

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Education reform

Visits, meetings and focus groups, Peterhead 29 January 2018

Introduction

The Education and Skills Committee visited Peterhead on 29 January 2018. It undertook a series of visits and meetings, which were largely focused on the Scottish Government's proposed education reforms. During the visit, the Committee:

- visited Peterhead Academy, where members met the Senior Leadership Team, groups of teachers and groups of young people;
- held focus groups with headteachers from across Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City;
- held a formal meeting with representatives of Moray Council and Aberdeenshire Council to discuss the reforms and the role of the Northern Alliance; and
- held discussion groups with young people, parents and teachers who attended the formal meeting.

Notes of all of the informal meetings were taken and can be found below.

The Official Report can be found here:

<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=11338&mode=pdf>

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Visit to Peterhead Academy

Senior leadership team & Primary heads

Committee members met with head teachers and promoted staff from the area.

What do you think the main positives of the proposed reforms would be?

Teachers would welcome the flexibility to customise provision, although there was scepticism about the extent to which this would really be possible given Education Scotland's expectations of the breadth of curriculum to be delivered in primary schools. The example was given of "de-cluttering" the primary curriculum and giving much more focus to literacy and numeracy in primary school, in order to impact on the attainment gap in secondary.

One teacher thought the Charter could provide more opportunity, but like others, was concerned it would mean additional work. Another thought this would depend on the type and amount of responsibility that would be devolved. Would it, for example, include making decisions about property?

What sort of support would your school need in bringing in the reforms, and when do you think your school would be in a position to make changes (the earliest changes will take place will be into 2019)

The main block to the reforms succeeding was the difficulty in finding and retaining teachers. Teachers need the time to consider and implement the reforms. Various pressures in education caused largely by constant change over recent years, means that teachers don't have the capacity to take on any more reform.

One teacher mentioned advertising a vacancy three times and still not being able to fill it. As a result, senior managers are doing more class cover, and so have less time to develop the school. Cuts elsewhere also impact on teaching: While they rely on partner agencies (health (particularly children's mental health), social work, third sector) to assist in supporting vulnerable pupils, cuts to these agencies mean that this support is harder to find. Others mentioned difficulties to ensuring class cover caused by 'McCrone hours.'

Asked about improving recruitment, one teacher suggested allowing support staff to do an initial teacher education course while still working as support staff in order to make training more affordable. The £5,000 'preference waiver payment' was discussed (where student teachers agree to do their probation year anywhere in Scotland). It was suggested that while this got probationers up from the central belt, they didn't tend to stay at the end of the year.

What will the different impacts of the reforms be on different types of schools (for example primary, secondary, special education schools)

Flexibility over staffing structures will have less of an impact in very small schools where there are fewer possible configurations.

Small schools (generally primaries) won't have the senior management structure to support the head teacher in their extra management responsibilities. There was a suggestion that a group of schools could pool resources to employ a business manager.

Do you consider the reforms will contribute to closing the attainment gap, and are there other measures you would also suggest?

Asked whether the proposals were teachers' priority for reform, the group suggested that issues around recruitment, pay and conditions were more pressing. Suggestions for addressing the attainment gap included; a greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy in primary, more consideration of the transition from early learning to primary and from primary to secondary.

What do you think of the head teachers charter proposals (more control over CfE decisions, staffing, funding etc.)?

There was concern that the devolution of more decision making to head teachers would increase workload. While some head teachers said they already had flexibility to make decisions, the group acknowledged a difference in approach between the two local authorities represented.

There was uncertainty about what the Charter would mean for the level of support available at local authority level. Some thought the Regional Collaborative would be too 'distant' from the school level.

Asked what additional powers they would like, the group referred to decisions over staffing. A couple gave the example of wanting to employ several additional support assistants instead of an additional support needs teacher, but they were constrained by the local authority to employ a teacher.

One teacher said that in her area, the local authority dictated which subjects are included in which school faculties. (Again, this is something that appears to differ between authorities).

There was concern that additional responsibilities resulting from the Charter might discourage people from applying to become head teachers.

What do you think increased parental and community involvement in schools should look like?

The general feeling of the group was that it is very difficult to extend parental involvement beyond a few who were always interested. One teacher noted that they had used PEF money for a breakfast club, but parents wouldn't sign their children up for it. A head teacher commented that while you can keep parents informed of what is happening you "can't force them through the door." There was general agreement

that communication with parents is much easier now because of e-mail and social media.

Do you have any views on the proposal to create the Education Workforce Council for Scotland that would replace the GTCS?

There were strong views against replacing the GTCS, although a workforce council for support staff could be useful.

Faculty Heads

James Dornan, MSP, Johann Lamont, MSP and Richard Lochhead MSP met four faculty heads.

What do you think the main positives of the proposed reforms would be?

The teachers found it difficult to identify a clear rationale for the proposals and they felt that the consultation paper lacked detail. The reforms would be good in an ideal world, but they considered it would be difficult in the context of recruitment difficulties and constant curricular change. Asked about the causes of the recruitment difficulties, teachers referred to the public's perception of the role. It was felt that teaching doesn't have a good reputation compared to, for example, nurses.

It was felt that teachers trained in the north east would be more likely to stay in the north east. Some referred to student teachers struggling with course workload and dropping out. It was suggested that changes to the induction scheme might also help. At the moment, a student teacher puts down five options or, if they are willing to work anywhere in Scotland they get a 'preference waiver fee'. As the 5 surrounding local authorities cover such a large area, students in the north east might as well opt to do their induction anywhere and get the fee.

