



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 5 December 2018

Session 5



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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

30th Meeting 2018, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)

*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Lauren Bruce (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Eddie Follan (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Councillor Stephen McCabe (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

John Swinney (Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 5 December 2018

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning. I warmly welcome committee members and the public to the 30th meeting in 2018 of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind everyone present to turn their mobile phones and other devices to silent so that they do not interfere with the broadcasting.

Our first agenda item is a decision on whether to take business in private. Does the committee agree to consider the draft report on our music tuition in schools inquiry in private at future meetings, and to consider its work programme in private at the next meeting?

Members indicated agreement.

Music Tuition in Schools Inquiry

10:00

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is our final evidence session in our music tuition in schools inquiry. We have two panels of witnesses today. We have roughly an hour for each panel, so we are quite tight for time. Therefore, if people are concise, that will be very helpful.

I thank everyone who has given evidence to the committee so far, including the National Youth Orchestras of Scotland, whose most recent correspondence was circulated to members this week.

Our first panel consists of representatives from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. I welcome Stephen McCabe, COSLA's children and young people spokesperson; Eddie Follan, a policy manager in COSLA's children and young people team; and Lauren Bruce, the chief officer for local government finance at COSLA. We are delighted that you have come to be with us this morning. I understand that Councillor McCabe would like to make an opening statement.

Councillor Stephen McCabe (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Thank you, convener. It is nice to be back. I see some familiar faces, and there are some new faces since I was last here.

As the committee will be aware, the issue of instrumental music tuition has been discussed at the COSLA children and young people board, and we have written to the committee on the decisions that have been taken on a cross-party basis by the board. We could no doubt discuss those decisions in more detail this morning, but I thought that, before we go to questions, it would be helpful to give some context to COSLA's role as a membership organisation and to the financial constraints within which local authorities are working hard to deliver essential services.

COSLA represents the 32 local authorities. As a membership organisation, we represent their views. We cannot tell them what to do or take action to change or rectify what they do. We seek to achieve a consensus of approach while recognising that local authorities will make decisions that are based on a wide range of factors. An absolutely vital element of our approach is that we respect and protect the ability of councils and of elected members to make decisions that are based on local priorities. In seeking political consensus, we work through our various boards, and we have achieved that on many complex issues, from education reform to the expansion of early learning and childcare.

There is a very strong consensus that instrumental music tuition is a valued service that has an important role in education and that, to maintain the service in difficult financial circumstances, retaining the option of charging is crucial. Since 2011-12, core funding to local authorities has been reduced by £1.64 billion in real terms. No local authority makes the decision lightly to introduce—or to increase—charges for any service. However, the financial situation for local authorities continues to be very difficult and, as a consequence, councils have faced difficult decisions about funding.

Our board was absolutely clear that those decisions are the embodiment of local democratic processes and that decision making and accountability for those decisions should rest locally. In the context of respecting local decision making and an extremely challenging financial situation, we are making every effort to ensure that there is access to music tuition for those on the lowest incomes and those who are sitting Scottish Qualifications Authority exams. Through the guidance, we will improve communication between authorities and children, young people and parents on the reasons and rationale for charging and on transparency around decision making. Officers will take forward work on that guidance over the coming weeks, and we will report back to the board in February.

I am happy to take questions from members, and will bring in officers where appropriate.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Thank you very much. You spoke about COSLA finding a consensus of approach on the issue, but the committee has heard evidence that the result of that consensus, combined with local democratic decision making, is a huge variation in the availability and cost of instrumental music tuition. Is COSLA content that, in one part of Scotland, instrumental music tuition is free and, in another, it costs a family hundreds of pounds?

Councillor McCabe: COSLA respects the decisions that are made by democratically elected local councils, which are accountable to the local electorate for those decisions. It is not COSLA's role to impose a national policy on our councils.

At a previous evidence session, the committee had the opportunity to speak directly to representatives from three councils, each of which takes a different approach. COSLA respects their different approaches. Each of the three council representatives reported back at the previous meeting of the COSLA children and young people board and set out their council's particular position. Across the country, from Shetland to Dumfries and Galloway, there was consensus that we must guard and protect the principle of local democratic decision making and accountability.

Iain Gray: You also said that COSLA believes that there should be protection for the ability of children from less well-off families to access instrumental music tuition. The committee has heard evidence that, although most local authorities have schemes for children who are entitled to free school meals to access music tuition, a significant number of families or sections of the population find that it is not possible for their children to continue that tuition.

The example of West Lothian has been given. There, the introduction of charges has led to four fifths of children dropping out of instrumental music tuition in primary schools. John Wallace, from the music education partnership group, was quite clear that

“The people who have, have more”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 14 November 2018; c 13.]

and the people who live in deprived areas have less. Are you content that the system delivers for children from poorer families?

Councillor McCabe: COSLA is here to represent the views of its members, who have discussed the issue. At the previous meeting of the children and young people board, the consensus was that there should be no charging for the SQA exams. I think that that is the case across the board. I think that it was agreed unanimously that every authority should seek to provide free music tuition to children who are entitled to free school meals. That would be the minimum criterion that would be built into any guidance, but it is for councillors to decide whether to introduce other policies that mean that children who are not entitled to free school meals but who come from a family on low pay would get a reduction in charges. Our view is that that should be a decision for democratically elected local councils.

We cannot look at decisions that councils have made on music charges in isolation. I am sure that, when the councillors of West Lothian or Perth and Kinross, who charged for music tuition for many years before West Lothian Council did, sat down and reviewed the savings proposals that were presented to them, they agonised for hours over making such decisions. I am sure that, as part of their budget processes, they consulted the local electorate, and I am sure and confident that, in their value judgments, introducing a charge for music tuition was considered to be a less damaging saving—or cut, to give it its proper term—than something else. Other councils may have decided otherwise, because they made a different judgment.

As a council leader, I sit every year with a list of savings proposals that officers have presented to me and other elected members. We must go

through that agonising process over tortuous hours and weeks of discussion and review until we make decisions. I have a list of £9 million of potential savings for next year, some of which involve education. The reality is that, if we do not take hard decisions in one area, we take hard decisions in another area. The fundamental issue is not ring fencing funding or protecting services; it is the chronic underfunding of local government over the past 10 years, which the Parliament has presided over.

Iain Gray: Is it fair to say that the differing structures and provision of instrumental music tuition and the charging regimes are driven almost entirely by the financial constraints on local authorities, that those are financial decisions that local authorities have had to take, and that local authorities have taken different financial decisions?

Councillor McCabe: It is very fair to say that. I have been an elected politician for a long number of years. I am in no way musically inclined—music passed me by—but I like nothing better than going to a schools concert. Indeed, I am going to our schools concert in Greenock town hall tomorrow night to listen to the concert bands, orchestras and vocalists, where I will look on with pride at the passion with which those young people enjoy their music and the joy that they give to the people listening. Our concert bands and orchestras have gone across the country representing our council and have achieved huge rewards and brought huge credit to our authority.

