Dear Angela,

During the autumn, members of the Education and Culture Committee undertook a series of sessions looking at the spending decisions made and outcomes delivered by 5 public bodies within our remit, including Education Scotland.

Members agreed this work would feed into the Committee budget report and in addition they would consider producing a series of letters to the Scottish Government drawing attention to issues heard in evidence and seeking comment.

The Committee scrutiny had the stated purpose of allowing us to:

- Understand the added value each body provides;
- Question the progress each is making on their key strategic objectives;
- Understand how transparent each is in evaluating and reporting on the effectiveness of their work;
- Question how each contributes to the Scottish Government’s National performance Framework; and
- Potentially consider whether their funding levels and key strategic objectives are appropriate.

Each body was invited to provide oral evidence and, in advance, respond to a series of written questions which sought information on their key objectives and measures.

Written comment from key stakeholders and others was invited and assisted in our examination of each body.
The remainder of this letter covers matters we wish to bring to the attention of the Scottish Government, who provide the bulk of funding to each body. In so doing, we have highlighted where we consider the Scottish Government as the sponsors of these bodies could have views.

For information, we will in our legacy report to our successor Committee be recommending this work is repeated with each body on an annual basis. This will allow the Committee to build, through annual scrutiny, a better understanding of the operation of each body and to follow through on information received and activities undertaken from year to year.

In relation to Education Scotland we heard from senior management on 27 October in relation to the Education Framework Document and their Corporate Plan for 2013-16.

In addition to their written submission we invited comment from stakeholders and considered published audit reports. The responses to the questions asked, all written submissions, the official report of our meeting and a subsequent exchange of correspondence with Education Scotland seeking clarification of certain matters are all available here on our web site.

Having considered all the material the Committee would welcome the views of the Scottish Government in relation to the following areas.

Outcomes for learners

Education Scotland has according to its framework document “a unique combination of roles and capabilities, giving it the potential to blend guidance, support and constructive challenge in new ways which will increase the pace of improvement across the whole of the education system.”

In evidence we endeavoured to understand the performance outcomes of Education Scotland and were advised “it is difficult to disentangle what the role of any single contributor is in achieving improvement because there are many players in the education field” We were subsequently advised of on-going work to develop key outcomes and performance indicators.

Education Scotland told us that “fundamentally and ultimately, our main customer is the learner”. On this basis, we were interested in whether outcomes for learners have improved since Education Scotland was created. In responding, Dr Bill Maxwell referred to Education Scotland’s mission statement, which sets out its ambition for attainment to rise and for excellence and achievement for young people to rise across the Scottish system. He said, in both cases, “there is plenty of evidence that, overall, that is happening in the Scottish education system”. While he acknowledged the improvement was not uniquely down to the work of Education Scotland, he believed that the organisation made “a positive contribution to those overall improvements in Scottish education”.

2
Q 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.

In-year budget transfers

We heard a lot of financial information relating to the Education Scotland budget allocation and in particular the extent of in-year transfers they receive. Due to the scale of in-year transfers, the Scottish Government draft budget documents do not give a realistic account of Education Scotland’s requirement for funds.

While some in-year adjustment is always to be expected, the scale of in-year transfers to Education Scotland suggests that there may be issues with original budget setting. Large scale in-year transfers reduce transparency and reduce parliamentary scrutiny.

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

Policy Development

Education Scotland is Scotland’s ‘education improvement agency’. As part of its role, Education Scotland provides advice and expertise to the Scottish Government on issues, stating its “contribution to informing policy development continues to grow”. Dr Bill Maxwell gave some specific examples—

“Looking beyond CFE, “Teaching Scotland’s Future: Report of a review of teacher education in Scotland” and the developing the young workforce strategy, I could cite many other examples, from our role in developing and implementing the new youth strategy and the adult learning statement of ambition to more specific areas such as work on Gaelic education and the Scots language and contributing to ministerial sub-groups on child sexual exploitation.”

At the same time, local authorities have responsibility for most matters relating to the delivery of education. The involvement of “many players”, including the Scottish Government in matters of policy, leaves us with questions around how control and accountability of educational policy is being managed and undertaken efficiently and effectively.

Q 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?
Q 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?

Grant distribution

In evidence we heard that a substantial amount of grant distribution work is likely to be transferred to Education Scotland from the Scottish Government Learning Directorate, which would increase the total transfer of grant responsibilities to around £9m from April 2016.

In its written submission to us, Education Scotland explained the rationale for the additional transfer of responsibilities—

“Scottish Government’s Learning Directorate and Education Scotland have agreed that elements of work currently carried out by Learning Directorate be transferred to Education Scotland where the work involved is primarily focused on the delivery of education and educational support and resources for schools within the framework of Curriculum for Excellence. This is a logical and sensible brigading of delivery focused work and will result in a better overall package of support for learners and teachers.”

Q 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?

Given this work is undertaken as part of our work in scrutinising the Scottish Government budget it would be helpful to receive a response to the questions by Thursday 14 January 2016.

Yours sincerely

STEWART MAXWELL MSP
CONVENER