What sort of support would your school need in bringing in the reforms, and when do you think your school would be in a position to make changes (the earliest changes will take place will be into 2019)

Asked about their priorities for change, the teachers referred to the school building which doesn't have adequate space for a staff room.

What will the different impacts of the reforms be on different types of schools (for example primary, secondary, special education schools?)

As in other groups, the capacity of primary school head teachers to take on additional responsibility was queried – given they do not have a senior leadership team.

What would you want the new regional improvement collaboratives of education authorities to do for your school or education in your area (ideas include assisting information sharing and communication between authorities and also between schools)

The teachers thought it would be impossible for a single improvement plan to cover the whole Northern Alliance area in any meaningful way, and so opposed the proposal to remove the local authority plan. They had had little information about the work of the Northern Alliance. There was a view that, despite this being a consultation, the Collaboratives had already been established and regional leads appointed. There was concern that the Collaboratives could be another layer of administration. At the moment, teachers meet voluntarily to share ideas – Facebook

groups were mentioned - but they were uncomfortable with collaboration becoming a requirement.

What do you think of the headteachers charter proposals (more control over CfE decisions, staffing, funding etc.)?

There was concern about the level of responsibility that head teachers would have over staffing and the reduction in support from the local authority. It was felt that the Northern Alliance was too large an area to replace that support. There was mention of Grampian Region as being a more manageable size than the Northern Alliance.

However, there were some areas where the lack of head teacher decision making was felt – in particular in relation to procurement. At the moment all procurement decisions need to go through a particular local authority system which can result in items being bought at a higher price. It was a particular issue with the more specialist equipment and resources needed as these tended not to be stocked by the local authority's preferred suppliers.

The teachers felt that the school already had responsibility for how CfE was implemented in their school, and responsibility for improvement, so were unclear what the charter would add.

Devolving decision making to the head teacher is fine if the head teacher is competent, but not all are. They would prefer that the charter reflected a broader approach to leadership and reflected a shared role between head teachers and other school staff.

There was some discussion of how the faculty system had led to a dilution of subject specialism. While they could determine the structure of the faculties at a school level (in contrast to some others the Committee spoke to), there was a feeling that faculties had led to a loss of rigour and clarity in specific subject planning. This was because in a faculty system there wasn't a promoted post for every subject specialism.

What do you think increased parental and community involvement in schools should look like?

Parental involvement is a challenge, although web and social media has made it easier. The parental involvement toolkit on the Education Scotland website was praised, but it was difficult to find the time to carry out the tasks suggested.

Do you have any views on the proposal to create the Education Workforce Council for Scotland that would replace the GTCS?

All four teachers opposed this proposal, considering that it would erode their professional standing. They also referred to relatively recent changes including the requirements for the professional update and were wary of more change so soon.

ASN and Guidance Teachers

James Dornan, MSP, Johann Lamont, MSP and Richard Lochhead MSP met two guidance teachers and two additional support needs teachers.

What do you think the main positives of the proposed reforms would be?

They welcomed reforms that would give them the freedom to adapt the curriculum to suit their own pupils' needs, but they thought they could already do this to some extent. They would also welcome more flexibility in budgets. In the budgets they worked with, there was considerable ring-fencing of funds. It would be good to be able to decide to employ support workers rather than an ASN teacher.

After the significant changes that have been happening in education over the last ten years and the difficulties in recruiting teachers (which they considered the most significant issue), they were wary of yet more change. Because of staff shortages it is easier for people to move around between posts and so their impression was that staff turnover is increasing.

What will the different impacts of the reforms be on different types of schools (for example primary, secondary, special education schools)

The impact will be greater on primary head teachers as they don't have a senior leadership team to assist them and they also have a teaching commitment. It was important to recognise the differences between primary schools – they can vary from 500 to 11 pupils.

Do you consider the reforms will contribute to closing the attainment gap, and are there other measures you would also suggest?

The group commented that if the policy aim is to close the attainment gap then there are other areas of policy that would be more important. These would include the home learning environment, early learning and early intervention. It was noted that parents in more advantaged families could afford to buy 'how to pass' books, pay for private tutors, and were maybe more able to help their children with their school work. All this created a significant advantage in attainment.

Other areas that needed attention included addressing cyber-bullying and children's mental health. They had had a social worker attached to the school, but the focus was on looked after children, whereas the need for support affected a much wider group of young people. It can be a particular problem where a young person 'falls between' children and families services and adult services.

They thought a community mental health nurse available to the school would be very helpful in addressing these issues.

What would you want the new regional improvement collaboratives of education authorities to do for your school or education in your area (ideas include assisting information sharing and communication between authorities and also between schools)

The group was unaware of the Northern Alliance prior to reading the background papers for this meeting. There was concern about the size of the area covered by the Northern Alliance, and how strategic decisions made at that level would impact on individual schools and take account of the diverse needs across the region. There was also concern about how regional level information would be communicated – it would need to be more than sending out emails that might get ‘lost’ in the vast number of emails teachers receive.

How do you think your role and the role of your education authority might change as a result of the head teachers’ charter?

The head teachers’ role would change if they took on additional responsibility, particularly in the primary sector as they have no support at the moment.

What do you think increased parental and community involvement in schools should look like?

The group agreed that more parental involvement is needed, especially to address the attainment gap. However this was difficult to achieve despite considerable effort being made. In common with other groups, it was agreed that social media made communication with parents much easier. The area had a large number of families where English was a second language, and these parents could be ‘hard to reach’ because of working patterns, different attitudes to school involvement as well as language difficulties.

