

School Trips

2.58 p.m.

Baroness Sharp of Guildford asked Her Majesty's Government:

What they consider to be the value of school trips and their contribution to the curriculum.

Baroness Andrews: My Lords, well planned and safely delivered school trips, with learning later reinforced in the classroom, make a valuable contribution to the education of pupils of all ages and abilities. The importance of an enriched curriculum is set out in our Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners. We believe that there are educational and personal benefits to be gained from experiences as diverse as fieldwork, visiting farms, museums and galleries, and outdoor activities.

Baroness Sharp of Guildford: My Lords, I thank the Minister for that reply, which was both helpful and very constructive. However, is she aware that—as instanced by the recent advice from the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers to its members—many teachers are afraid of the health and safety risks involved in school trips and of the litigation that could ensue? Given the compensation culture to which the noble and learned Lord the Lord Chancellor has so recently referred, can she give any assurance to teachers who take school trips that this issue can be addressed?

Baroness Andrews: Yes, indeed, my Lords. We are very grateful to all those teachers. There are 10 million pupil visits a year, and teachers continue to ensure that pupils have those wide experiences. We want there to be more and widened opportunities in this area. But teachers are concerned, and we recognise their concern. In the past year, the Secretary of State has met the NASUWT to open up a dialogue and look for ways in which we can reassure teachers and reduce the barriers that they see as inhibiting the possibility of such opportunities. There is a lot of additional training at LEA level and in schools, involving educational visits co-ordinators and professional development. I think that that will create a better climate of confidence where more will happen.

Lord Lawson of Blaby: My Lords, is the Minister not aware that one of the problems is that any teacher, whether in the state or private sector, who wants to take his or her pupils on a school trip is obliged to fill in an extremely comprehensive, lengthy and time-consuming risk assessment that covers everything, including the risk of crossing a road? That is such a burden on already hard-working teachers that they find it easier simply not to conduct the trip. What is she going to do about that?

Baroness Andrews: My Lords, we are aware that there are complaints about bureaucracy. It is absolutely clear that we must get the balance right between having a safe and successful trip and not overburdening teachers. We have read—although the Department for Education and Skills has no evidence for this—that a pond-scooping excursion merited 16 forms. The DfES guidance runs to two pages and entails one form. So there is a definite balance to be struck. David Bell, the chief inspector, recently said:

"We do not have to tie the system up with risk assessment and filling out endless forms. It would be a terrible shame if we lose those opportunities, which are so valuable".

We entirely agree.

Baroness Carnegy of Lour: My Lords, in pursuing this matter with the teaching profession, could the Government at the same time follow up the problems of voluntary organisations, where the fears of leaders and the problems of filling in forms are doing an equal amount of damage? Trips by voluntary organisations—the Scouts, the Guides and such groups—are of crucial value in the education of young people. Will the Government extend the whole operation to voluntary organisations?

Baroness Andrews: My Lords, the noble Baroness is absolutely right: there is a very valuable partnership with the voluntary sector in many different ways. Schools are working with organisations as diverse as Learning through Landscapes, the Scouts and so on.

When we create a climate of confidence, we include the voluntary sector as valuable partners. I take note of what the noble Baroness said. She may be interested to know that we have asked the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme and the Scout Association to map the extent of existing residential provision for us and help us work out how to create more capacity in the system.

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath: My Lords, is my noble friend aware of the recent Better Regulation Task Force report, which considered the blame culture and largely concluded that many of the fears about litigation were unwarranted? Might it be advisable to circulate a summary of that report to the teacher unions and education authorities to give them more confidence to take part in trips in future?

Baroness Andrews: My Lords, that is an extremely good idea and I will take it back to the department. The DfES has produced some excellent guidance. If teachers and schools follow that, they should be able not only to guarantee a safe and successful trip but to dismiss very swiftly any unfair accusations in the unfortunate event of an injury to a pupil. The number of tragic accidents is, thankfully, very small and has been even smaller in recent years. Better risk awareness, better safety provision and better, updated guidance is certainly having an impact.

Baroness Linklater of Butterstone: My Lords, does the Minister agree that for children with special educational needs, trips have a particular value and importance, and that issues of health and safety should never be allowed to be a barrier to such trips taking place, as often appears to be the case?

Baroness Andrews: My Lords, I entirely agree. I have seen at first hand the transforming impact that an experience like that can have for a child with special needs—not only in terms of the curriculum but in building a relationship with staff and other children, developing a team culture and learning how to be responsible. Those are all personal and social skills that we very much want to encourage in all children, but especially those who have some difficulties.

Viscount Bledisloe: My Lords, is the noble Baroness aware that the discouragement of teachers and local education authorities is by no means the only factor that is counter-productive for school trips? Like many other farmers, I would welcome children coming to see round my farm. But one is inevitably put off enormously by the high risk of claims arising in circumstances where the danger, although a risk to which one is happily exposing one's own children, is thought to be too great for schoolchildren coming to see farming done and one's insurance company is reluctant for one to host such trips.

Baroness Andrews: My Lords, I am sorry to hear of the noble Viscount's experience, because one partnership with schools that is very successful is that with city farms. We want children in the inner cities, especially, to have opportunities to engage with rural activities and experiences. There are not

many instances of litigation. As I have explained, if guidance is followed there should be complete security for teachers that they are protected against it.

Baroness Seccombe: My Lords, the Minister refers to guidance, but we have not heard what that guidance would be. When my children were at school, they had accidents, but today, children seem to be involved in incidents for which someone must be blamed.

Baroness Andrews: Yes, my Lords; my noble and learned friend the Lord Chancellor was eloquent on the latter issue this morning and we welcomed what he said. As for the guidance, it is statutory, DfES guidance which is updated regularly. In 2003, for example, a new supplement on water sports was added to the guidance. So when high risk activities take place, the department looks closely at whether the guidance is efficient and appropriate and what else can be developed.

Lord Greaves: My Lords, in reply to the noble Lord, Lord Lawson, the Minister said that the guidance consisted of two pages. I have here a set of forms to be filled in that my wife, who teaches English for Speakers of Other Languages classes, had to fill in during the summer when she was taking an ESOL class to a local country park for a couple of hours in the afternoon. It consists of 13 pages, many of which have to be signed and countersigned by everyone in the bureaucracy and hierarchy, and some of which have to be filled in for each person on the trip. That is for young adults, not even young children. Does the Minister not think that a 13-page form such as that is excessive and that some stronger guidance ought to be given to stop that ludicrous bureaucracy?

Baroness Andrews: My Lords, as I said, it is important that the risk assessment is made and that it fits the activity involved. I do not know what that ESOL trip involved. When I talked about the risk assessment forms for the DfES being two pages, that was a basic outline. The point is that it is part of the employer's duty to provide what is practicable and reasonable. We are commissioning research to consider LEAs' good practice and spread it. We may well be able to achieve a better balance for local authorities, some of which may be slightly exaggerating the situation.