SCRUTINY OF DRAFT BUDGET 2015-16:
SPENDING ON PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Children in Scotland is the national network for the children’s sector in Scotland. Its membership consists of over 420 children’s organisations and individuals from across the statutory, voluntary and private sectors.

Earlier this year, Children in Scotland were pleased to join Audit Scotland’s Advisory group for its School Education Report.

As noted in the Education and Culture Committee’s call for evidence, this report found:

“Councils’ spending on education reduced by five per cent in real terms between 2010/11 and 2012/13, largely as a result of employing fewer staff”.

In addition, Audit Scotland highlighted:

“As well as employing fewer staff, councils have adopted other strategies and approaches to reducing their education spending. These include changes to teachers’ terms and conditions, increasing classroom teaching time, seeking efficiencies in school transport, and reducing training budgets.” ¹

Audit Scotland published its report in June 2014 and it provides an excellent basis for the Committee’s consideration and review of spending on primary and secondary schools by local authorities. In particular, we ask the Committee to note the finding that contact time with children had largely been protected by local authorities. As a result, the report infers that, to date, the impact of a 5% reduction in expenditure over the period studied in the report has not been immediately apparent to children and parents.

Nevertheless, the report questions whether in future years and with further cuts planned, children can continue to be protected from the impact of cuts. One example is training budgets. Given the significant training and development agenda arising from the 2014 Children and Young People Act and ongoing curriculum for excellence development, can we have confidence that improvements can be delivered if training is reduced?

We have therefore replied to the questions raised in this consultation by highlighting those areas where there is cause for concern and also offer ideas where the impact of any cuts could be mitigated.

1. Given recent trends in local authorities’ spending on schools, what are likely to be the main pressures on education budgets in financial year 2015-16? Will there be any impacts on pupils and families; attainment; teacher numbers; the length and scheduling of the school week; teachers’ terms and conditions; developing and strengthening links between schools, colleges and employers; etc?

¹ http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/local/2014/nr_140619_school_education.pdf
2. How should schools, local authorities and the Scottish Government be preparing to deal with these spending pressures?

In 2014-15, local government will see a reduction in its funding allocation in real terms. There are fixed commitments in terms of teacher pay and conditions, which account for 56% of the expenditure on primary and secondary schools. There are also commitments to maintaining teacher numbers as part of the wider National Performance Framework. Therefore, only 44% of schools’ expenditure is at the sole discretion of local authorities and it is their role to determine how much of the reduction needs to be borne by its schools and associated services rather than other areas of local authority activities. Audit Scotland’s report also makes clear that there is wide variation in the choices which have been made by local authorities on how much or little is cut from education budgets.

We question in this financial context, whether overall, local authorities can continue to protect children’s learning within the school settings. We have grave concerns for the non statutory services for children with additional support for learning, further cuts being made to school support staff, such as laboratory technicians and also extra curricular activities, which are critical for wider learning and development, such as youth awards.

We welcome the Scottish Government’s and local authorities’ ambition to raise the attainment of every child and eliminate the attainment gap. International evidence from OECD highlights that in Scotland, children’s learning outcomes are determined primarily by the socio-economic circumstances they are born into. We believe strongly that schools can help change Scotland’s story but it is impossible for them to change this without additional support to engage with families and the wider community. Such support is being delivered, albeit piecemeal but it is non statutory and therefore vulnerable.

Our ambitions for schools to fulfill the principles of curriculum for excellence; to work with families to reduce inequality and also to respond dynamically to the Wood Commission recommendations, are all therefore under threat unless we transform our thinking about how we fund and support our schools.

We think it is imperative that innovative approaches are identified which seek to protect existing spend and potentially lever in and align wider expenditure by community planning partners rather than the easier path of salami-slicing cuts to each school. Looking at how we can maximize our investment in the school estate by opening our schools and their facilities throughout the year for the benefit of all, is one opportunity for funds to be raised and engagement opportunities with parents and others, to be maximized. Children in Scotland has been funded by STV Hunter to identify and develop schools as community hubs – where schools become community activity hubs not just to support children and young people but also to contribute to economic regeneration goals by increasing employability skills among parents. Big Lottery funding has enabled Fife Council to provide welfare advice and wider support to parents, based within its school estate. These three examples are seeking to harness the use of existing assets – our school buildings and school staff and, critically, looking at how a range of outcomes can be achieved from across the range of community planning partners and other funders.

We recommend strongly that community planning partners could do far more to align their economic regeneration, community learning and development and health work around schools as community hubs and channel existing spending through our school assets. Other
funders could equally do more to align relevant funding streams around schools. We can provide more information on our work with schools as community hubs, if the Committee would find it helpful.

3. The Scottish Government’s national performance framework (NPF) “provides a strategic direction for policy making in the public sector, and provides a clear direction to move to outcomes-based policy making”. How has the NPF helped the Scottish Government and education authorities move towards ‘outcomes-based policy making’ in relation to schools?

4. How do the Scottish Government and local authorities ensure that funding for schools is spent in a way that best delivers value for money?

We think this is a really helpful question and we look forward with interest to the evidence provided. We think Scotland’s NPF is a useful way of binding community planning partners to a set of high-level outcomes. It is also helpful that there are several outcomes within the NPF, which directly relate to children, young people and their families and that outcome 4, in particular, refers to ambitions for fulfilling the ambition of curriculum for excellence. However, it is less obvious to us how the NPF has led to improvements and progress towards achieving these outcomes. We are not aware of any education authority, which has been praised for its progress towards achieving relevant outcomes and used as a model of good practice. Equally, we are not aware of any action taken if progress by any of the authorities has been unsatisfactory.

The NPF is unlikely therefore to be a helpful means for ensuring value for money. It is right to have highlighted the role and contribution of Scottish Government given the proportion of education expenditure, which it determines in large part. The measures used by Audit Scotland together with Education Scotland could also be developed further. The attainment and inequality agenda is of central importance and therefore measures which show progress on this should also be a factor in determining value for money.

5. How are pupils, parents, teachers, and communities able to contribute to discussions on—
   -The allocations that should be set out in the draft budget;
   -How these allocations should be spent on schools?
How will the draft budget advance the preventative spending agenda in relation to school spending?

We defer to the National Parent Forum for Scotland’s (NPFS) response in relation to the contribution of parents.

More generally, we think pupils, teachers and communities should be involved in these discussions. We need to focus the discussions at local authority level as it is critical that we build understanding among school communities of what makes up the budgets and the local decision-making, which determines how much per pupil head is invested in education. We need to avoid a parochial, school-based, conversation where consultation is confined to discussing how a comparatively small amount of money is divided up in each school setting. The discussions need to be addressed in ways that can both support school communities to understand how critical the financial situation is and also to help identify innovative solutions. In addition to the approaches described at page 3-4, we believe there is scope to build on
approaches such as merging S6 years. Could senior phase pupils of a school be offered access to the top class science facilities in the neighbouring school in return for a reciprocal arrangement to share staff resources in other curriculum areas? Can youth awards be offered to a cluster of schools rather than individually? We need to support our school communities to think beyond their own school boundaries if they are all to be able to offer every child equal opportunities to fulfill their potential.

Children in Scotland believe that Scotland should be proud of its comprehensive, inclusive education system supported by curriculum for excellence. It needs to be treasured and sustained. We do not want our ambitions for our children to be damaged by the forthcoming reductions in expenditure. We believe that a twin-track strategy is required. We should continue to protect children from the impact of cuts and secondly, concentrate on the systemic, organizational and value for money improvements, which can be achieved by a more innovative and imaginative approach. Examples are already underway in parts of Scotland but with considerable scope to transform our approach.