Do you have any views on the proposal to create the Education Workforce Council for Scotland that would replace the GTCS?

The group noted the professional update had only implemented relatively recently – it should be left to bed in, rather than changing the organisation. The group did see value in common core principles that all education staff would cover in their training, but this does not necessarily mean they needed the same regulatory body.

S1-S3 students

Q1 What's your favourite thing about school?

Most answers were around the teachers being friendly and approachable and willing to stay back after school to help students with any problems whether personal, careers advice or studies related.

Q2 What one thing could improve school for you?

“More teachers” was the general response and this theme came up a number of times during the discussion. There are classes where teachers that are not specialists in that subject are covering classes including where videos are shown or ‘homework’ set as opposed to more interactive lessons. Two of the nine students suggested this was impacting on their education and career potential.

Behaviour of pupils was also raised as an issue by two students.

Q3 Do you have a voice in how the school is run?

The pupil council has pupils elected from each class on it and guidance teachers and the headteacher come to their meetings to ensure they are listened to. Sometimes ideas don't always become a reality and sometimes classes don't generate that many ideas, when asked for an example of an idea that students had suggested that had been taken forward from the pupils by the school none of the students could think of one.

Q4 How could you have more of a say?

One idea was to send surveys/polls on ideas about the school electronically since almost all the senior students have phones now.

Q5 How involved are parents in your school?

There's a parent/staff association and also a survey but the general suggestion was that unless they follow the school on Facebook then they are unlikely to know a lot about school life. One idea was a school open day where parents could come in, walk around and ask questions. A number of students suggested they did not necessarily want parents more involved in school life.

There was a suggestion that the parent staff association was perhaps the more affluent parents and that parents living in certain areas or in certain jobs would not be able to get to the meeting easily. An idea was to have the PSA at local places that would be easier to get to than the school.

Q6 How involved is the wider community in school life?

There were a number of suggestions that some students generate a reputation and that acts as a deterrent for community involvement. Ideas included going out to sing carols at Christmas, beach cleans and working at homeless shelters to improve

interaction and having more community events in the school. Another idea was getting the local radio station to interview students. All the students had had the opportunity to do local work placements and these seemed to be positive experiences.

Q7 What if pupils were involved in recruiting teachers?

One suggestion was that sixth years that had been through the whole school so knew what teachers the school needed could be part of the interview process. One of the nine students was interested in becoming a teacher.

Q8 What's the most important thing you would want to highlight from the discussion?

The need for more teachers was highlighted again by most of the group. In addition an improved understanding of LGBTI issues was discussed as homophobia was an issue. One suggestion from one of the MSPs was to look at the school being part of LGBT charter work. One student suggested they were not taught about equalities issues and they would like to have PSE lessons that cover that. There was a lot of support for better PSE lessons and students suggested they did not get much of a say as to what featured in PSE lessons.

S4-S6 students

Q1 What is the best thing about school life?

As with the previous group support from the teachers was highlighted by the whole group for studies support and mental health support including staying on late to support students. There are supported studies classes for different topics which were described as valuable by the group. One student said the pupil teacher relationships 'make the difference'.

Q2 What one thing could be improved?

The number of teachers was raised with students suggested time in lessons is wasted as there are not specialists teaching the correct subjects (English and maths were mentioned). One student's family had hired a private tutor for English studies and others suggested a number of pupils that could afford to get tutors.

When asked what other subjects were unavailable to study answers included that two students leaving to go to college as the school could not provide subjects. Examples given were that IT, electronics and economics were not available.

Q3 How involved are you in the running of your school?

One student was part of Pupil Voice where students across the education authority meet the Director of Education periodically. One student was part of the pupil council and most of the nine were prefects. It was suggested your voice was heard more within the school in 4th year and above, when asked for an example of an idea that students had suggested that had been taken forward from the pupils by the school none of the students could think of one.

Q4 How involved is the community with the school?

There were suggestions that the media gives the school a bad write up but that the school is involved in positive initiatives including a youth philanthropy initiative which had had a positive impact on pupils and the cause.

Q5 Are there areas where you would like more of a say?

The 'Highers timescales are too squashed' was a comment that received some support in the group. Another comment was that the pressure for 4 Highers in one year is too much. The discussion moved on to pathways after school and one student suggested in S4 pupils who leave are all encouraged towards college and then there is pressure to go to university if you stay on to sixth year.

Q6 How involved are parents and guardians in schools and what role could they play?

The students that answered suggested not much involvement but they were kept informed with lots of texts and on Facebook. When asked whether there was a parent teacher association there was not much awareness of it in the group and one

student suggested the involvement they want from their parents is 'just to support me at home.'

Q7 Do you get a say in the content of PSE classes?

They all agreed they do not have a say with one suggesting they are given leaflets and shown dated videos and students find guidance lessons a waste of time with students looking at their phones throughout. Suggestions of what could be covered included taxes / bills / house buying and other life skills. When asked if mental health was discussed one student answered that the lessons had touched on it. When asked whether sex education included consent issues the whole group agreed the lessons did not. The Committee were surprised to learn that sex education still involved being taught how to put a condom on over a banana. LGBT issues were also mentioned as lacking and sexual harassment was described as an issue only known about from social media. CV / interview skills and college application forms had received a focus. A number of students suggested homophobia and bullying was an issue and that if the lessons were interactive and enabled open discussion then issues like that could be addressed.

