decisions. We are providing a very clear statutory duty to provide advice that is independent and impartial, and we are providing increased accountability measures, such as destinations. That is the approach that we think will be successful, not top-down prescription that sets out precisely from whom schools must take advice and that requires them by law to allow access to this or that individual. Under our regime that will no longer be necessary.

Mr Wright: I am worried about what the Minister is saying. Is there not an inherent risk that there will be an elitist approach to the provision of information, in which the brightest and the best will be given access to, and have face-to-face time with, a careers professional, whereas people who are not considered to be the brightest and the best might be told, “You’re a girl—you can go into secretarial work,” which is something that could have happened in the 1950s? It was inappropriate then and it is certainly inappropriate now. Will the Minister reassure me—so far he has not done so—that we will not have an elitist, narrow-minded approach to the provision of careers advice?

Mr Gibb: There will be a destinations measure for schools, so they have every incentive to provide high-quality advice to all students. The approach taken by the previous Administration clearly did not work, which is why we have to take remedial measures to sort out the quality of careers advice in schools. The better approach is to put into law very clear and strengthened duties on schools to provide impartial careers advice. When we go through clause 27 in detail, we will see the clear duties on schools to provide that high-quality and impartial careers advice to their pupils. We are combining that with our destinations measures, our increased accountability and our whole approach to trusting professionals, so the hon. Gentleman should not have any concern about the quality of advice being different for pupils in a school. The school will be under enormous pressure to provide the highest-quality careers advice to all pupils, particularly to those who are floundering and are not clear about what they intend to do when they leave school. I would

have thought that the school wanted to focus on those pupils, given the new statutory duties.

Tessa Munt: I wanted to be reassured that the independence that the Minister is talking about will continue. I have experience of five examples at the moment. A year 11 student applied to a college and asked the school for a reference. The head teacher intervened with that pupil, which left the pupil feeling harassed. As that happened frequently, the college stopped asking for references from the school. A college set up a fresher’s day event for year 11 students; it was scheduled for June. A grammar school in a particular town changed the school calendar and insisted on year 11 pupils coming into school on that day to return textbooks under threat of fines for not returning books on that particular day. There are Catholic schools providing advice only on Catholic options at post-16, colleges that have been barred from talking to school pupils who wanted to study A-levels, and academies that are not allowing any advice or guidance other than for their own sixth form. School governing bodies are being advised—

The Chair: Order. This is a very interesting intervention, but it is very long. May we wind it up?

Tessa Munt: I want to be assured that those sorts of things will not happen. I have spoken to the Minister about that before. If we move towards a position where there is independence, at least we have some hope of stopping the sort of thing that happened under the previous regime.

Mr Gibb: My hon. Friend makes a good point. She is citing examples that are happening at the moment. We cannot, of course, legislate for every incident of bad practice, but those are things happening now. I believe that under the approach taken in clause 27, which will shall debate shortly, and which says:

“Careers guidance provided to pupils at a school is independent for the purposes of this section if it is provided other than by—

(a) a teacher employed or engaged at the school, or

(b) any other person employed at the school”,

the independence will be increased. I hope that the provision addresses some of the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend.

James Duddridge: I am fascinated by this discussion, and perhaps we can continue it on Tuesday. Will the Minister return to his seat so that the Whip on duty can beg to move that we adjourn?

Mr Gibb: I will happily do that. In any case, I had come to my concluding remark. Given the pupil premium and all that we are doing to close the attainment gap between those from poorer and wealthier backgrounds, the increased independence provided for under clause 27 and the fact that we are introducing a destinations measure and accountability, I hope that we will be able to adjust successfully—more successfully than we can at present—the concerns of the hon. Member for Hartlepool. With those remarks, I hope that he will withdraw the amendment.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—
(*Mr Duddridge.*)

4.2 pm

Adjourned till Tuesday 29 March at half-past Ten o'clock.

