Introduction

1.1 The National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS) welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence for the Committee’s scrutiny of the draft budget. NPFS’ aim is to help ensure that every child maximizes their potential throughout their school life, and we were established in 2009 to achieve this aim following the creation of parent councils in 2006. NPFS has a membership consisting of representatives from each local authority area, and we work in partnership with national and local government and other relevant organisations to represent parents’ views at the national level. NPFS representatives contribute to a range of national working groups including the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board, Wood Commission and the GIRFEC National Implementation Support Group. We have also participated in leadership events to help agencies, schools and local authorities understand the needs of parents.

1.2 Our evidence focuses on parents’ experiences and features the views of parents as reported to us at our local and national events, focus groups, annual conferences, and through our local authority representatives, who keep us informed of issues that have been discussed at local authority-level parent forums. We have concentrated on the questions that are of most relevance to parents.

Questions

2.1 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?

2.2 As the evidence from Audit Scotland demonstrates, there is relatively little room for flexibility with regards to education budgets. The research shows that (in 2012/13) councils spent £4.8bn on education of which £3.8bn was allocated to primary and secondary schools. Of this, 68%, or around £2.6bn, went on staff costs. Significantly, councils’ spending went down by five percent in real terms from 2010/11 to 2012/2013.
Local authorities have dealt with this budget pressure through strategies such as employing fewer staff, reducing teacher training and cutting back on classroom time.

2.3 The evidence from our local authority representatives is that maintenance budgets are being reduced, fewer non-teaching staff are being employed and peripheral activities are facing cuts. English as an Additional Language support is being reduced, for example, yet there is a growing need for this in many communities across Scotland.¹ Some councils are struggling to provide adequate levels of Additional Support for Learning provision.

Pupils are likely to experience overcrowding, reduced support and a less pleasant learning environment as a result of these cuts. For example, reductions in the numbers of Classroom Assistants will have a negative impact on pupils who need additional support but will also affect other pupils as well, as teachers will have to give more attention to those needing extra help. NPFS local authority representatives have provided examples of situations such as special needs schools facing considerable overcrowding, resulting in gym halls having to be used as classrooms.

2.4 In terms of the likely impact of budget cuts on families, the reality is that we do not have a level playing field and cuts will be felt more keenly by the most disadvantaged communities. For example, schools are increasingly expecting parents to fundraise not just for add-ons but for essential items such as pencils and paper. These expectations place a heavy burden on disadvantaged communities where incomes are already tightly stretched.

2.5 It is not clear how the ambitions in the Raising Attainment for All programme can be fulfilled at the same time as cuts are being implemented. Budget cuts will be disproportionately felt by the most disadvantaged communities and in turn this will impact on pupil attainment. The danger is that inequalities will become entrenched. As the Audit Scotland report states, ‘councils […] need to understand the longer-term effect that budget reductions could have on efforts to raise attainment among pupils.’² However, the report also notes that it is not necessarily how much councils spend that makes the greatest difference to raising educational outcomes, but rather, how they spend it. Targeting spending on the schools and pupils who need it most is likely to have the greatest impact.³

2.6 In relation to supporting parental involvement, budget cuts potentially make the task of engaging with communities who have less social

¹ Count Us In, Education Scotland 2009  
² School education, Audit Scotland 2014, p.14  
³ Ibid, p.42
capital to draw upon and face barriers to participating in their child’s education even more challenging. Yet the evidence is that parental involvement in education is crucial in addressing the attainment gap – see 5.1 below for further discussion.

2.7 With regards to the Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce recommendations on developing and strengthening the links between schools, colleges and employers, the Scottish Government faces a considerable challenge to deliver on expectations when the funding allocated to Further Education (FE) has effectively undergone a cut. The planned spending for FE in 2015-16 is £526m, plus £16.6m for taking forward the Commission’s recommendations. In 2010-11, for example, funding for FE was £580m. However, colleges are now being expected to do more, including delivering on the Scottish Government promise of a place in education, work or training for all 16-19 year olds. The effect of this has been larger class sizes and students being unable to get into their first choice courses. There is no increase in funding for bursaries for the poorest students, and if parents are to be encouraged to support young people into vocational options, then this issue is significant.

3.1 Will the allocation to be provided via the 2015-16 Draft Budget be sufficient to enable local authorities to provide a quality education; meet all their statutory obligations in relation to schools; and deliver the Scottish Government’s national educational priorities?

3.2 Local authorities will face considerable challenges to deliver on the Scottish Government’s national educational priorities and provide a quality education. The draft budget has little to say about the continued implementation of Curriculum for Excellence and the roll-out of the new Highers and Advanced Higher qualifications, which are being delivered in addition to all the other ongoing commitments.

As was discussed in the Committee’s evidence sessions on the implementation of the National qualifications, if we are to truly realise the ambitions of Curriculum for Excellence in relation to personalisation and choice, and not fall back to one-size-fits-all, this needs to be resourced. We must ensure that there are sufficient numbers of secondary teachers and resources in order to offer pupils the full range of pathways.

