COSLA response to Education and Culture Committee: Education Spend – 2015/16

Introduction
1. COSLA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Education and Culture committee and its interest in scrutinising the draft budget for 2015/16, in terms of spend in primary and secondary education. As the Committee notes in its call for evidence, the draft budget will provide the overall funding which Scottish local government will allocate to all of the services provided, taking into account statutory requirements and local priorities.

2. The thread that runs through this submission is that local decision making over budgets and service delivery is necessary for the improvement in outcomes. This is a consistent message that COSLA has argued for over a number of years but one that has been recently reinforced by the independent Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy. This submission also describes the complexity of delivering education services and the importance of connections to wider public services.

Education and Children’s Services
3. It is important to consider the scope of education and children’s services before considering budgets in more detail. There are a number of services and planning functions vital to the education, wellbeing and safety of children which are delivered by local authorities which go beyond the school:

- School transport
- Teacher employment policy and deployment
- Pre-school provision and childcare
- Additional support for learning
- Schools meals & nutrition
- Procurement & commissioning
- Quality improvement and performance management
- Curriculum development across schools
- Links to local employers and further education
- Child protection
- Services for looked after and accommodated children
- School infrastructure planning and decisions over placing requests
- Contingency planning
- Support for children’s hearing system

4. We are aware that the Committee’s focus is on primary and secondary education but it is important not to lose sight of the other functions that support the operations of schools. While the school may be the front face of the education service, the effective operation of schools and linked children’s services depend on a number of other elements (often running in the background and out of sight of many parents) which may stretch across the entire local authority area. All of these services operate under the democratic oversight of councillors elected to the authority.

Education Spend
5. It is no surprise that Education provision commands one of the biggest elements of expenditure from Scottish local government. The recent school education report by Audit
Scotland showed that in 2012/13, councils spent £4.8 billion on education services, of which £3.8 billion was spent on primary and secondary education. It is worth saying that this is the approximate expenditure on schools, so spend on children’s services will be in excess of this figure.

6. Of the total schools expenditure, the largest element of spend is on teaching and support staff and maintaining or building schools. The Audit Scotland report (Exhibit 1) showed that staffing and school estate equated to between 76% and 80% of a revenue budget – a very large proportion of total spend. As we go on to discuss, this and decisions taken at the national level on both staffing and school estate have a consequence for local budgeting within education and elsewhere within the council.

7. There are undoubtedly both internal and external pressures on education budgets but it is absolutely right that decisions on how to manage that budget are taken at council level, as it is also clear that such pressures are often complex and interlinked. During their budget setting process, councils will scrutinise how to allocate funding in order to best deliver the services for which the council is responsible. In doing so they will need to take account of financial pressures felt across the council – not just within education.

8. Within the education budget councils will look at options for delivering as efficiently as possible the high quality service that is expected by communities. This inevitably requires some choices to be made in consultation with parents and communities. The introduction of the asymmetric week by some local authorities in secondary schools is one example of the changes that can be introduced. Similarly, looking at the length of the primary school week is another option that councils may consider when looking at the efficient operation of services. It should be emphasised that neither of these options can be viewed as a solution for all schools or authorities. They also generate one off savings which, while not insignificant for individual councils, should not be viewed as a solution to council wide financial pressures.

9. As previously discussed the two biggest components of the education budget are staffing and school estate. The Committee will be aware of COSLA’s agreement with Government, reached as part of the local government settlement, to maintain teacher numbers in line with pupil numbers. While local government has successfully delivered on this commitment in recent years it continues to present a challenge to local education delivery and council budgeting more broadly.

10. This is the last year of our existing agreement with Government on teacher numbers. We believe that we will meet the commitment again when the statistics are published in December although this is likely to be by a narrow margin. From next year onward we have reached a new agreement with Government that should begin shifting the focus away from input measures such as teacher numbers towards a more useful measure of educational outcomes. This is a positive move and is discussed later in this submission.

11. The second largest budget component - spend on the school estate – remains an issue for local government. Our views on the handling of school closure consultations have been well rehearsed and we do not wish to repeat them in this submission. Time will tell whether changes to the Schools (Consultation) Act 2010 assist the process of making necessary decisions about the school estate but any discussion on education spend would be incomplete without considering the impact of school estate – both in terms of revenue spend on maintenance but also on capital projects.

12. It would be too simple to suggest that removing constraints around teacher employment and buildings would alleviate all the difficult decisions that have to be made by authorities. This is not the point we wish to make. Local authorities neither wish to reduce the number...
of staff employed nor close schools as each is a necessary part of delivering a quality service. It is the ability to take meaningful decisions on the biggest pressures on the budget, that is staff and buildings costs, that matters, both for the delivery of education but also for dealing with other council-wide pressures e.g. growth of older people’s care

13. We have long argued that councils are best placed to make strategic decisions over funding of public services. For education this is reinforced by the work of Audit Scotland that shows there is no ‘magic number’ in terms of spend that delivers improved outcomes including better attainment. Spend per pupil as recognised by Audit Scotland has little connection with outcomes – it is how the resources are spent, rather than the amount spent, that matters. This also supports our view that tracking overall expenditure in schools, although important for service planning and best value purposes, it should not be viewed as a proxy measure for improving attainment. We focus on work to better measure improved attainment later in this submission.

Education and other Public Services

14. Education has never been a service that can be viewed apart, either in budgetary terms or indeed in terms of delivery and impact. We have highlighted evidence of this in the range of services and functions linked to education and wellbeing. The complexity associated with education provision is now further extended, with links to colleges and employability, receiving renewed emphasis by the recommendations of the Commission on Developing the Young Workforce. In addition planning, housing, regeneration, economic development and leisure and recreation services play a part in aiding and encouraging learning and attainment in its widest sense, not just in terms of resources, but also coupled with support for the wellbeing of children and young people in the community.