I believe that every elected member has a passion for that. However, we also have a passion for many other areas, including tackling poverty and deprivation, and addressing the range of other challenges that we face. In my opinion, the situation has been driven entirely by the hard choices that councils have to make.

I would like music tuition to be free to every young person in Scotland in the same way that many other things are but, fundamentally, at the end of the day, councils are faced with hard decisions every year around education and every other service that we provide, and we cannot sustain indefinitely things that were previously free.

My council has a fairly limited approach to charging, but we have made other hard decisions. I would not criticise a council that had cut back or introduced charging for music tuition, because I might well have taken other decisions in other areas to protect music tuition. The simple fact is that we face hard choices.

Iain Gray: Okay. You have touched on this issue, but I want to explore it a little more. In a previous evidence session, we heard from

representatives of three councils that have taken three very different decisions on charging for instrumental music tuition. It was suggested to them that one way out of that would be for central Government to provide the funding to allow tuition to be provided free, but all three of them were quite reluctant for that to happen. The committee might wonder why, if local authorities are genuinely passionate about the opportunity that is provided by music tuition—which you have just described—they would resist central funding to make it available free across the board.

Councillor McCabe: Local authorities will always take pragmatic decisions in the best interests of their communities. If the offer of money were on the table, they would look at it and consider what was in the best interests of their communities.

A recent example is the level of the school clothing grant. There was huge lobbying around that and huge pressure on the Government, and the Government decided that it would come up with extra money for the grant. The level was not determined in legislation, so there was huge variation across councils, but the Government said that it would come up with the money so that everybody could bring the level up to a minimum of £100. Some councils already offered more than £100; others offered significantly less. You could view that as overriding the principle of local democratic decision making, but we took a pragmatic approach. We said, “Fine. If the Government comes up with the money, we will work with it on a voluntary basis and we will come to an agreement.” That is what we did.

However, those sticking plasters—that is how we see them—are continually being applied. People will pursue a good cause, lobby on it, lodge a petition and say, “Isn’t it terrible that this council is cutting this and that council is cutting that and wouldn’t it be better if we just funded it centrally?” The Government comes up with money here and there, applying sticking plasters. The fundamental problem is the chronic underfunding of local government. I have given members the figures. Lauren Bruce is our finance expert; if anybody wants to challenge her figures on that, we are more than happy to have that discussion. The fundamental reality is that there is chronic underfunding of local government.

We are prepared to have a dialogue around finance, but let us be clear that we estimate that it costs £28 million a year to provide music tuition. Fees and charges, which not every council applies, raise about £4 million. Providing music tuition will cost more than £28 million next year and the year after that, because of inflation, wage increases and so on. Saying that £4 million should be found to wipe out charges is a simplistic

solution. In an ideal world, no council would want to charge for music tuition, if it had the right resources.

10:15

Iain Gray: Just to be clear—

The Convener: Mr Gray, I am sorry, but we are really tight for time. I will try to bring you back in later.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I will ask a question that I have put to previous witnesses. Are local authorities across Scotland living up to the undertakings that were given six or seven years ago on the back of the Government's working group on instrumental music tuition and the agreements that were reached about what would and would not be done?

Councillor McCabe: I am not conscious that councils have breached any agreements that had been reached.

Eddie Follan (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): As we said in our letter to the committee, we last revisited the group's recommendations in 2015, when progress had been made. We will go back to that as we develop the guidance, when we will look back at the recommendations and ensure that we are addressing them. Progress has been made in a number of areas of the group's review, but we can still do more to address the 17 recommendations. We will revisit that as we develop the guidance, which we are doing now.

Dr Allan: It is interesting that the strong view of students from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland whom we spoke to—I am not putting words in their mouths—was that some undertakings were not being lived up to. That related particularly to the definition of how a council lives up to the undertaking that was given not to introduce fees for tuition that leads to SQA qualifications. Are local authorities introducing fees for tuition that is essential for an SQA exam?

Councillor McCabe: Our view is that that is not the case.

Eddie Follan: Our understanding is that parents and families are not charged for SQA-related tuition.

Dr Allan: I have another question on the back of what the conservatoire students said. What workforce planning are local authorities doing? The students made the point strongly that they do not see where the next generation of music teachers will come from unless there is a supply of people who are sufficiently adept in musical instruments that they can go through the

necessary training to become music teachers. The students expressed doubts about whether the tuition that is now available in many parts of Scotland is sufficient to get an advanced higher in music.

Eddie Follan: In the wider context, we are looking at shortages of teachers, which involves pressures on local authorities. The supply of teachers in particular areas varies. We need to look at that challenge, which we are happy to take on board.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): I have a supplementary question to Iain Gray's questions. I heard what Councillor McCabe said about local democratic accountability, but I wonder about exemptions. The committee has heard about variations in exemptions across the country. Some local authorities use free school meals as a measure, and a sibling discount applies in some local authorities but not in others. Will COSLA take a national view on exemptions, so that there is at least a level playing field?

Councillor McCabe: As I said, our children and young people board, which comprises the education conveners of the 32 councils, has discussed that issue and has been absolutely clear that the guidance will include the minimum criterion of free school meal entitlement. Any decisions to apply further exemptions will be for councils. We simply represent the views of our members—it is not our job to tell our members what to do—and many councils expressed strong views on that issue.

Jenny Gilruth: Did the board take a view on the need for a cap on what councils charge?

Councillor McCabe: No.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): My question is similar to the one that my colleague has asked. I hear what you are saying about local autonomy. Does COSLA ever give guidelines or guidance to councils about anything? You have kind of answered that question, because you said that you gave guidance on school clothing grants. Are you selective about that?

Councillor McCabe: We are not being selective. We were approached by the Government on that area, and the Government had obviously been lobbied strongly by particular interest groups, which is perfectly legitimate. The Government said that it would be prepared to provide additional funding, so we had a discussion with the Government and came to a potential agreement. We took that through the appropriate democratic decision-making processes in COSLA, which involved the 32 leaders of the councils who were there to represent the views of their councils. Those council leaders signed up to that package and, from the start of the new academic term,

every council implemented a minimum school clothing grant of £100. Some councils have school clothing grants of more than £100.

Rona Mackay: I understand that point, but the decision was made on the back of councils getting more money. Do you ever issue guidelines when money is not on the table?

Councillor McCabe: We intend to issue guidance on the subject that we are discussing, and we are working on that at the moment. We are discussing the matter with the Government and other stakeholders.

Rona Mackay: Do you mean guidance on music tuition?

Councillor McCabe: Yes.

Rona Mackay: Can you expand on what that might be?

Councillor McCabe: Eddie Follan can give more detail on what that might be. As I said, it is about setting a minimum level for exemption from charges, related to free school meal entitlement, and not charging for the SQA-related tuition. It is also about providing information on good practice and drawing on the experiences of other councils. If some councils want to change their policies on the back of that guidance, they will be perfectly entitled to do so. We are not imposing a policy; we are simply providing councils with guidance.