Q8 Is there anything else you would like to raise?

The number of teachers and the need for more was discussed, and English and maths were specifically raised (as above). One student suggested that a new school building would attract more new teachers. Another suggested a lack of staff was demotivating for the other teachers and the students. Another said that every area needs cover to 'get by' and help students get the grades they want.

Resources (other than teachers) were also raised with one student suggesting the school had very little funding available for stationary and support documents. One student mentioned students had to pay for their jotters and another suggested that they had to pay for class notes that they need for their National 5 qualifications which impacted on those that could not afford it. One student suggested jotters are not available in English classes and students are told to buy their own paper. Another student said when the need to pay for these resources is raised in class it embarrasses students that perhaps cannot afford it.

Headteacher and Deputy Head Focus Groups

Headteacher/Deputy focus group 1

James Dornan MSP and Richard Lochhead MSP heard from a group of head and deputy head teachers.

What do you think the main positives of the proposed reforms would be?

One contributor described the aims overall as laudable, but they were not convinced a Charter was necessary as they were already doing a lot of the things mentioned in it. There was a concern that the reforms would lead to head teachers spending more time on administration issues and that this would take them away from developing teaching and learning.

The idea of strengthening cluster working was considered a positive.

The idea of the Collaboratives as a 'bank of expertise' was also welcomed however there was resistance to the idea of anything being imposed on schools. They should be able to choose how and when to draw on the Collaborative.

Differences between local authorities were noted.

Currently local authorities had different staffing formulae, which means different schools with the same numbers of pupils and with comparable needs can have very different budgets. One head teacher considered that if the reforms resulted in more equitable treatment of school budgets then this would be a positive thing. Another head teacher said that he needed to use some of his staffing budget for other things in order to run the school.

One head teacher said that she could already decide how to implement CfE and can spend resources allocated to the school, within the 'supportive framework' of the local authority. Another said that their local authority 'clawed back' any unspent budget and does not give head teachers much freedom to decide how to spend their budget. Another said that she could decide whether to employ ASN support assistants or an ASN teacher.

With these reforms, teachers were unclear whether the local authority would still be able to provide the same level of support. There was reference to the Scottish Government consultation on funding which would not report until the summer. Some felt that it was difficult to assess these governance proposals without knowing what might be proposed about school funding. The more general issue of resources was considered integral to these reforms.

Local authority cuts were discussed. Cuts to central staff, including to local authority HR staff has an impact on head teachers as their support from the centre is diminished. It was felt that some HR tasks that would have been carried out by central HR staff were now being passed over to schools.

What sort of support would your school need in bringing in the reforms, and when do you think your school would be in a position to make changes (the earliest changes will take place will be into 2019)

Recruitment difficulties were discussed. Suggestions included incentive payments to teach in the north east and council tax discounts for teachers. Difficulties in arranging McCrone cover and supply cover were raised.

What will the different impacts of the reforms be on different types of schools (for example primary, secondary, special education schools?)

Secondary schools have extra capacity for management and administration that doesn't exist at primary.

Do you consider the reforms will contribute to closing the attainment gap, and are there other measures you would also suggest?

Greater parental involvement could have a huge impact on the attainment gap. However, it was felt that most of the issues with the attainment gap were beyond the school, and related to the wellbeing of the child. In this regard the consultation should take account of Community Learning and Development. One teacher referred to buying in services from the third sector – for example Barnardo's and SACRO. Now there is PEF money there was a worry about third sector organisations charging for services previously provided for free. Some were of the view that PEF money should be targeted at the early years and primary as a preventative measure. Some had found the local authority advice confusing in terms of what PEF could be spent on. Examples of PEF spending given by the group included; nurture groups, projects run by SACRO and by the local football club.

Some schools had wanted to employ ASN teachers, social workers, home-school link workers as part of tackling the attainment gap but there were none to recruit.

Schools implement GIRFEC in partnership with others, and this has potential to address the attainment gap.

What would you want the new regional improvement collaboratives of education authorities to do for your school or education in your area (ideas include assisting information sharing and communication between authorities and also between schools)

There was concern that the Collaboratives would be too distant to provide the right level of support. While the Collaborative might be able to provide strategic support, the support required was often at a more detailed level. There was concern about the scale of the Collaborative and its diversity in including 1 city and 7 rural authorities covering a vast geographical area.

Group members were aware of the basic idea of the Northern Alliance, but didn't feel the Collaborative had impacted very much on their day to day practice. There was a suggestion that it had been more active in relation to the primary curriculum. They were aware of and enthusiastic about the 'Emergent Literacy' programme that was

being implemented through the Alliance. A major strength of this is that schools can volunteer to participate and can take it at their own pace. It isn't imposed. Others felt that a duty to collaborate would be a positive.

What do you think of the headteachers charter proposals (more control over CfE decisions, staffing, funding etc)?

There was a general view that the additional responsibilities in the charter needed to be accompanied with the resources and funding.

There was a query about the difference between existing GTCS standards for head teachers and the standards that would be expected from the Headteacher Charter.

There was a view that budgets would not be increased and so these new responsibilities would be difficult to meet. If local authority cuts were made 'at the centre' then this weakened their ability to provide support and increased pressure on head teachers. The proposals were fine 'in a perfect world', but we're not in a perfect world. However some group members discussed how they could manage their budgets better with a bit more flexibility – for example the ability to take money from the staffing budget to direct at other things, rather than getting budgets for unfilled vacancies removed. PEF funding had been welcomed as a 'bit of freedom' although one teacher said it was difficult to get entitled pupils to register for free school meals because they didn't want to eat in the canteen. (The PEF funding is based on FSM registrations rather than entitlement).