15. It is also important to note developments in respect of the integration of health and social care. While the legislative agenda will place minimum requirements to integrate services for adults, we anticipate that around one third of partnerships in Scotland will also choose to integrate children’s social work and health services. This is clearly an important development in terms of the provision of holistic care for children and will place an onus on those partnerships to work closely with local authority Education services.

16. It is clear that viewing education through the lens of a stand-alone service, is not informative or helpful to parents, legislators and the general public. Education and the services mentioned above as well as many more, are better viewed as working together as part of a holistic approach to local government service provision.

Education Policy

17. The next section of this submission summarises some of the different Government priorities that councils have responded to in recent times. It is to give the Committee an illustration of the different demands on local authorities and policy strands which come together to deliver a modern education system.

18. We do not intend to discuss the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in detail other than to make the point that it represents a significant shift in the way education is delivered in our schools. This ‘shift’ is still continuing but even once CfE’s first cohort of young people leave school, councils and schools will continue to strive towards improving teaching and learning. Continuous improvement is at the heart of CfE. We are sure the Committee is aware that the Government has invited the OECD to undertake a review of CfE during 2015. This will provide a valuable snapshot of progress-to-date and provide a link to the OECD’s 2007 study which we believed encapsulated well the challenges facing Scottish education on how to close the attainment gap.
19. COSLA continues to support the recommendations of the Christie Commission relating to early intervention and preventative spend. One example of this is Early Years activity led by local government that has been given added emphasis in recent years as part of the early years collaborative. As mentioned above, COSLA is also working with councils in relation to the recommendations from the Commission on Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce, which links to senior phase in particular, and has relevance for the broad general education in secondary schools. It is of equal relevance to primary and it could be argued, pre-school pupils too. We would also like to highlight the work of the literacy hubs underway in councils across Scotland as we see that they, alongside numeracy hubs, are making an effective contribution to improving attainment.

20. Other policies and strategies that can contribute to supporting learning and attainment which have been taken up by councils, are the changes to minimum hours or periods of PE, the 1 +2 policy on languages and the Better Eating, Better Learning Strategy. On school nutrition, councils are in the process of working to deliver free school meals for all P1 to P3 pupils, due to take effect in January 2015. We have been successful in reaching an agreement with Government on the revenue and capital for the delivery of the policy, although implementation will need to be closely monitored to ensure that resources do indeed match the expected high levels of uptake. In addition, improving school food and food education as well as supporting the well-being of young primary age children with free school meals, involves not just education services but others, such as estates and facilities management.

Best Value
21. COSLA has noted that the Committee is interested in the role of Scottish Government and local authorities in the delivery of Best Value (BV). The statutory duties set out in the Local Government (Scotland) Act 2003 apply specifically to Scottish local government, but for other elements of the public sector, the appropriate chief executive of the agency or department is accountable for BV delivery.

22. In terms of scrutiny of education service delivery in the context of best value, in general, Audit Scotland scrutiny and inspection is dealt with on a cross service basis. As the committee is already aware, occasional scrutiny focusses upon specific services, as exemplified by the report published by Audit Scotland in June this year on education spend.

Improving Attainment
23. The top education priority for COSLA at present is closing the gap in attainment that exists as a result of social and economic inequality in Scotland. This was the focus of two jointly organised roundtable meetings attended by Government Ministers, local authority Education Conveners and Directors held in November 2012 and September 2013. Both Education Scotland and Government are undertaking initiatives with a number of councils and school communities that emphasise partnership working, self-assessment and research to aid and improve attainment, particularly though not exclusively in areas of deprivation.

24. As we have said the thread that runs through this submission is that the most important measure of success within education is not how much money is spent, or how many teachers are employed or how many schools are built or refurbishment, but whether different and inter-connected local services make a difference in terms of outcomes and particularly whether the gap in education attainment is being closed. This is why COSLA and Government are jointly about to commence a significant piece of work that will seek to move the focus away from input measures that have become the focus of education debates and place more emphasis on tracking improved attainment. This is part of the
agreement on the local government settlement for 2015/16 which should emphasise the importance that we attach to its success.

25. In short we want to work with Government to develop a robust way, which draws on multiple sources of information, of demonstrating whether or not we are closing the attainment gap. We have an opportunity in the next five months to make good progress towards achieving this aim with the help of SOLACE, ADES, teaching unions and parent groups, as well as others. If successful, we want this to be recognised as the tried and tested way of measuring attainment and something that is able to gather wide cross-party support within Parliament. We acknowledge the ambition that this represents but we feel it is an absolutely necessary task, critical to the future success of Scottish education. We would be happy to speak further on this during our oral evidence session.

Conclusion
26. It is clear to us that there is significant complexity associated with the interlinking services that help to deliver education outcomes. We support the need to close the gap in attainment: indeed we support the desire and ambition to raise attainment for all children and young people. It is for that reason that we are keen to engage with Government and work towards a way of measuring attainment more effectively.

27. We would be keen that the Committee focuses its attention on education spend, not just as an end in itself, but with an eye to the value that it delivers in terms of education ambition, attainment and achievement for Scotland’s children and young people. We are happy to assist the Committee with its work and to provide additional information if so requested.

For further information contact:

Kathy Cameron
Policy Manager
0131 474 9262
kathy@cosla.gov.uk

24 October 2014