Eddie Follan: I am happy to expand on that. As Councillor McCabe has said, we are considering writing into the guidance that there should be no charge for the SQA-related tuition, which goes back to the recommendations from 2013. We are also looking at free school meals as the minimum level for exemption, although it is important to recognise that many councils go further than that.

At the same time, we have heard from campaigners that how the decisions around charging are communicated can be quite frustrating for parents and families. We want to get some transparency in the rationale for charging and the explanation of why it needs to be done.

We are also exploring guidance on the consideration of unintended consequences. We know that, sometimes, difficult decisions have consequences that people do not really think about. That issue will be addressed by highlighting good practice. We know that there are examples of really good practice across the country. For example, we have heard about bursaries and other things that can ease the pressure on both the council and the families.

We are currently working on that guidance. We are working closely with the Scottish Government and the music education partnership group, which has a lot of expertise and can provide lots of

examples. We are very open to that. We are just trying to find a way to improve the situation as much as we can.

Councillor McCabe: The guidance will be issued and implemented only if it is approved by our children and young people board, which is made up of the education conveners of the 32 councils.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): In answer to my colleague, you mentioned that previous initiatives and policy changes have come about when COSLA has been approached by the Scottish Government. Have you been approached by the Scottish Government about instrumental music tuition?

Councillor McCabe: Not formally.

The Convener: You mentioned democratic decision making and the setting of policies. All the evidence that we have heard about the youth music initiative has been really positive, and that policy is set by the Scottish Government and delivered in partnership with COSLA. Given that we have local democracy, there are examples of work that can achieve policy goals in practice and that work very well.

Councillor McCabe: Yes. Across the board, music is flourishing in our schools and local authorities. As a councillor, I have been around for a few years and have seen the music provision in the schools in my authority area improve significantly over the past decade or so. In the past, schools had particular traditions in music that might have reflected the make-up of the pupil intake and their backgrounds, but there is now a high standard of music provision in all our local secondary schools, including in the school that I attended and that my children attend, where music was not particularly strong 10 years ago.

Significant progress has been made, and, on the whole, there has been an increase in the uptake of music tuition over the past decade or so. I accept that there has been a dip more recently, which might be to do with charging issues. However, on the whole, music is flourishing in our schools.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Councillor McCabe, I would like to ask you about the article by Andy Denholm that appeared in *The Herald* two days ago, in which he said:

“Midlothian Council is the first local authority in Scotland to pass on the cost of tuition for music qualifications such as Higher and Advanced Higher, rather than funding it from central budgets.”

Were you aware of that?

Councillor McCabe: I did not read that article—I often find that I cannot get beyond the paywall for articles in *The Herald*—but I am aware of the issue

and I have seen correspondence about it, including from the leader of Midlothian Council. As I understand it—Eddie Follan will keep me right—the council took the difficult decision to take the funding of music tuition out of a central budget and to ask schools to fund it from their devolved budgets.

Liz Smith: Do you recognise that, if that proposal to bring in charging for SQA qualifications goes ahead, that will be very much at odds with the view that has been expressed, which is that that should not happen?

Councillor McCabe: I do not see that as charging for SQA qualifications. The headteacher of the school will have a devolved budget, which they can choose to use to avoid having to charge. All things being equal, that will mean that less money will be available to spend on other things, but that is the situation that the council faces. If the council had decided to maintain that budget centrally, it would have had to cut something else. That is the harsh reality of life as we face it.

We are having discussions with the Government about further devolution of budgetary responsibilities to schools to empower headteachers. If we keep going in that direction, headteachers will have more such decisions to make. There seems to be cross-party consensus that headteachers should have more power over and accountability for budgets and decision making. Midlothian Council has taken that approach, and who am I to criticise it?

Liz Smith: Thank you for your view on that. There is a serious issue here, not just for music tuition. If pupils are to be charged for taking SQA qualifications in music when that does not happen with other SQA qualifications, will COSLA, as the councils' umbrella body, be happy about that approach, which discriminates heavily against music compared with other subjects?

Councillor McCabe: At the most recent meeting of our children and young people board, at which Midlothian Council was represented, I am sure, it was agreed by the board that there will be no charging for SQA exams. As I understand it, there will not be charging for music exams in schools in Midlothian, because the schools will find the funding for those exams from within their devolved budgets, which come to them from the council.

Liz Smith: I would like to think that you are right about that, but the article that I mentioned states:

"Campaigners, who fear other councils will adopt the tactic, said the move could see a decline in the number of pupils sitting music exams.

And they warned it would also restrict choice—with pupils having to select instruments commonly taught in school, such as percussion or guitar, rather than those

requiring expert outside input such as strings, woodwind or brass."

I ask again: would COSLA be comfortable about that situation?

10:30

Councillor McCabe: COSLA's view, as determined by the most recent meeting of our children and young people board, is that councils should not charge for SQA music exams. That is COSLA's position, agreed by the 32 councils. I do not accept the interpretation that that is charging for exams. I saw a letter—which might have been circulated to the committee—from the leader of Midlothian Council in which he says that there will be no charges for the SQA exams.

Liz Smith: We have heard a lot of evidence on the issue, and the problem that the committee faces is particularly about the young people who have been very successfully involved in music tuition. There are serious concerns that many youngsters are being excluded, particularly if the tuition charges are difficult for them to pay. Without doubt, we know that youngsters are not taking up music tuition as a result of the tuition fees, and concern about exam charges adds to that problem. We know that the SQA exam charge will probably be passed on to parents, but, even if it were not passed on to them, the schools are unable to make the choices that are required to allow equity across the board. Do you accept that?

Councillor McCabe: I do not accept that those charges will be passed on to parents. I saw a letter from the leader of Midlothian Council saying that that will not happen, so I do not accept the premise of your question.

The fundamental reality is that schools, councils and other public bodies are making difficult decisions at the moment, and some of those decisions affect young people. Last year, when my council was going through its budget process and we had a huge list of savings proposals, many of those proposals—such as reducing youth services and introducing charging for swimming, which was previously free of charge—potentially affected young people. Decisions are being made in a whole range of areas.

If you want to take music or education in isolation, which happens a lot of the time, that is fine—you can have a debate about particular priorities. However, councils have to deliver a range of services to a range of people, and we constantly have to make difficult decisions about those services and prioritisation. Politics is the language of priorities, and socialism is the language of priorities—that is the fundamental reality. We have to make hard decisions in life. Councils are faced with those hard decisions, and

we want to give our young people the best opportunities in life.