3.3 There is a need to ensure that education policy ambitions are aligned with the reality of tightly-stretched budgets. For example, the 1+2 Language policy, which is due to be implemented in 2020 and the planning for which is currently underway, expects pupils to be competent in two additional languages by time they leave primary school. It requires one additional language to be taught from P1 and another from P5. It is doubtful as to whether the programme will deliver on expectations without a large investment in teacher training. Local authorities are responsible for ensuring primary teachers are provided
with suitable training, but the current situation is that some local authorities are only providing 4 or 5 days of language training. Individual schools will be free to choose from any of the 12 proposed languages as this will not be nationally prescribed. However there will be greater expense and difficulty in delivering some languages, e.g. Mandarin or Arabic, without a considerable investment in teacher training, all of which needs careful consideration and planning.

3.4 Nor are there details in the draft budget of any commitment to connect more schools to the new Fibre network. This is a particular issue for rural areas, as if they are unable to access a fast and reliable broadband connection, then pupils and their communities will face significant disadvantage.

4.1 *How are pupils, parents, teachers, and communities able to contribute to discussions on—*
   
   o the allocations that should be set out in the draft budget;
   
   o how these allocations should be spent on schools?

4.2 In reality there is little opportunity for parents, let alone pupils or communities, to have any sort of real influence over budget allocations. Between the block grant and the funding formulas used by Local Authorities, which are highly complex, there is very limited room for manoeuvre, and Local Authorities' strategies for engaging parents in these discussions are not always effective. The most engaged parents are motivated to participate through parent councils and Local Authority-level parent forums, but the issue of how best to support all parents to have their say remains. Budget discussions presume a high level of understanding and many parents feel they lack the expertise and/or time to contribute to financial debates of this nature. This issue is particularly pressing in relation to hardest-to-reach parents and those who are new to Scotland and who are unfamiliar the model of parent engagement in Scotland.

4.3 Parents’ involvement in budget decision-making should not be taken as tacit acceptance of cuts to staffing or other areas of the school budget, but realistically these are the issues that they will have to consider. NPFS' representatives have told us that when parent councils are engaged in budget discussions, they have suggested looking at areas such as teachers’ terms and conditions and pensions, but that Local Authorities will not address these issues as they are nationally set. As previously mentioned, education budgets are mainly comprised of staffing costs and of this around 70% goes on teachers’ salaries. This leaves local authorities with options such as cutting back on the number of classroom assistants, English as an Additional Language support and other areas, which there is an increasing need for and the loss of which may have a negative impact on addressing the attainment gap. Aside from staffing, this only leaves the possibility of cutting property costs such as facilities management, heating and maintenance. Procurement and working with other authorities are
areas that could potentially be looked at in greater depth. Options such as reducing the school week would be contentious, as parents would then face additional childcare costs. Many parents already have considerable difficulty in accessing suitable out of school care places. Local authorities are consulting with parents on out of school care as required by the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 but there is no duty on them to act on the findings.

4.4 It is essential that school budget issues are also considered in the light of the Wood Commission recommendations on greater flexibility in senior phase, as this has implications for staffing and the school week. Greater use of FE and business partnerships are likely to result in a reduction in time spent in class, so there is an option to look at whether maintaining teacher numbers is sustainable, certainly in the senior phase. Again, it is essential that parents and pupils are fully informed about these developments and are able to have their say on the proposals.

5.1 How will the draft budget advance the preventative spending agenda in relation to school spending?

5.2 A truly preventative approach would require investment and support for parental engagement, as there is a considerable and growing body of evidence about the importance of parental involvement in raising pupils’ attainment levels. Audit Scotland’s report lists parental involvement as one the key factors that play an important role in improving attainment (pp.32 and 35). However the report also notes that although there are more opportunities for parents to be involved in education, there are still a number of barriers to overcome. These include a lack of time, not receiving information or not knowing how to get involved, and a lack of opportunities to participate. This is a bigger issue than NPFS alone can hope to resolve, and as such we would argue that Scottish Government and Education Scotland need to do more to shift the balance of spending towards supporting parents to participate as partners in their child’s education, in partnership with NPFS and other relevant organisations. In many communities there is a need for considerable work to build capacity before parents feel they are at the stage where they can actively participate. Community capacity building for parents needs to tie in with the three year Community Learning and Development planning requirements for local authorities, as specified in the CLD Regulations 2013 and accompanying statutory guidance.

Conclusion

6.1 In summary, NPFS is concerned about the impact of budget cuts on pupils’ attainment and overall learning experience, and urges councils to look

4 See [http://engagingwithfamilies.co.uk/evidence/supporting-the-home-learning-environment/](http://engagingwithfamilies.co.uk/evidence/supporting-the-home-learning-environment/)
at Audit Scotland’s recommendations on the factors that have the greatest impact on improving educational outcomes. It is important that councils’ decisions to make short-term savings do not have a negative longer-term impact on pupils’ learning. Spending should be targeted on where the evidence tells us it is likely to have the greatest impact, and that means focusing on the schools and pupils who are most in need, and on the factors that can have the greatest influence on raising attainment. One of these factors is the involvement of parents in education, and we would support a shift in spending towards strategies for supporting parents’ involvement and overcoming barriers to their participation.

Barbara Schuler
Policy Manager, NPFS
policymanager@npfs.org.uk