How do you think your role and the role of your education authority might change as a result of the head teachers' charter?

Head teachers were unclear about schools would be accountable following these reforms and how this would be measured. They were clear that it could not just be measured on various performance statistics.

If head teachers are going to have more responsibility for HR, then they will need training and resources for this.

What do you think increased parental and community involvement in schools should look like?

It was agreed that parental involvement was important, but challenging to achieve. It can be difficult where the home language isn't English – translators are difficult to find.

One head teacher said that while parents of their pupils were very involved in fundraising they were much less willing to be involved in more procedural or administrative issues. Some busy working parents are happy if their child is happy and do not have time to come into school.

The proposal for a home school link worker was liked, but there was uncertainty about how it would be resourced.

What do you think about a proposed duty on headteachers to promote and support pupil participation?

There was concern about the use of terms like 'duty' in relation to pupil and parental involvement – what would the sanction be for not complying?

Do you have any views on the proposal to create the Education Workforce Council for Scotland that would replace the GTCS?

There was one member of the group who supported that idea of merging the GTCS with a new workforce council, however others in the group disagreed. There was agreement that everyone in education should have professional standards. When asked, they agreed that, if there was a guarantee of no diminution of professional standards then a joint body could be considered. However, the GTCS Standards must be protected.

Headteacher/Deputy focus group 2

Attended by Johann Lamont MSP (chair) and Ross Greer.

Main positives of the proposed reforms

The overall impression of the group was that positives of the reforms were difficult to identify. Members of the group described the Scottish Government's proposals as vague.

Particular concerns were raised about the potential for additional workload to take away from teaching and learning.

Another suggested that the reforms do not address issues with ASN. He valued the support provided centrally through the local authority and argued that if this were to be removed, other supporting partners would require more resources.

One member argued that the reforms are consuming the attention and efforts of the education system which would be better focused on improving education. The group suggested that focus should be on: the number of teachers; high quality continuous professional development; and developing leadership.

Some in the group suggested that the current challenges in education makes a poor starting point for these reforms.

One member of the group argued that there would never be a good time for these reforms, but that empowering and devolving decision-making to schools is a welcome idea. Within this context, he said he would welcome the opportunity to focus more on teaching and learning, and less on administration. He stated that schools will need the support to effect change.

What support will be required by schools?

The headteachers identified finance, procurement, facilities management and building maintenance as areas where they may need additional support.

Improvement plans and Regional Collaborative

Less than half of the head teachers had had direct contact with the work of the Northern Alliance. The group noted that the Northern Alliance had been formed to address teacher shortages and had grown organically from there.

Some members of the group were aware of curricular support the Northern Alliance had produced (e.g. literacy). Several were unclear what impact the Northern Alliance had had and others suggested that there is little buy-in with the work of the Northern Alliance.

The headteachers had concerns about how the Northern Alliance is accountable, particularly to the schools it serves. This was compared to the structure of the local

authority which, being smaller, schools and communities may be better placed to influence.

Some in the group expressed a concern that the work of regional improvement collaboratives (RICs), such as the Northern Alliance would be “top-down”.

It was argued that RICs could add value to support learning and teaching across the region.

One member of the group questioned whether a greater decision making at a regional level might impact on how local negotiating committees for teachers would operate.

The group agreed that the School Improvement Plan (SIP) should have primacy over other improvement plans as it will take account of the local context of the school and the population it serves.

It was expected that SIPs would reflect the priorities of local improvement plans (LIPs) and Regional Improvement Plans (RIPs). There was concern at the level of detail of the Northern Alliance’s RIP as it was felt that it left little room for the schools to reflect the local context in their SIPs and therefore impacted materially on the primacy of the SIP. Another member of the group suggested that the levels of guidance from national agencies (i.e. the SQA and Education Scotland) meant that in practice that there is little room for headteachers to develop a bespoke SIP.

There was concern about how the RIP had been developed and the level of consultation of schools. The standing of the RIP was also not understood – the headteachers were unclear to what extent their SIPs could diverge from the RIPs.

One member of the group suggested that that regional improvement plans should be produced in a bottom-up fashion, drawing from clusters’ plans, which in turn would have been drawn from SIPs.

Role of local authorities

The headteachers discussed a number of roles that would not be suitable to be devolved to schools and would be better administered by local authorities. These roles were: human resources, supporting Additional Support Needs, maintaining buildings, cross-service working (particularly in relation to GIRFEC), and the education service’s role in community planning.

It was noted that schools already have a role in choosing their own staff in Aberdeenshire.

The headteachers found the proposals for reforms to be unclear in respect of the role of local authorities.

Headteachers’ charter

There was some support for more autonomy for headteachers. However the focus on the headteacher was thought to be an error as it misses the importance of distributed leadership and collegiality.

The charter would be better if it were a “school charter” and therefore inclusive of parents, young people and staff.

Impacts of the reforms be on different types of schools

The group discussed the different circumstances of large secondary schools and small, perhaps rural primary schools. The former may still employ business managers and therefore be better placed to take on extra responsibilities. Small primary schools have fewer staff and therefore the capacity to take on additional roles is limited.

Attainment gap

There was discussion about the nature of the attainment gap, and it was argued that there are different types of disadvantage (e.g. time poverty). One teacher questioned whether there should be a focus on a poverty-related attainment gap, instead suggesting that the focus should be on improvement for all. Another disagreed and stated that it is vital that the poverty-related attainment gap be closed.