I would want a range of services that we currently charge for to be free, but I have to live in the real world. I have to live within the funding that the Parliament allocates to my council. Somewhere in the region of 85 per cent of my council's funding comes directly from a block grant from the Government via the Parliament. We raise somewhere in the region of 10 to 12 per cent from council tax—the Parliament dictates by how much we can increase council tax. We are then left to make up the rest of the funding through fees and charges. Why have council fees and charges gone up across the board over the past decade? Because of a freeze—and now a cap—on the council tax and because of a real-terms reduction in block grants. That is a simple fact of life that we deal with on a daily basis, and it is why we are increasing or introducing charges for burial grounds, parking and a range of other services.

Jenny Gilruth: I have a brief supplementary question that follows Liz Smith's line of questioning on selection tests. The committee has heard evidence that selection tests are routinely used by local authorities across the country to identify pupils with—I do not like to use this expression—aptitude. That can, in itself, cause inequity. Does COSLA have a view on the use of selection tests?

Eddie Follan: Not at the moment—I will come back to you on that.

Jenny Gilruth: There also seems to be variation in the age at which pupils are first exposed to music tuition and what instruments they are offered. Does COSLA have a view on that?

Eddie Follan: Not at the moment, but I will come back to you on that.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I will continue Liz Smith's line of questioning about Midlothian Council. The letter that we received from the council said that secondary schools could be charged up to £38,000 per year for the music tuition recharge. If a school had to meet £38,000-worth of costs, what impact would there be in terms of the activities that it would have provided otherwise?

Councillor McCabe: I think that £38,000 is across the authority—

Gordon MacDonald: No. The letter says that the recharge

“will result in sums between £7,000 and £38,000 being recovered from individual secondary school budgets this year.”

Councillor McCabe: Okay. I am not familiar with how many schools there are in Midlothian; I do not know the size of each secondary school or the size of the budgets. I suspect that in the budget of a typical secondary school £38,000 is a reasonably significant amount of money—absolutely. However, I do not know what decisions a headteacher would make as a consequence—I cannot second guess that.

As I said, the reality is that the school will have less money to spend on other things, just as the council would have less money to spend on other things if it bore that cost.

Gordon MacDonald: If other councils were to start rolling that out, would COSLA discuss it at board level and issue guidance about whether it thought that that was an effective way to recover funds?

Councillor McCabe: We have received no indication that any council is planning to do that, so we have not considered it and we do not have a view on it. I am sure that if it came up at our board, the board would take a view on it, but I would need to see what that view was.

Gordon MacDonald: If additional funding was found for music tuition, how would you guarantee that a council would use that money for music tuition, given that there is no ring fencing?

Councillor McCabe: I do not think that we can guarantee that. COSLA's position on behalf of local government is that we do not like ring fencing. We think that we are democratically elected in the same way that you are and that we should have discretion as to how we spend the public's money. If the public are not happy with decisions that we make, they can exercise their democratic right to express that dissatisfaction at the next election.

The Convener: I am very conscious of time. I know that some members want to get in and I will try to bring them in at the end, but I want to move on now.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): My first question is a brief one. I hear exactly what our witnesses are saying about the financial context and about having to make tough choices. There is no easy choice; you are choosing between lots of bad options. The argument put by advocates for music is that music is being treated differently from other subjects and that there is no level playing field. I am concerned about some secondary schools in Glasgow, which no longer offer geography, history and modern studies—they offer only one or two of those subjects. What is your view of the argument that the costs of music tuition, which is a core part of getting an SQA qualification in music, are looked at differently from the costs of studying another subject? Has

COSLA considered the question of making sure that all subjects are treated with the same value and that what is core to subjects is understood?

I will ask my second question now, in order to get them both over with and not take up too much time. The other argument that music tuition specialists have made is that we are at a tipping point. If there is a reduction in uptake, we will lose qualified teachers and people will no longer train to do that job. When the financial circumstances improve, we will not be able to recover. Do you have a view on that?

Councillor McCabe: I will bring in Eddie Follan to answer those questions. On music tuition being treated differently, it is a discretionary service, so it is different. That is the reality.

Johann Lamont: If someone is doing a higher or advanced higher in music, they need to be able to perform two instruments—they cannot do the examination otherwise.

Councillor McCabe: We accept that.

Johann Lamont: In that sense, it is not discretionary. If, in people's heads, the tuition bit is seen as different, rather than fundamental, is it treated differently? I do not disagree with you at all about the financial context and the tough choices, but what reassurance can you give us about music not being treated differently from a science subject or a language?

Councillor McCabe: I would hope that all councils and all schools value music and will do their best to make it as accessible as possible to young people and support young people to achieve the qualifications that they are capable of achieving. However, music tuition is discretionary, unless it leads to an SQA qualification.

Johann Lamont: If something was fundamental to getting an SQA qualification in science or whatever, would the same view be taken that, somehow, its cost could be passed on to the school or the individual? What is the argument on that?

Councillor McCabe: Our view is that appropriate music tuition is provided to those who are studying for exams. I have read the committee papers, so I know that some take the view that tuition should start earlier—there is a debate to be had about that. As I said, I am no expert in music, but I imagine that, the earlier people start to learn an instrument, the better they will be by the time they do an exam. In an ideal world, I would like my council to provide free music tuition for pupils from a very early age in primary school and through to secondary school, but we do not live in such a world.

Johann Lamont: We would not ask somebody who was sitting higher French to start studying

French only in fifth year. I absolutely get the financial context, but people are exercised by the situation because, although there is a general good in music tuition, there is a fundamental need for it for those who are doing SQA music qualifications.

Councillor McCabe: Music tuition does not start in fifth year.

Johann Lamont: My point is about music tuition being discretionary. If I have to be taught an instrument in order to sit my higher, is it fair for me or my school to be expected to pay for tuition because it is regarded as discretionary? Is music seen as being different? Is music tuition seen as a bonus rather than a necessary part of a course?

Councillor McCabe: Music tuition is clearly seen as being different, because it is a discretionary service. Eddie Follan will talk about the detail.

Eddie Follan: I do not have much to add. I take the point that there is an issue and a debate to be had. In developing the guidance, perhaps we can look at unintended consequences. That is as much as we can do.

Councillor McCabe: I ask Johann Lamont to remind me of her second question.

Johann Lamont: It was about—I have forgotten my own question. I am interested in whether COSLA has an approach to looking at the offer of subjects across the board. If a school has no geography teacher, it can no longer offer pupils the opportunity to take geography. In the broader context, when people make tough budget choices, that limits the breadth of opportunities in schools. That is not necessarily the fault of local authorities, but it is another consequence of the funding challenges.

Councillor McCabe: We have not looked at that issue in particular, but the reasons are not just financial—funding is a big part, but another aspect is the shortage of teachers. A question was asked about workforce planning, on which we have huge issues across the education estate.

The committee has touched on the next generation of music instructors. Councils are under pressure not just to charge for tuition but to reduce the number of music instructors. That is the simple reality. Some councils have reduced, or have savings options to reduce, the number of music instructors—that might involve instructors in instruments that are not particularly popular and where numbers are limited. Councils are looking not just at charging but at savings that might reduce the number of music instructors.

