Education and Culture Committee Scrutiny of the Draft Budget 2015-16 - Call for written evidence

Response from Voice the Union:

Questions

The Committee would like to hear your views on some or all of the following specific questions (please provide any other information you think would be relevant to the Committee’s work)—

- 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?

Voice: Our members believe there is insufficient money available now in schools to cover main priorities and any unplanned needs are likely to be difficult if not impossible to meet. They are experiencing the stripping out of support services to pupils with support needs. That in turn is meaning teaching staff are required to deliver that support and increasing their workloads. Supply and recruitment/retention is increasingly becoming an issue in many authorities and this will deteriorate further. Valuable work on school links are bound to suffer as schools increasingly have to concentrate on core activity – i.e teaching the pupils in a classroom.

Many schools are driven by the demands of mainstream pupils and are compromising the experience of pupils with support needs. Often this is difficult to identify unless you actually work in the schools themselves. This will have a negative impact on attainment and achievement for all pupils.

Teacher numbers are falling in many authorities and some are already altering the school week to make savings. Often authorities are reducing the number of hours teaching contact for pupils. Although children have a statutory right to the number of days education they can expect, that does not extend to the number of hours in those days and reductions in teaching hours for children will inevitably impact on attainment. Adequate delivery of the breadth and depth of the curriculum is under pressure in many areas.

- How should schools, local authorities and the Scottish Government be preparing to deal with these spending pressures?

Voice: A meaningful dialogue between schools, local authorities, Scottish Government and trade unions is required to examine priority areas and to review the effect of any spending decisions on wider policy aspirations. An example of that would be the implementation of 600 hours in nurseries where decisions over local implementation have led to poorer early intervention as the quality of the care has suffered with increased contact time and workload for nursery staff. Voice would submit that the combination of early years professionals and teaching staff deliver the best outcomes for pre-school children. Therefore, the removal of teachers from nurseries altogether further compromises the standard of education received by pre-school children.

Care must be taken before adding further compulsory areas to the curriculum as some schools will have difficulty delivering anything beyond what they currently can. Additional language teaching is an example in the primary sector.
• 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?

**Voice**: A difficult question. Given the present level of challenges faced by schools further fiscal constraint could compromise the ability to deliver a “quality” education. For example there is no statutory requirement to provide music tuition by instructors but doing so certainly contributes to the overall experience of the pupils. Yet it is non-statutory areas such as music instruction that are particularly vulnerable to further budget cuts. With reference to our answers earlier within this paper, we would submit that the ability to deliver the Scottish Government’s national educational priorities, for example, continues to be at risk given the impact of budgetary cuts already experienced to date.

• 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?

**Voice**: We have seen little if any evidence to support the view that the Framework has influenced economic decisions by Councils in education.

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

**Voice**: How does the Committee define “value for money”? Cheapest does not always mean best value. Again meaningful consultation and dialogue between the key stakeholders is important in driving best value for money.

• 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?

**Voice**: We remain to be convinced that such discussions meaningfully take place. And we think they need to extend beyond teaching staff to include all those working in education/schools.

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

**Voice**: Local authorities will continue to need to analyse spending across education to ensure that increasingly scarce resources are distributed in the most effective way to meet the needs of the pupils while at the same time exercising their duty of care towards the employees discharging the Councils statutory responsibilities for providing the education service. And they can only effectively do that by consulting with - and listening to - those staff and all professional associations.

Dougie Atkinson

Voice

22 October 2014