Dear Ms Boyd

I am writing to highlight the concern of the Education and Skills Committee at the refusal of your education authority to accommodate a meeting with one of our members, Fulton MacGregor MSP as part of the Committee’s scrutiny of the role of education authorities. My understanding is that a proposed meeting between teachers from a number of schools was refused by the authority. I understand the meeting was prevented at education authority level and I would very much appreciate further details as to why this occurred. I attach an extract of the Official Report of the Committee meeting on 14th December where this matter was raised with COSLA and SLGP.

Free and frank information from frontline staff is vital in enabling the Committee to scrutinise the Government, its agencies and local authorities effectively. A recent finding from the Royal Society of Edinburgh advice paper on the Governance Review states: *There is concern that a culture of compliance and conformity in Scottish education inhibits head teachers and teachers from expressing critical and independent views.* The value of these, sometimes hard to access, independent views was borne out in the Committee’s recent scrutiny of the Scottish Qualifications Authority for example. I was interested to note that a good number of teachers chose to make anonymous submissions in order to express themselves with candour.

Lastly the Committee is extremely understanding of the time pressures on teachers and there is no suggestion that the Committee would seek to take away from teaching time or other priorities to arrange meetings. Therefore it would be entirely legitimate, at teacher/school level as opposed to education authority level, for a meeting to be impossible to arrange due to pressure on teachers.
I would appreciate a response at your earliest opportunity to provide your perspective on this matter. Please note that, as is standard practice, the Committee will make this letter and your response public on its website.

Yours sincerely

JAMES DORNAN MSP
CONVENER
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):
I thank the witnesses for coming in. I will start off with quite a simple question. For the committee meeting, we were asked to speak to a school in our constituency. Do you think that local authorities should engage with Parliament committee processes such as this?

Councillor Primrose:
It is critical—I said that in my opening statement. We are not far apart—we are all politicians to a greater or lesser extent—and, as a society, we want the same thing, so it is critical that local authorities engage. We have to have a free and open discussion. I said at a national conference that I spoke at that we sometimes get too bogged down in the things on which we do not agree. I have tried very hard to get away from discussing teacher numbers, for example, because we just will not agree on the matter. However, there is no point in throwing the baby out with the bathwater; we have to accept the fact that we will not agree on the issue, park it and move on.

I am in a fortunate position because, through my COSLA job and through East Ayrshire Council, I have regular meetings with parliamentarians. It is important that the local authority has a voice because we want exactly the same thing, and committee meetings such as this are an ideal opportunity.

Fulton MacGregor:
I am really glad that you answered that so positively because, as some of my committee colleagues know, I had real difficulty getting North Lanarkshire Council to agree to its teachers speaking to me about today's committee meeting, although we had a line of questioning that the clerks sent to the local authorities in advance, so that it was clear and transparent for them. The difficulty came as a surprise to me because I have a great working relationship with the schools in North Lanarkshire. I set up a meeting with them but as soon as the political figures—the education convener—became involved, tremendous barriers were put up and the meeting did not happen. Do you have any idea why North Lanarkshire Council acted in such a manner?

Councillor Primrose:
I could not answer on behalf of North Lanarkshire Council. I am very fortunate in that I know all of my teachers and have a very good relationship with them, so I have never encountered that. I am not sure that we could give you a definitive answer on the specific question of North Lanarkshire.

Jane O'Donnell:
No; just to be clear, I do not think that COSLA could comment on that. However, our position is that we would encourage parliamentarians to liaise with their communities in the same way as we would expect elected members to do. We offer apologies that that happened—I am sure that it is a one-off incident; it is certainly not a position taken across local government.

Fulton MacGregor:
I reiterate that it is important to have that relationship. I was looking to speak to teaching staff in high schools so that I could come to the committee prepared to highlight the concerns of teachers in my constituency, and I feel really
disappointed that that did not happen. The schools in the area do a fantastic job, working—as we have discussed and as other members have said—in difficult circumstances. I have a lot of faith in headteachers.

That brings me to my next line of questioning. Should headteachers have more say in the delivery of education, given the plans, and will that help to meet the attainment gap challenges? I address that to Councillor Henry.

Councillor Henry:
Speaking for my own authority as well as the SLGP authorities, I think that it is right that our headteachers have the greatest say—in fact, the say—on learning and teaching in their schools. As a former headteacher myself, I consider headteachers to be the leaders of learning—that is what they want to do.

Councillor Primrose:
Could I say something, very quickly, about Fulton MacGregor’s first question?

The Convener:
Yes.

Councillor Primrose:
I was fortunate to be at one of the North Lanarkshire schools recently with Mr Hepburn and Mr Swinney, as part of DYW, and we could not have been made more welcome, to be honest. I think that maybe Fulton MacGregor caught them on a bad day.

I would agree with what Councillor Henry has—

The Convener:
Can I just come in there? To be fair, the point that Mr MacGregor made was not about the schools, because his relationship with them has been excellent.

Councillor Primrose:
I beg your pardon.

The Convener:
His point was about the education authority and the fact that it stopped him from going to the school, so those are two different points, Councillor Primrose.

Councillor Primrose:
Okay, I take that on board.