Johann Lamont: The fundamental point is that cutting too deep or making certain choices now

will mean that provision cannot survive until the financial context is better.

Councillor McCabe: Yes—that is the harsh reality of decisions that we make day to day. We can sit here and discuss music tuition, but another committee can discuss another area. Hard decisions are being made as a consequence of decisions that elected members of the Parliament have made.

If members are concerned about reductions and cuts in the essential services that are provided by local government, they have an opportunity to address that in the coming weeks and months by giving local government a fair settlement.

10:45

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): On the issue of a fair settlement, COSLA has made a submission to the Government in relation to next week's budget. Does that submission mention music?

Councillor McCabe: It does not mention music specifically. We are looking for a fair settlement overall; we have not made a specific ask on music. If we were to get the settlement that we are seeking, that would make it far easier for councils to protect services such as music provision.

Tavish Scott: I assume that, when COSLA makes that submission, across the portfolios that you are responsible for—you made a fair point about the spread of council services—you build up the number that comes in at the top line. You are responsible for the education aspects, but music is not included in that ask.

Councillor McCabe: No, but it is part of the overall cost of delivering education. We would obviously look at what it would cost to deliver the same service next year, which would involve an element of inflation. Lauren Bruce is our expert on that area.

Lauren Bruce (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I am sorry—my voice might go. If it does, I apologise.

Music provision is part of local authorities' core budgets. Since 2011-12, because of initiative funding, core budgets have reduced from 98 per cent of the funding that local government receives through the block grant to 88 per cent of that funding. Because of ring fencing of various parts of the budget, including the part for teacher numbers, and the cost of delivering health and social care and so on, the savings that local authorities must make from core budgets can be taken from only 42 per cent of the budget that comes to them. When we talk about core budgets, we are talking about services such as music tuition. The impact of reductions on those core

budgets is significant and it becomes more significant every year. In addition, the impact becomes more significant the more ring-fenced pots of money and initiative funding we have.

That is where the sticking plaster that Councillor McCabe talked about makes things difficult for local government, because it deals with issues in quite a siloed and singular way, which is not the way in which local authorities must set their budgets. The core funding is what we are talking about when we talk about instrumental music tuition. Protection of the core is vital.

Tavish Scott: That is very fair.

On the policy, it seems from your earlier answers that you are not arguing for a dedicated fund of £4 million that would enable you to do away with charges for music tuition. That is not part of your pitch, is it?

Councillor McCabe: No.

Tavish Scott: Therefore, by definition, you are not arguing for ring fencing.

Councillor McCabe: That is correct.

Tavish Scott: When we ask the Government what it will do about the issue, your request is not that we ask it to include a ring-fenced amount for music tuition; you are arguing for the core funding to be augmented. However, the Government—never mind the Parliament—will have no say on decisions about what will happen to music tuition in the future, because that is a democratic responsibility of your councils.

Councillor McCabe: That is fair to say.

Rona Mackay: Do you know of any local authorities that have piloted a different framework for introducing music? You mentioned good practice. Will you issue guidance on that to the other local authorities?

Eddie Follan: I cannot give specific examples, but we know that the music education partnership group works with and is aware of many local authorities that do things a bit differently. Two weeks ago, we heard from councils that have introduced initiatives. I think that Perth and Kinross Council has introduced bursaries. We are looking at work that we can highlight as good practice that authorities could adopt to take the pressure off. That would be a central part of the guidance. We will work with MEPG on developing that.

Rona Mackay: I want to go back to Johann Lamont's question about discretionary subjects. It strikes me that music is a creative subject in the same way that art is a creative subject, yet art does not seem to be singled out in the same way. Do you have a view on that?

Councillor McCabe: I do not have a view on that. It is not something that I have thought about.

Eddie Follan: When there was a debate on the issue back in 2012, it was generally recognised that there was a cost to music tuition and learning a musical instrument that might not be attached to other subjects. That is the only thing that I can think of. There are costs involved with the instrument, travel and orchestra activities. Although we recognise that there are challenges, we must also recognise that a whole load of good work goes on with orchestras and music initiatives right across Scotland.

Rona Mackay: So it is not that music is seen as a luxury subject; it is that it is seen as the easiest one to cut when it comes to costs.

Councillor McCabe: I would not say that it is a luxury subject, but the resources required, in terms of music tuition, instruments and so on, are more costly than for any other subject.

Dr Allan: In a sense, I will pick up on the point that Ms Lamont raised, which is relevant. The students told us of an overwhelming disparity between people with a private school background who study music after school and those with other backgrounds. In response to Ms Lamont's question, you have undertaken to look at some of those questions, so will you also consider issues of equality and inequality? I cannot think of other subjects where a pupil is told in fifth year, "You haven't been able to get to the necessary stage to do advanced higher. We'll offer you the necessary tuition now, but it's too late."

Councillor McCabe: Music, like every other subject, involves lifelong learning. You can pursue music and other qualifications throughout your life.

Dr Allan: Not if you cannot afford to.

Councillor McCabe: There are lots of things that you cannot do in this world and in this life because you cannot afford to. That is the simple reality.

Dr Allan: What about chemistry?

Councillor McCabe: I am not talking about particular subjects; I am talking about things in life that some people can do because their parents can afford them and other things that they may not be able to do because their parents cannot afford them. That is life, unfortunately. It reflects the unequal society that we live in.

Dr Allan: But you would not apply that argument to chemistry.

Councillor McCabe: I am not applying it to chemistry, but the reality is that music tuition is a discretionary service. It is a costly service, and there is a cost involved in getting particular instruments. Legislatively, it is a discretionary

service. That is the difference. We are not comparing like with like. The Parliament may choose to change that, and that is entirely a decision for you, but we are dealing with the situation as it stands now and with the very difficult choices that councils have to make. I reiterate that I am absolutely sure that no council would wish to charge for services if they thought that there was a better alternative, and I am sure that no council would charge if we were properly funded.

The Convener: We have spoken to a number of young people in different contexts during our investigation. Many who were not going on to study music talked about their experience of the instrumental music service and orchestras. They said that, for them, it was not about achieving a level of excellence in music but about the friendship groups and the additional skills that they gained from working in a group and not letting people down. Young people's mental health is a huge issue for all of us, and all those young people expressed the view that music can reduce stress. From speaking to council representatives, that seems to be well understood by some councils, but perhaps not by other councils. The budget decisions that are being made are not being made on the same basis, because music is considered a vital core subject in some areas and not in others. Has COSLA taken a view on the approach to music from that point of view? The unintended consequence of losing that service across the councils has been mentioned.

Councillor McCabe: We do not have a particular view at this point in time. There are many views in local government about the value of music. I value music and I think that all young people should be able to pursue the things that they are interested in, whether that be sport or music or some other form of art, and we want to create as many opportunities as we can for young people. We will reflect on the outcome of the inquiry. We are not conducting an inquiry on the issue ourselves because we do not have a remit to do so from our board, but we will listen and reflect and we will take the outcome of your inquiry back to our board for consideration. If there are lessons that can be learned from the inquiry, councils will give them serious consideration.

