12 January 2016

Dear Convenor,

Thank you for your letter of 17 December 2015 in relation to the evidence Education Scotland provided to the Committee.

I welcome the opportunity to write to you given the recent publication of the National Improvement Framework, its interim report and OECD’s review – all of which assist in our pursuit of excellence and equity in Scottish education.

Outcomes for learners

Given the Agency was created in 2011 this has left us wondering how performance and outcomes have been monitored to date and we seek information from the Scottish Government on this.

Performance across Scottish education is monitored through a variety of measures. SQA attainment data is a key source of information through which we monitor performance and outcomes as are the annual Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN), international studies such as PISA and specifically commissioned reviews such as the recent OECD review. Alongside these sources we also consider measures of wider achievement such as ASDAN and Duke of Edinburgh awards. The National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education 2015 Interim Report, published on 6 January 2016, provides a helpful analysis pulling together a wide range of evidence sources. We intend to publish further reports annually reporting directly on the progress being made in addressing the priorities being set out in the National Improvement Framework.
With specific reference to Education Scotland, performance against its strategic objectives is regularly monitored through in-year reports to Scottish Government and regular meetings between the Agency Chief Executive and the Director General for Learning and Justice. Whilst the Chief Executive is designated as Accountable Officer for the Agency, the Director-General is Accountable Officer for the Education and Lifelong Learning portfolio as a whole and has a role, which is set out clearly in the Agency's Framework Document, in ensuring the work of the Agency is aligned appropriately with Ministers' priorities and wider expectations of public bodies. Education Scotland reports formally each year through its statutory Annual Accounts. The Agency also publishes an Annual Review of its performance each year (eg Annual Review 2014-15) which focuses on performance and the impact of its work.

It is expected that the Agency will also formally evaluate and report on its achievement of longer-term strategic objectives as set out in its Corporate Plan 2013 - 2016 as this planning period concludes and the next Corporate Plan is being established.

In-year budget transfers

How can Scottish Government strategic planning be improved in order that extensive in-year transfers are avoided and greater transparency and scrutiny is available?

It is entirely appropriate for some elements of funding to be provided through in-year allocations to Education Scotland, particularly for work which is time limited and operational in nature. Scottish Government seeks to plan effectively through ongoing dialogue with Education Scotland senior management and indeed, a forward look between Scottish Government policy colleagues and Education Scotland staff forms part of the Agency’s annual planning cycle. We continue to review the extent of in-year funding through the annual budgeting process.

Policy development

Can the Scottish Government explain how issues around accountability and control of policy development and implementation are managed and explain with which bodies responsibilities for each aspect lie?

The primary role in providing policy advice for Ministers sits within Scottish Government. One of the functions of Education Scotland is to provide Ministers, and the policy directorates that support them, with expert professional advice to inform this policy development process. As policies progress from early development towards implementation, Education Scotland typically takes a stronger role on behalf of Ministers. For example, the Chief Executive of Education Scotland chairs the Curriculum for Excellence Implementation Group, with the Agency heavily involved in supporting the system to deliver. In a few areas (eg youthwork and adult learning) Education Scotland provides the lead for policy advice directly to Ministers.
Does the Scottish Government have a view on how they see Education Scotland’s role complementing and not duplicating work occurring at local authority level?

Education Scotland is uniquely positioned to be able to take a national view on education matters based on first-hand experience of visiting establishments across all areas of the country. It is recognised that system improvement needs both local and national perspectives, for example in sharing good practice and collaborating across regional boundaries. The recent OECD review recognises the strength of this approach and the positive role Education Scotland has played in providing national support and challenge for educational improvement in Scotland.

Grant distribution

What measures are in place allowing the Scottish Government to monitor whether the transfer of responsibilities to Education Scotland has a positive effect on the delivery of education and educational support and resources for schools, and that the transfer provides value for money?

A detailed service level agreement covering the transfer of grants funding has been agreed between Scottish Government and Education Scotland.

Education Scotland will be establishing individual outcome agreements with each funded organisation with a focus on ensuring value for resource and impact.

ANGELA CONSTANCE