The group agreed that the support services which work in the community have retreated in recent years, leaving more responsibility to fall on schools to deal with young people’s problems, such as mental health.

One headteacher spoke of the importance of taking a holistic approach to tackling the attainment gap. Another suggested that PEF would be better spent on mid-wives as an early intervention.

In terms of PEF, the headteacher suggested that some schools were having difficulty in spending their budget, whereas other schools without PEF had were seeing a shortfall. Another headteacher argued that PEF had increased the demand for teachers in the central belt choking further the supply of teachers in the north east.

Several headteachers said that the reforms may have a detrimental impact on the attainment gap because those schools with more parental involvement would be more advantaged.

Parental involvement

The headteachers agreed that strong parental involvement has lots of positives. They reported that current practice in their schools was already beyond what was in the consultation.

There was a discussion about what constitutes parental involvement. There was general agreement that the most important element of parental involvement is to be interested and supportive of the child’s learning. It was argued that few parents are interested in the management of the school.

Some suggested that parental engagement was a two way process and that the school's job was to provide imaginative and varied opportunities – a toolkit produced by Aberdeenshire Council was praised in this respect. Engaging hard-to-reach parents was thought to be a matter of practice rather than one of law; it takes time to develop trust and relationships.

One head noted that initiatives such as the Developing Young Workforce can engage parents, for example if the children were learning about their parents' occupation.

It was noted that parental engagement was easier at primary school level than senior school. One reason given for this was that parents are more likely to be working full-time as their children get older.

There was no appetite for school boards.

Pupil participation

Again the heads argued that pupil participation is common practice. One felt patronised that it would become a legal duty when it is already undertaken and well-understood as good practice.

Another head questioned why the Scottish Government wouldn't seek to adopt all of the UNCRC, rather than just the element on participation.

General Teaching Council Scotland

The group were hostile to the suggestion that the functions of the GTCS be taken into a wider Educational Workforce Council.

The headteachers valued the self-regulatory nature of the GTCS as it recognises a trust in the profession. The GTCS was described as one of the greatest successes of Scottish education and was considered to be important in maintaining standards and professionalism.

There was not opposition for a regulatory body to cover other professions in education, only that this should not replace the GTCS. One teacher said that the proposals would dilute the teachers' voice.

Other issues

Workforce planning and the number of teachers available in the region was a big issue for many. One suggestion was that the University of Aberdeen should prioritise local people for their teaching courses. Another was that the university should pair up with NESCOL to offer Bed courses.

The D-Lite scheme was praised; however other accelerated routes into teaching were not valued by the group.

Discussion Groups with Parents, Young People and Teachers

Parents' discussion group

This group had 25 parents. Many were involved in their respective parent councils. Ross Greer MSP led discussions.

Headteachers' charter

Some members of the group were unclear what the charter is.

There was some concern that headteachers wouldn't have the time to undertake the new roles, particularly heads of small primary schools.

Some welcomed the idea that heads would be able to manage priorities of their school. Others raised concerns about the accountability of headteachers if they had more decision making.

In terms of recruitment, one parent suggested that they supported headteachers retaining their role in recruitment. Another questioned how having more powers in relation to recruitment would help in a time of teacher shortages.

A number of parents suggested that more resource would be required to support headteachers.

Good parental participation

The parents identified a number of areas of good practice in parental involvement—

- Schools being open to parents' suggestions and involvement;
- Schools collaborating with parents;
- Parents organising clubs;
- Parents volunteering in the school library;
- Consultation on the School Improvement Plan;
- Open dialogue with headteachers on strategic issues; and
- Heads of Departments regularly presenting to a Parent Council about forthcoming projects and how parents can get involved.

The parents noted that participation in parent councils can be fairly narrow, but some argued that being involved with learning and having an interest about what goes on in the school is valuable parental engagement as well.

Widening parental participation

One teacher suggested that the role of parent councils should be made clearer. He said that a Parent Council falls between being a fundraising committee and part of a school's governance structure and it ends up being sometimes both and sometimes neither. Another said that the nature of the parent council as a fundraising body may be attractive to some, but less so to others.

It was noted that parent councils tend not to have a proportionate gender split.

The education system is heavy on jargon, which may put some people off. The work of a liaison officer employed by the local authority was praised in building capacity in the parent councils and acting as a bridge to the council.

The group discussed how schools could better communicate with parents. A number of technological solutions were mentioned, e.g. group texting service, to improve communication to all parents (including those without regular email access). The importance of such systems being user-friendly for both parents and teachers was identified.

There was also a request for policy documents at school, regional and national levels to be written in a more accessible way.

The parents said that schools relationships and communication with parents should be part of inspections (and noted that it already is).

Children and young people's participation

One parent suggested that there is a risk that pupil involvement is superficial and that it must be an authentic process.

Some parents identified good current practice of parent councils engaging with school leadership, the parent council and others to raise issues and seek changes. Some parents said that there is and should be an open culture where the views of pupils are valued. Another commented that there should not be too much focus on the headteacher in this process and all school staff should be open to engaging with pupils. This was linked to teachers having a broad practice which is inclusive and engaging.

A number of parents said that pupil involvement should be limited and children and young people's focus should primarily be on learning. One parent was critical of giving young people too many choices from early years onwards, suggesting instead that teachers and early years practitioners be more prescriptive and that young people are not being taught that there are times where one needs to get on with unenjoyable tasks or subjects. One parent who is also an early years practitioner said that involving children in how to learn does not mean that the learning is not practitioner-led.