The Convener: That concludes our questions. I thank Councillor McCabe and the officials from COSLA. We appreciate your engagement with the committee this morning.

10:55

Meeting suspended.

10:59

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel: the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, John Swinney; and Malcolm Pentland, head of the curriculum unit at the Scottish Government. The cabinet secretary will make an opening statement.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Thank you, convener. The Scottish Government recognises the importance to Scotland's culture and economy of all the expressive arts. We also know of the many significant benefits that participation in music and the arts can have for the lives of our children and young people and their families. Participation in music and the arts provides children and young people with opportunities to be creative and imaginative, and to experience inspiration and enjoyment, which greatly contribute to their mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing.

Opportunities for children and young people to learn to play a musical instrument through tuition in our schools are an important element of participation in the arts. Scotland's music education system has an instrumental music service operating in every local authority, which is highly regarded across the United Kingdom and internationally for its quality and inclusivity. That was highlighted in the instrumental music group's 2013 report, "Instrumental music tuition in Scotland". I understand and share the concerns of young people, their parents and families and those who work in the sector over any reduction in the quality or reach of such services in any part of Scotland.

As the committee is aware, the Scottish education system is set up in such a way that decision making is devolved to the most appropriate level, which enables local education authorities to make choices that meet their local circumstances and needs. Local authorities decide how to provide instrumental music tuition, based on local circumstances, priorities and traditions. While maintaining respect for the autonomy of our local authorities, the Scottish Government is committed to working collaboratively with partners. A working group, led by the chair of the music education partnership group, which brings together representation from the Government and COSLA, is actively considering ways to ensure that instrumental music tuition remains accessible. That work is on-going and progress is being made to ensure that there are minimum eligibility criteria for full concessions for tuition in certain circumstances and on the development of clear guidance for local authorities.

I welcome the committee's interest in the issue and the opportunity to answer questions from members. I look forward to fully considering the conclusions of the committee's inquiry, the outcomes of the working group and the recommendations of the "What's going on now?" report, which is to be published early in the new year.

Iain Gray: Good morning, cabinet secretary. I will ask about the evidence that the committee has heard about the breadth of variation in the schemes for instrumental music tuition. In your opening remarks, you made the perfectly correct point that those are local decisions, made by local authorities. Nonetheless, the current position varies between authorities that provide free instrumental tuition for all children and others that ask families to contribute a few hundred pounds for each child. Are you content with the variation or concerned about it?

John Swinney: As you correctly say, there is variation. Some authorities do not charge at all for instrumental music tuition and others charge what I consider to be significant amounts of money in a year. Yes, I am concerned about that range, because there is clearly a risk that the cost inhibits the participation of young people in instrumental music tuition. Given the context of my remarks to the committee, the committee would be right to conclude that I view participation in instrumental music tuition as advantageous to young people in Scotland.

Iain Gray: I appreciate that. The committee has heard evidence that there is a risk that some children are discouraged from participating because of charges. For example, evidence from the Improvement Service showed that even young people who would not have to pay because they are eligible for free school meals actually participate less in instrumental music tuition than the rest of the school population. I know that you are concerned about, and often talk about, equity in our education system. Does that therefore worry you?

John Swinney: Yes. There are factors, with which we are all familiar, around eligibility for free school meals, which weighed heavily in the Government's consideration when we moved to make school meals free for pupils in primary 1 to 3. We felt that there was a danger that young people who were eligible for free school meals were not taking them up and getting their nutritional value during the day because they were essentially discouraged from doing so by the danger of stigma. The same issue can apply with instrumental music tuition. Schools, with their knowledge of pupils and circumstances, can handle those matters in a careful fashion, to make sure that there is not an impediment to young

people participating. However, I accept that there is a risk of that.

Iain Gray: You gave the example of addressing a problem by moving to universality in the provision of free school meals for pupils from P1 to P3. All the evidence that we have heard from local authorities is that decisions to increase or impose charging for instrumental music tuition were taken for reasons of financial constraint. Nobody told us that they introduced charging because they thought that, educationally speaking, it was a good idea; they all said that it was about balancing the budget.

An obvious way out of this would be for the Scottish Government to provide central funding to allow instrumental music tuition to be provided free across the board. This morning, that point was put to Councillor McCabe from COSLA, who made it clear that that would not be COSLA's preferred option, because it does not like ring fencing, but that, from a pragmatic point of view, it would be open to that discussion. Have you considered that possibility or discussed it with COSLA?

John Swinney: I have not considered it yet. The data shows that, despite all the general issues that are raised about local authority finance, some local authorities attach a priority to this by making access to instrumental music tuition free. That is the case in a number of local authorities, including some of our significant ones—Dundee, Edinburgh, Western Isles, Glasgow, Orkney Islands, Renfrewshire and West Dunbartonshire. In the context of the challenges that surround the public finances, some local authorities have taken a policy decision that access should be free. Other local authorities have taken decisions to charge at modest levels and some authorities have applied higher charges. Fundamentally, the issue that emerges from the evidence that is available to us is that some local authorities recognise the value of instrumental music tuition and want to put in place no barriers to access to it as a consequence of the decisions that they have made about their finances.

Iain Gray: The same arguments would apply to the level of the school clothing grant, where the Government took the view that it would provide additional funding in order to have a more equitable service. Why is this different?

John Swinney: In some circumstances, local authorities are opting to provide an entirely free service.

Iain Gray: Some of them had high levels of school clothing grants, too.

John Swinney: There is a difference between school clothing grants and instrumental music tuition. Clothing grants are about making sure that young people are properly supported to maintain

accessibility to education. To me, that is a pretty fundamental point about the ability of young people to participate in education. Instrumental music tuition is not available to every pupil. What we have to be careful about—this is where individual local authorities are making judgments—is that we retain accessibility for young people who have an interest in and an enthusiasm for pursuing that tuition.

In a different area of our policy agenda, through the youth music initiative, we are making it possible for all pupils to have some experience of instrumental music tuition. I equate that provision with the school clothing grant, because it is about ensuring that young people who have an interest in such tuition and the aptitude to pursue it can do so without impediment.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): In 1980, the UK Government began direct funding of places at the private St Mary's Music School in Edinburgh. Since devolution, that has been continued, first by the Scottish Executive and then by the Scottish Government. That practice involves more than £1 million a year of public money going to a private music school for funded places. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the value for money that the provision of that funding offers?

John Swinney: We consider on an annual basis, in dialogue with St Mary's Music School, the considerations that are relevant in relation to that public expenditure. We assess the contribution that is made to the development of music education in Scotland as a consequence, and we judge the funding that is made available to the school on the basis of that assessment.

Ross Greer: It does not appear—publicly, at least—that such an assessment has been made, but I accept that a substantial portion of budget setting each year does not work in that way.

