

House of Commons
Education and Skills Committee

**THE WORK OF THE
COMMITTEE IN 2002**

First Report of Session 2002–03

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*Report, together with
Proceedings of the Committee*

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

The Education and Skills Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Education and Skills and its associated public bodies.

Current Membership

Mr Barry Sheerman MP (*Labour, Huddersfield*) (Chairman)
Mr David Chaytor MP (*Labour, Bury North*)
Valerie Davey MP (*Labour, Bristol West*)
Jeff Ennis MP (*Labour, Barnsley East & Mexborough*)
Paul Holmes MP (*Liberal Democrat, Chesterfield*)
Mr Robert Jackson MP (*Conservative, Wantage*)
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Mr Kerry Pollard MP (*Labour, St Albans*)
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Mr Mark Simmonds MP (*Conservative, Boston & Skegness*)
Mr Andrew Turner MP (*Conservative, Isle of Wight*)

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Contacts

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Footnotes

In the footnotes of this Report, references to oral evidence are indicated by 'Q' followed by the question number. References to written evidence are indicated by the page number as in 'Ev 12'.

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FIRST REPORT

The Education and Skills Committee has agreed to the following Report:

THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE IN 2002

Introduction

1. This is our report on the Committee's activity over the year 2002. It looks at what we have done in the context of the Committee objectives and tasks devised by the Liaison Committee, which in turn arose from a resolution of the House of 14 May 2002.¹ The notion of common objectives for select committees is one that we support, and we believe that they should help to provide a consistent degree of scrutiny for all of Government. We have therefore sought to be as thorough as possible in assessing what we have done against the Liaison Committee's model.

How we organise our work

2. For a committee to scrutinise the work of a department properly, there needs to be a system in place. We believe that it is important to see each Minister in the DfES at least once every year, whether or not we are undertaking an inquiry into a subject for which a particular minister has responsibility. There are five Ministers in the DfES as well as the Secretary of State, and during the course of the year a new Secretary of State and two new Ministers were appointed. We had meetings with both Secretaries of State and all eight Ministers who served in the Department during 2002, and four of the Ministers we saw twice. Altogether we had thirteen meetings with Ministers during the year.

3. We also believe that it is very important to have regular meetings with non-departmental public bodies and related organisations. We have established clearly the accountability of OFSTED to Parliament through the Committee; we take evidence from OFSTED twice a year and report on its activities. We also see the Learning and Skills Council, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the General Teaching Council (the principal NDPBs related to DfES) once a year. We are examining ways of improving the scrutiny of the Learning and Skills Council's activities, not because we are aware of any particular deficiencies in its work but because it is responsible for such a substantial budget; £8.1 billion for 2003–04, rising to £9.2 billion in 2005–06.² We are also examining ways in which we can expand our role in examining the work of the QCA, and will be reporting on that issue shortly.

4. One of the most important posts in education is that of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI). This is the type of appointment that the Committee should scrutinise under the model adopted by the House and by the Liaison Committee. A new HMCI, Mr David Bell, took up his post on 1 May following ratification of his appointment by the Privy Council. We took evidence from Mr Bell on 8 May and in a report³ on his appointment argued strongly for a role for this Committee in the process, as our predecessors had done in the last Parliament.⁴ Unfortunately, as with our predecessors, the Government has resisted our recommendation.⁵ This is an issue that we may well return to, although, as Mr Bell's appointment runs until 30 April 2007, a new appointment is unlikely to be made during the lifetime of this Parliament.

¹ *Votes and Proceedings*, pp. 864–5.

² Evidence 11 December, Q65; letter from Secretary of State for Education and Skills to the Chairman of the Learning and Skills Council, 5 December 2002.

³ Education and Skills Committee, Fourth Report of Session 2001–02, *Appointment of New HMCI*, HC 830.

⁴ Education and Employment Committee, Fourth Report of Session 1998–99, *The Work of OFSTED*, HC 62–I, paragraphs 16 and 17.

⁵ Education and Skills Committee, Fifth Special Report of Session 2001–02, *Responses from Government and OFSTED to the Fourth Report from the Committee, Appointment of New HMCI*, HC 1190.

5. An issue that required investigation during the year was the Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) scheme, which had been closed down in autumn 2001 because of concerns that its fast growth had outstripped its expected cost to public funds. In our report on the subject we analysed the reasons for the failure of this flagship education project and made strong recommendations about the introduction of a new scheme with better quality assurance.⁶ We were pleased to note that the NAO report into ILAs which was published later in the year built on many of the points that we had made.⁷ One of the recommendations of our report was that it should be debated, and we were awarded an Estimates Day debate which took place on 27 June.

6. In total we published six reports in 2002.⁸ We held 44 meetings, taking evidence in public at 36 of them. This included a series of meetings in Birmingham during a week long visit in September to prepare for our major inquiry in this session into secondary education.

Areas for improvement

7. One area where we acknowledge we could do more is in scrutinising the Department's expenditure and financial planning. We do have a specialist adviser to assist us in the task, and the new Scrutiny Unit in the Committee Office did examine the Winter Supplementary Estimates on our behalf and raised two issues which we have taken up with the Department. We are aware, however, that we need a more systematic approach, and we will be looking to make progress on that front over the course of the coming year.

Relations with the DfES

8. We have in general a good working relationship with the DfES, but it is inevitable that matters do not always run smoothly. Our inquiry into post-16 student support illustrates one problem. We undertook this inquiry into ways in which students in higher education might be financially supported in future to coincide with the Government's review of the issue, which was initially due to conclude in the summer of 2002. In order to ensure that our findings could be taken into account in the review, we reported in July 2002.⁹ The date for the report of the review was then put back to September, and then again to November, and then, following the resignation of Estelle Morris and the appointment of Charles Clarke as Secretary of State, to January 2003. We were therefore disadvantaged in two ways: we had undertaken a shorter inquiry than might have been the case in order to meet the Government's original timetable; and then because of the postponement of the review, the Department postponed its reply to the report, which we had not received by the end of 2002 and do not expect to receive until the outcome of the review is published. It is of course in one sense not unreasonable for the Government not to reply in advance of the report of the review, but it is frustrating six months after publication of our report to have had no response whatever from the DfES.