Personal and Social Education

Following on from earlier discussions Ross Greer had had with young people at Peterhead Academy, he highlighted PSE as an area which lends itself to greater pupil co-design.

The parents took this opportunity to discuss what ought to be included in PSE curricula. This included Day-to-day life skills and digital literacy.

The group spoke about the importance of parents' understanding of a number of issues to enable them to better support their children (e.g. health and wellbeing, digital literacy and the risks of digital media).

One parent said that PSE should have the same rigorous benchmarking as other subjects.

Education Committees

Mr Greer then asked what the group's views were on young people sitting on the local authorities' education committees.

The parents noted that it was important that any representation would be truly representative of the views of young people. One said that youth forums should be involved in policy development, rather than an individual having a seat on the Committee.

Support schools will require to implement reforms

The parents discussed a number of things that, in their view, schools will require to implement the proposed reforms:

- Sufficient staff;
- More resources;
- Support on procurement.

One parent suggested that schools should be able to work as clusters to share additional administrative roles proposed.

The roles of regional improvement collaboratives and local authorities were questioned and said to be unclear under the proposals.

Closing the attainment gap

The parents could not identify how the reforms might close the attainment gap. Some suggested that the process of reform would distract from efforts to do so. Others suggested that more resources were required.

Other issues

A number of issues were raised by individuals at the end of the discussion—

- More resources should go to early years, including PEF;
- Teachers have too much paperwork;
- Concern at the speed of consultation/implementation;
- Headteachers are already stretched.

Young people's discussion group

Johann Lamont convened a discussion with pupils from secondary schools in Aberdeenshire.

The pupils highlighted what works well in their schools:

- the range of extracurricular activity is considered to be a major benefit, although better communication could lead to greater uptake of the opportunities on offer
- direct engagement with employers - one school has a mentoring system; another school allows senior pupils to undertake a weekly work placement for the duration of the school year
- some schools allow pupils to passport to different schools to take subjects not on offer or that do not fit in with the rest of their timetable

and issues of concern:

- teacher shortages
- cuts leading to restrictions on printing and inadequate supplies - with examples of pupils buying their own jotters and teachers using their own money to provide supplies - particularly in practical subjects
- inadequate attention paid to scheduling and/or an inability to resolve timetable clashes, leading to some pupils being unable to study all their preferred subjects or being forced into making less suitable choices
- teacher absences leading to lost lessons (As some schools do not use supply teachers, pupils may be supervised and given general instructions only; there is no teaching of that subject. In other schools, supply teachers may teach subjects that they are unfamiliar with. Consequently, some pupils were struggling in class and others were reliant on their written English skills to get through all the requirements, rather than on detailed knowledge of the subject per se.)
- although PSE is considered to be useful, it needs to be reformed and tailored to the needs of the different age ranges, rather than simply repeating the same messages about drugs and alcohol for example.
- although there are many positives to being part of a community campus, thought needs to be given to how and when older college students and adults access that campus and how they conduct themselves when they are there.

When asked what one thing the pupils would change in their school, a consensus emerged on the need for greater discipline. It was highlighted that the school reforms and the teacher shortages have led to an environment in which discipline is poor and a greater number of the youngest pupils in particular are acting up. This is compounded by the lower levels of authority that substitute teachers seem to display when taking classes. Linked to the issue of authority is the inability of some schools to enforce their uniform policy, leading to focus being taken away from what is important: the education of pupils. At one school, senior pupils sign a behaviour contract that they must abide to.

Do children have a voice in schools?

The pupils described the different models that operate in their schools. In some schools, a pupil is given a role that allows them to raise issues brought to them by their peers with the deputy headteacher; in other schools, the process is more convoluted and although it starts with pupil-to-pupil interactions, the system is hierarchical and ends with a teacher raising an issue with the headteacher, so the pupil involvement is less meaningful and there is a danger that the message is lost along the way.

Some schools have pupil academies. In one example it was highlighted that, although the body is able to express views, it is rarely listened to. Given that experience, the preference would be to make it a decision-making body, but attempts to achieve that have not been successful.

Another school has a pupil council in place, but it is seen to be ineffective, partly because of its structure. It was suggested that some issues raised by pupil councils are not considered fully, that teacher representation on the council can be problematic – poor attendance is an issue, for example - and that there needs to be proper lines of responsibility. It is considered that the two-tier system works well at the lower level, with pupils feeding effectively into the council, but the difficulties occur at the higher level where issues that have been raised with the school are not being adequately addressed.

Should there be a pupil decision-making body in schools?

In an ideal world, pupils would have more say on all aspects of the school. Failing that, there was general agreement that pupils should have more input into how the school is structured, although it was acknowledged that some pupils would take advantage of that involvement for personal gain rather than the greater good. It is seen as vital that a body reflects the differing needs of the pupils depending on where they are in their school journey – that is, the needs of seniors are different from those of juniors.

What are your views on parent councils?

Although there is an awareness of the parent council, the pupils do not see many changes resulting from it. In particular, communication is poor and meeting minutes are not provided. The council is seen to operate in a separate sphere, lacking two-way dialogue or consultation based on pupils' needs.

A parent in attendance offered a different perspective: they get useful information from school, via the council. However, given the pupils' concerns, they suggested that the lack of feedback has to be tackled.

Should parents have a say in staff recruitment?