At the beginning of the inquiry process, a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament who had been affected by the increase in charges for music tuition in West Lothian's public schools described the situation as creating Victorian levels of inequality. When music tuition in our state schools is being squeezed as a result of wider budget constraints, can you understand why the provision of significant funding to a private music school might appear to compound those Victorian levels of inequality?

John Swinney: I do not really see a connection between the two issues. St Mary's Music School is an institution of musical excellence that has received funding from the public purse on a long-standing basis. The Government also supports specialist artistic institutions in our state school system. Broughton high school is one such school

that is supported directly. Through the local government settlement for Highland Council, we support the music school in Plockton. We also support the dance school that is part of Drumchapel high school. There are a number of ways in which we support specialist artistic provision in the state system. In addition, instrumental music tuition is provided through the state school sector in general, although the issue of charging that Mr Greer raises might present a financial impediment to some people's participation in that education.

Ross Greer: You mentioned that there are centres of excellence in our state school system—there are four centres of excellence for music. Why does the Government believe that it offers greater value for money to provide between £1.2 million and £1.3 million a year to St Mary's than it does to provide that funding to the centres of excellence in our state system or elsewhere in the state system?

John Swinney: We do so because we acknowledge the long-standing value to musical education in Scotland that St Mary's has provided. The school has acknowledged expertise. The Government has judged that it would not be appropriate to discontinue that support. We recognise the value that it provides and the specialist opportunities that it offers for young people to thrive as a consequence of their participation at the school.

Ross Greer: The block grant for local government, which results in music tuition being provided—to a greater or lesser extent—in state schools, has obviously been cut since 2010. We will have that debate all over again this year, in the coming weeks. Over the same period, the grant that is given to St Mary's—a private school—has not reduced at all. Why is that the case, when the funding that is provided to public schools that will eventually provide the same service has been reduced?

11:15

John Swinney: Local authority expenditure involves a variety of issues. Since 2010, the Government has had to wrestle with significant reductions in our budget and, in that context, we have dealt fairly with local government. In the past three years, local authority education expenditure has increased; in the current and past financial years, there have been real-terms increases.

It is important to bear in mind all the elements of the pattern of local authority financing that have taken their course. Within that perspective on local authority financing, some local authorities—I recounted their names to Mr Gray—have decided not to charge for instrumental music tuition.

The issues in connection with St Mary's Music School raise questions about the viability of institutions if we significantly reduce the resources that are available to them. The Government would have to consider carefully the consequence of actions that could be taken if financing was reduced.

Ross Greer: A Scottish statutory instrument on funding for St Mary's was last made in 2015. When does the Government intend to bring forward the next SSI on St Mary's?

John Swinney: I would have to check the details of what is required to answer that. I suspect that an SSI would be required only if we were increasing the provision in the financing arrangements. I do not want to prejudge the finance secretary's budget next week, so I had better not give Mr Greer's question a more specific answer, or I really will be in difficulty.

Ross Greer: I understand.

Dr Allan: I and other members asked the COSLA representatives who were here earlier about whether they go beyond saying that such things are a matter for local authorities and whether they have a collective position or take collective responsibility. I am interested in your take on the question that I asked about the agreement that was reached between the Government and COSLA in 2013 following the report of the Government's working group on instrumental music tuition.

To be honest, the COSLA witnesses were a bit vague about whether local authorities are still living up to what they agreed in 2013 on instrumental music tuition and what should and should not be done. Does the Government have a view on whether local authorities are living up to what they promised?

John Swinney: The committee's inquiry, my discussions with the music education partnership group and my encouragement of local government to participate in the working group that has been set up under the auspices of the partnership group, which includes the Government, indicate my concern about where the issue is moving to. I am concerned because, if participation in instrumental music tuition diminishes, the nature, diversity and opportunity of our education system will be diminished.

Many such issues underpinned the consideration that led to the work that was done in 2012 and 2013. The danger is that the circumstances that caused concern then are about to reappear in 2018. That is why we are taking forward the collaborative approach that we have adopted.

There are careful judgments to make. As members are aware, and as I said in my opening remarks, the Government fully respects local authorities' autonomy. We want to work with them to address the questions and ensure that there is no diminution of instrumental music provision, which would be detrimental to young people's wellbeing.

Dr Allan: This question relates to questions that a number of members asked the previous witnesses. An on-going theme in the committee has been a particular undertaking that was given in 2013 by local authorities, which was that they would not charge for instrumental tuition that leads to an SQA qualification. Do you have a view on whether they are living up to that? A number of witnesses, including people from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and many others, have asked whether it is practical to ask people to sit advanced higher music if they have, since a year or two before the exam, been unable to afford the tuition that gets them to the position of being able to actually sit the exam.

John Swinney: On the hard question of whether local authorities are charging young people for instrumental music tuition that is an integral part of an SQA qualification, I see no evidence of that happening. The exception that I am concerned about is what I see Midlothian Council doing, which I think is not consistent with the spirit of that 2013 commitment. It might be just about passable in terms of the letter of the commitment, but not with the spirit of the point that was made in the 2013 report.

There is another issue, which is what happens prior to S4 participation in national 4, national 5 and other qualifications, and whether access to instrumental music tuition is in any way hindered by the existence of any form of charging. That, of course, gets into the differentiation between authorities that do not charge at all, those that charge something and those that charge quite significant amounts. We have to look carefully at participation levels in order to ensure that no obstacles are, as a result of their preparation before S4, being put in the path of young people who want to access those qualifications.

Liz Smith: I will follow up on SQA qualifications. I agree that there are concerns in Midlothian. It is obviously a difficult issue, because there is devolved autonomy for local authorities—and, indeed, for individual schools. Given what you have said previously, both in the chamber and in committee, do you accept that it is not appropriate to levy SQA charges on individual families for any SQA exam?

John Swinney: Yes, I accept that.

Liz Smith: If that is the Government's policy, which I think we all agree with, would you be concerned about circumstances such as those in Midlothian, where other cutbacks in the authority might end up with a headteacher deciding to charge parents—in particular, for music, which seems to be being singled out from other subjects—to get that extra money for an SQA exam?

John Swinney: It seems to me that there are quite a lot of hypothetical points for me to respond to in that question. In principle, my point is that families should not be charged for participation in SQA exams. The Midlothian example is—based on the justification that I have seen from that authority—giving discretion to individual schools to decide the level of participation to meet the internal charge. That needs to be considered within the scope of how much discretion an individual school has over its finances, because the significance of that decision on music tuition will have a direct relationship to the degree of control that the school has over its wider finances. I do not think that that control is as wide as it would need to be to make that judgment entirely transparent and reasonable.

Liz Smith: We have received an awful lot of evidence in the past month or so to the effect that people feel very strongly that music is the poor relation and that other subjects are not attracting the same debate or discussion. Do you accept that that is creating inequity and a feeling that if people want to pursue music in their SQA qualifications, not only does there have to be good choice available in S4, S5 and S6, but there is an impact further down the school? Do you accept that music is being singled out and having particular difficulties in that respect?