9. Another consequence of the Government's postponement of its decision on student support was that a debate on our report which had been due to take place in Westminster Hall on 21 November was put off at short notice by the Government and replaced with a Government debate on further education. Again, we understand that the Government

⁶ Education and Skills Committee, Third Report of Session 2001–02, *Individual Learning Accounts*, HC 561–I.

⁷ *Individual Learning Accounts*, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, HC1235 Session 2001–02 (25 October 2002).

⁸ The six reports are: First Report, Session 2001–02, *The Work of OFSTED*, HC 437; Second Report, Session 2001–02, *Standards and Quality in Education; The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools for 2000–01*, HC 699; Third Report, Session 2001–02, *Individual Learning Accounts*, HC 561–I; Fourth Report, Session 2001–02, *Appointment of New HMCI*, HC 830; Fifth Report, Session 2001–02, *Library Resources for Higher Education*, HC 804; Sixth Report, Session 2001–02, *Post-16 Student Support*, HC 445.

⁹ Education and Skills Committee, Sixth Report of Session 2001–02, *Post-16 Student Support*, HC 445.

would not have been in a position to announce its proposals or to give a full response to the Committee's report in that debate, but it would have provided an opportunity for Members to raise issues of concern with the Minister and to inform the Government's thinking on the subject. We also note that so far a new date for a debate on our report has not been set.

10. This episode illustrates the difficulties that select committees still face in holding Departments to account, even where, as we said earlier, the committee's relationship with the Department is generally good; the balance of power still lies with the Government. We will be exploring ways of avoiding some of the difficulties we experienced over this inquiry in the coming year.

OBJECTIVES AND TASKS

OBJECTIVE A: TO EXAMINE AND COMMENT ON THE POLICY OF THE DEPARTMENT

Task 1: To examine policy proposals from the UK Government and the European Commission in Green Papers, White Papers, draft guidance etc, and to inquire further where the Committee considers it appropriate

11. The Committee is systematically provided with copies of all Green and White Papers. No inquiries were based directly on a particular Paper, but they were raised in evidence with Ministers. For example, the White Paper 'Education and Skills: Investment for Reform' and the strategy document 'Success for All' were discussed with Ivan Lewis, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Adult Learning and Skills.

Task 2: To identify and examine areas of emerging policy, or where existing policy is deficient, and make proposals

12. The Committee's inquiry into post-16 student support examined an area of emerging policy, and the inquiry into Individual Learning Accounts examined a policy which having been implemented was not developing as expected or desired.

Task 3: To conduct scrutiny of any published draft bill within the Committee's responsibilities

13. There was no draft bill within the Committee's remit during 2002.

Task 4: To examine specific output from the department expressed in documents or other decisions

14. The DfES provides the Committee with copies of all statutory instruments laid before Parliament.

On 24 July 2002, the last day before the summer recess, the Government published a Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention (No. 13, 2002) on the 'Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region' with Explanatory Report [Cm. 5577], with an Explanatory Memorandum. The Committee examined the Treaty and decided that no further action was required.

OBJECTIVE B : TO EXAMINE THE EXPENDITURE OF THE DEPARTMENT

Task 5: To examine the expenditure plans and out-turn of the department, its agencies and principal NDPBs

15. The Committee has appointed a specialist adviser to assist in the examination of the Departmental report and expenditure plans, and is seeking to appoint another. The Committee Office Scrutiny Unit raised two matters on the DfES Winter Supplementary Estimates which required further explanation from the Department.

OBJECTIVE C : TO EXAMINE THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE DEPARTMENT

Task 6: To examine the department's Public Service Agreements, the associated targets and the statistical measurements employed, and report if appropriate

16. A number of the department's Public Service agreements were raised in a meeting with the Secretary of State on 18 December, particularly progress towards the target of 85% of 11 year olds achieving level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 English and Mathematics tests by 2004.

Task 7: To monitor the work of the department's Executive Agencies, NDPBs, regulators and other associated public bodies

17. The Committee examined the annual reports of, and took oral evidence from, OFSTED, the Learning and Skills Council, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the General Teaching Council. We published two reports on OFSTED during the year.

Task 8: To scrutinise major appointments made by the department

18. The Committee reported on the appointment of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools.

Task 9: To examine the implementation of legislation and major policy initiatives

19. The inquiry into the operation of Individual Learning Accounts looked at a major policy initiative, highlighted the flaws in implementation and the lessons to be learned.

OBJECTIVE D: TO ASSIST THE HOUSE IN DEBATE AND DECISION

Task 10: To produce Reports which are suitable for debate in the House, including Westminster Hall, or debating committees

20. The report on Individual Learning Accounts was debated in the House on 27 June 2002, on an Estimates Day. The report on Post-16 Student Support was due to be debated in Westminster Hall on 21 November, but the debate was cancelled by the Government.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE RELATING TO THE REPORT

MONDAY 27 JANUARY 2003

Members present:

Mr Barry Sheerman, in the Chair

Valerie Davey	Jonathan Shaw
Mr Robert Jackson	Mr Mark Simmonds
Ms Meg Munn	Mr Andrew Turner
Mr Kerry Pollard	

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report [The Work of the Committee in 2002], proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 20 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

* * *

[Adjourned till Monday 3 February at a quarter to Four o'clock.]

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