A parent in attendance suggested that that would depend on who sits on the parent council. For example, if one of its members was a human resources manager, staff

recruitment would probably be an acceptable activity. However, problems would quickly arise if the parents knew the candidates personally.

Should schools decide what subjects are offered?

One participant made the point that the SQA deals with much of that; another made the point that popular demand dictates to an extent what is provided. However, it was agreed that schools should not be told what to offer. Concern was expressed that a huge amount depends on the availability of teachers in individual subject areas. It was highlighted that university applications ask for certain qualifications, but not all those qualifications are offered in all schools.

It was highlighted that when pupils sit exams is determined by their ability, not their age, meaning that younger pupils might sit exams earlier than others. Given that pupils may take Highers and Nat 5s at the same time, the point was again made about the need for schools to learn how to handle the timetabling of subjects better.

Named person scheme

A pupil initiated a separate discussion about the named person scheme. Concerns were expressed about a teacher, or another individual, knowing details about pupils and their family life. It was suggested that pupils may feel under pressure to talk to them because they represent a figure of authority.

On a related issue, it was emphasised that pupils should receive information in advance of their first meeting with the school nurse. At one school, no information was provided to pupils or parents about the check-up, and some pupils were unprepared to answer and intimidated by difficult questions on, for example, abuse. The concern is that, fearful about what might happen to them or to others, pupils were not being truthful in their responses.

Teachers' discussion group

James Dornan MSP met with a group of around 30 teachers and other education staff.

What do you think the main positives of the proposed reforms would be?

There was a view that the reforms were a good idea in principle – there was support for collaboration. However there was also concern about how staff would find the time to do this. Teachers already share ideas – there are various online groups, but it would be a shame if this informal collaboration were to be replaced by something more bureaucratic. One group member thought the reforms were confused as they appeared to be aimed at both increasing homogeneity as well as devolving power to schools.

What sort of support would your school need in bringing in the reforms, and when do you think your school would be in a position to make changes (the earliest changes will take place will be into 2019)

Broader pressures on school education were raised – in particular recruitment difficulties and continuous change in education policy. Again, the general principles of the reforms were supported – (collaboration, flexibility), but there was a concern that they would have little impact. They felt they were 'on shifting sand' all the time and it is exhausting.

What will the different impacts of the reforms be on different types of schools (for example primary, secondary, special education schools?)

A head teacher in a small primary school said she had no capacity to take on more administrative responsibility – she did a lot of teaching and did not have senior leadership team because of the size of the school.

The difference between large and small primaries was highlighted. There was reference to a one teacher school which shared a head teacher with another school. How would increase devolved decision making affect them? On a positive note, the idea of establishing partnership between very small schools was raised and felt to be a good way to get support and advice for the particular issues faced by these.

Do you consider the reforms will contribute to closing the attainment gap, and are there other measures you would also suggest?

There was a suggestion that improving pay, terms and conditions of support staff would help tackle the attainment gap, given the degree to which it is these staff who work with low attaining pupils. Problems with retention of support staff were raised, and this was blamed on poor pay, lack of career recognition and lack of recognition of the level of skill staff have.

There was reference to the increasing partnership working that has developed as a result of GIRFEC over the last five years and how this can impact on the attainment gap through accessing wider services. Co-ordinating all this different input and the

logistics of multi-agency meetings could be difficult, but to really impact on the attainment gap, all these agencies needed to be involved. Cut backs to these other agencies – social work and health – therefore impacted on the ability of school to tackle the attainment gap. The research finding that children from the most deprived background are “18 months behind their peers” was referred to in the context of the difficulties schools had in tackling the attainment gap. The group therefore referred to the importance of intervention from birth and GIRFEC. There was a view that focusing on school was ‘too late.’

Other issues raised included the gap in requirements between N4 and N5 and the transition from primary to secondary school. It wasn’t clear to the group how the reforms would help with this.

What would you want the new regional improvement collaboratives of education authorities to do for your school or education in your area (ideas include assisting information sharing and communication between authorities and also between schools)

Most of the group had not heard of the Northern Alliance until they received the papers for this meeting. There was scepticism about the effectiveness of a Collaborative on the scale of the Northern Alliance. It was felt that people ‘on the ground’ were best placed to know the community. Teachers wanted support from someone who knew the area they were in – the Northern Alliance was felt to be too big and too distant to provide this. If the support was provided on a more local scale by the Northern Alliance then there was a question whether it would effectively be the same as current local authority support.

However, there was support for Alliance if it encouraged more collaboration and made it easier for people to collaborate on working through problems.

What do you think of the head teachers charter proposals (more control over CfE decisions, staffing, funding etc)?

The model of leadership implied by the Charter was queried as was its purpose, with teachers referring to developing leadership throughout the school rather than only in the head teacher.

How do you think your role and the role of your education authority might change as a result of the head teacher’s charter?

There was concern that the reforms represented ever increasing workload for head teachers, and that this may make the job unattractive. In the context of the difficulties in head teacher recruitment this was seen as particularly problematic.

There was a concern that giving more power to head teachers would result in schools becoming selective about their intake, and may not be fully inclusive of pupils with disabilities.

Do you have any views on the proposal to create the Education Workforce Council for Scotland that would replace the GTCS?

The general feeling was that the GTCS didn't need to change. The professional update system is still quite recent, and there was little appetite for further changes. One said: "can we just hold still for a while?" In the professional update teachers were now uploading records of the CPD they've completed, yet it was not clear to the group what happened to this information – there was concern that it was a bit of a 'box ticking exercise'.