Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) response to Scottish Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee panel sessions on Evidence Base for Education Governance Reforms

1. The RSE is pleased to have been invited to nominate RSE representatives to take part in panel sessions that will discuss the evidence base for the Scottish Government’s education governance reforms on 29th November and 6th December. As the RSE is in the process of preparing its response to the Scottish Government’s consultation, *Empowering Schools: The Provisions of the Education (Scotland) Bill*, we have sought to focus this short submission for the Committee on key aspects of the reforms. We have included links to relevant RSE advice papers and discussion reports at the end of this response.

2. There is a need to consider to what extent the Government’s reforms will lead to improved outcomes for young people, especially for disadvantaged learners. Ultimately, meeting the needs of learners must be the key success criterion of any school reform.

Support for Schools

3. In its response to the original consultation in January 2017, the RSE was concerned that the Government had adopted a pre-determined commitment to establish the regional improvement collaboratives (RICs) without making clear their purpose and in the absence of presenting evidence of their need. *Next Steps*, published in the summer, presented a highly centralised structure for the RICs, in which they would be led by a Scottish Government-appointed regional director, who in turn would be accountable to the Chief Executive of Education Scotland. This would have been at odds with the thrust of the proposals which seek to empower schools by devolving greater decision-making powers to them. The RSE therefore welcomed the joint steering group work undertaken by national and local government partners that resulted in agreement among the parties about the principles that should underpin the RICs. We welcome the confirmation that the new leads of the regional collaboratives have been appointed by the local authority groupings and are to be mainly accountable to the authorities, while reporting on some matters to the Chief Inspector of Education.

4. It will be crucially important that schools are able to feed-in views on how the collaboratives should operate. Schools will need to believe that the collaboratives are supporting their needs, rather than imposing the views of central and local government organisations.
5. The RSE is particularly pleased that the report of the steering group recognises the importance of planning for independent evaluation from the outset to ascertain the impact of the collaboratives on learner outcomes. This will of course require the identification of baseline data, and will have implications for data collection.

6. It will of course be important to learn from the experiences of existing regional collaboratives, of which the Northern Alliance is the most long established.

**Headteachers’ Charter**

7. Key questions include: 1) *What decisions about learning are currently not made at school level but should be; and 2) how the proposed governance changes will facilitate decision-making at the school level.*

8. The Government’s consultation, *Empowering Schools*, makes clear the intention to give headteachers significant new responsibilities over staff structures, staff budget and recruitment within their schools. Local authorities will remain the employers of school staff, and headteachers will be accountable to the local authority for the decisions they make in relation to staffing and budget. While it is likely that many head teachers will welcome greater responsibilities for staffing, there is a need to consider how the arrangements will work in practice, given that tensions could arise between headteachers’ views and those of the local authority. It will also be necessary to consider whether the retention of national agreements relating to teacher numbers, and teachers’ pay and conditions will inhibit headteachers’ decision-making. It will be important to explore to what extent the proposal that local authorities will no longer be required to prepare local improvement plans could impact on local authorities’ democratic accountability.

9. Given the significant increase in decisions to be taken at school level, consideration needs to be given to the governance structure at this level. There is, for example, no suggestion that the headteacher and senior staff should be accountable to a board of governors or similar governance group. While the headteacher will remain accountable to the local authority in a somewhat diminished manner, the importance of the decisions to be delegated to school level suggests the need for a new accountability mechanism at a more local level.

10. It would be useful to explore to what extent the proposals cater for the different circumstances of primary and secondary heads. In contrast to secondary schools, primaries have very few promoted posts and very little flexibility to allocate teacher time once the basic need to put a teacher in front of every class has been met.

11. School leaders will need clarity on the support they can expect to receive to enable them to embrace greater decision-making responsibilities. While the consultation mentions that schools should be able to access support from business managers, the budgetary implications of this and other aspects of the reforms are unclear.
Measuring the Attainment Gap

12. The RSE has recently submitted a response to the Scottish Government on its proposals for measuring the attainment gap. Valid and reliable assessments can only be made if there are appropriate measurement tools and data. The RSE is concerned that the Government’s intention to use SIMD, which is an area-based measure, for identifying the most and least disadvantaged young people could undermine its commitments on closing the attainment gap. SIMD is incapable of providing the individual-level data required. SIMD cannot distinguish between deprived and non-deprived learners living in areas classified as low/high deprivation. It would therefore not be possible to determine to what extent any improvement in attainment in the most deprived areas is actually as a result of attainment improving among the most deprived learners, as opposed to the significant minority of non-deprived learners who live in these areas. The RSE recommends that the Government reflect further on potential measurement tools, rather than risk implementing unsuitable approaches.

Interventions aimed at closing the attainment gap

13. Schools and practitioners need to be able to access evidence-based advice on effective interventions for closing the attainment gap i.e. ‘what works’. Interventions for Equity was established by Education Scotland to support schools deploy their Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) as effectively as possible. However, the evidence base and criteria for the selection of interventions showcased is unclear, as is whether they have been subject to independent evaluation. It is crucially important that this is addressed to ensure that interventions are underpinned by empirical evidence, including evidence of impact. The Scottish Government should consider how its Education Research Strategy, which has as its focus the National Improvement Framework (NIF), can be used support these developments.

14. Additionally, it would seem timely to review the operation of the PEF with a view to learning lessons and informing the increased devolution of spending responsibilities to schools that is envisaged by Empowering Schools.

15. It will also be important to consider the processes for translating research into practice. Evidence shows that an influential factor on increasing research impact is the personal contact and dialogue between researchers and users of research. This emphasises the need to support active engagement between researchers and practitioners.

Role of parents

16. Parental engagement is crucial to making progress on improving the attainment of disadvantaged learners. However, it remains uncertain how changes in
school governance will secure the kind of parental engagement that helps to raise standards, especially among disadvantaged children.

Processes of change

17. The ambitious programme of school governance reform must take account of the capacity of the system to respond. This will require a strategic approach taking account of other related major developments including the National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan, Curriculum for Excellence and closing the attainment gap developments, among others. Consideration will need to be given to processes for bringing about transformative change in complex systems. While targets need to be ambitious, they also need to be realistic and in line with the capacity of the system to respond. There is a need to ensure widespread engagement, particularly extending beyond those bodies responsible for leading the reforms. It will be particularly important to seek the input of schools, teachers, parents and learners. Research and evaluation need to feature from the outset of the reforms to be able to develop a proper understanding of what is happening, and why.

Links to relevant RSE advice papers


The Royal Society of Edinburgh

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ADDENDUM

After the meeting on 29 November 2017, Mr Bloomer was asked to expand on comments he made regarding the clarity of the Scottish Government’s consultation on the Education (Scotland) Bill (Official Report cols 28/29). On 5 December 2017 Mr Bloomer responded:

I was referring primarily to the lines of accountability for headteachers.

The consultation paper makes clear – quite rightly in my view – that headteachers decisions on matters of curriculum and staffing are not subject to being overturned by the local authority. It also states – again, in my view, correctly – that the RICs are there to provide support and are not a new tier of governance. At the same time, local authorities will remain the employers of headteachers. All this leaves in doubt who, if anyone, heads are accountable to in relation to key educational decisions. I can see how they are accountable to chief education officers in matters of conduct and ‘pay and rations’ issues, but not curriculum or staffing.

This seems to me to be confusing. Indeed, there seems to be a gap in the accountability arrangements. This could be filled by having in place a local accountability structure, such as an empowered school council. However, the paper does not mention any such mechanism.