John Swinney: I do not see why that would be the case, given that the broad general education encompasses eight curricular areas including the expressive arts and music. We look carefully at the way in which the broad general education is delivered across schools to make sure that young people are receiving a holistic education that reflects those eight curricular areas. I do not see why what Liz Smith has suggested should inherently be the case. However—this refers back to my response to Dr Allan—if a young person has had exposure to instrumental music tuition, that will obviously be of assistance to them in pursuing the SQA qualification at a later stage, in the senior phase. There is, therefore, a relationship there. However, in terms of the broad general education, I do not see that a direct connection could be applied.

Liz Smith: One of the trainee music teachers who came to speak to us via the Royal Conservatoire made the point that the family of

one youngster in a class with which they had been involved had decided that, because they would not be able to afford the tuition fees further up the school, they did not bother doing anything about music further down the school. What would you say to that trainee teacher? Do you accept that such situations impact on the choices that are available to youngsters, particularly those from deprived communities?

John Swinney: Charges might well have that impact, which is why we have to be concerned and anxious about the scale and nature of charges that are levied by some local authorities.

Jenny Gilruth: I want to follow up Liz Smith's line of questioning. To varying extents, local authorities across the country look at aptitude—although I do not like to use that word—as early as primary 4 to identify whether a child should be offered music tuition. I heard you say that early exposure to musical instruments is useful to pupils who want to pursue a qualification at SQA level later in their academic journey. What are your views on use of selective testing? Should there be conformity across the board in respect of when children are offered music tuition and in which instruments such tuition is offered?

John Swinney: That would get us to a level of prescription that would run at odds with our approach to delivery of the curriculum in Scottish education. Schools make individual judgments as to how exposure to instrumental music tuition fits in with the wider curriculum. I would be cautious about taking the approach that Jenny Gilruth suggests, because I think that that would mean, essentially, application of an approach to music tuition that is not reflected in our wider approach to the curriculum.

Jenny Gilruth: I will jump back to Iain Gray's line of questioning on exemptions. We talked about free school meals entitlement perhaps being used as a criterion for exemption from fees; COSLA accepted that that should be the minimum criterion. There are variations nationally—some local authorities offer discounts for siblings, for example. Should a national standard on exemptions be considered? I am concerned that some local authorities write to parents to advise them of whether their child is entitled to an exemption, which is perhaps not the best method of communication. Do you have a view on exemptions and consistency across the board?

11:30

John Swinney: Wherever a charge is applied that might have exemptions based on income background—or whatever judgments are applied in that respect—such issues must be handled with great care by individual schools. As I explained in

my response to Iain Gray, we have seen that eligibility for free school meals can sometimes create stigma for young people.

Schools that use pupil equity funding might use it to provide particular interventions for all pupils, but judgments might require to be deployed to take into account the circumstances of individual young people. I see very good practice in how such judgments are arrived at and handled in dialogue with families. The key issue is the knowledge that schools have of individual families and their circumstances, which is a great advantage in enabling schools to make a judgment about how they can sensibly deal with those questions.

Oliver Mundell: You have been very candid in acknowledging the concerns that have come before the committee. There is lots of talk of discussing things with stakeholders and moving cautiously. Can you identify anything that can be done to address some of the concerns without breaking the balance between local and central Government?

John Swinney: Yes. The offer from the music education partnership group to set up a specialist group—involving the Government and local authorities—to look at that question is really helpful. The measure will create a space where Government can get together with local government, music specialists and people who are driven by the agenda, in order to make some progress. Professor Wallace is very driven by the agenda and I applaud him for his energy on it. Obviously, the music education partnership group is undertaking research work on the question, and the committee is undertaking its inquiry. I hope that we can draw together the different elements to formulate an approach that can be widely supported, and that can ensure that the objectives that we are all interested in achieving can be fulfilled.

Oliver Mundell: Are there any specifics that you would like to see as part of whatever emerges? Do you have an idea of what you would like and expect to see in terms of music tuition?

John Swinney: I want young people to be able to access instrumental music tuition without finance being an obstacle to their participation. I am concerned about that. On a number of other matters—the availability of skilled professionals and opportunities for development—we have very good provision in place. However, I am concerned about cost potentially being an impediment for some young people.

Some local authorities have already taken the view that they will entertain no charges whatsoever, which provides a good illustration of how provision can be taken forward without

impediment. I am keen to ensure that we have an outcome whereby young people are not in any way impeded from participation because of cost.

Oliver Mundell: If we do not get to the point at which it is possible for local authorities to provide tuition, what happens then?

John Swinney: An answer would prejudice the process that we are engaged in, but I am keen to make progress on that question.

Tavish Scott: Have you received any submissions asking for the £4 million cost of charging across Scotland to be covered by the Government?

John Swinney: I have not.

Tavish Scott: Would you entertain such a submission?

John Swinney: Obviously, people are free to come to me with whatever propositions they want to bring. People are not backward at coming forward to ask me to pay for things. I would therefore not be surprised if I received such a proposition.

I was interested to hear Tavish Scott's questions to Councillor McCabe earlier on what might be the arrangements and circumstances for such an approach. It was pretty clear from Councillor McCabe's evidence that local government does not like ring fencing. That will be a material issue in the conversations.

Tavish Scott: You have pre-empted a number of my questions. I presume that you will therefore remove ring fencing on teacher numbers.

John Swinney: We have an agreement with local government about boosting teacher numbers. We are keen for that to be sustained in the coming period.

Tavish Scott: Thank you, but I am not sure that that was quite how Councillor McCabe described the situation.

Maybe the rather more important question is about the discretionary nature of teaching music in our schools. Is the Government giving any consideration to whether the service should remain discretionary? Should there be a change in its status?

John Swinney: A change could well emerge from the discussions that we are having with the music education partnership group. I am concerned about the dangers that might lie ahead in relation to levels of participation in instrumental music tuition, so I need to be open to considering the question that Tavish Scott has raised so that I can address that issue. Scottish education would be poorer if there were to be diminished participation in instrumental music tuition. If we

cannot find a way of advancing that agenda in collaboration, we might need to look at other approaches.

For completeness, I should say—this relates to my response to Liz Smith—that in broad general education there is a presumption that young people will be exposed to music as part of the expressive arts element of the curriculum.

Tavish Scott: Indeed.

Another point that Councillor McCabe made this morning was that this is not a case of "applying sticking plasters"; it is about core funding for local authorities and schools. Do you accept his argument that, at the moment, musical tuition financial support is contained within the structure of local government funding?

John Swinney: Yes. In 2007, at the start of this Administration, I took a decision to remove a great deal of ring fencing from local authority finances. The purpose of that was to enhance local authorities' spending power through removing, in essence, false barriers from elements of public expenditure. The removal of ring fencing gave much more capacity for local authority resources to be stretched further, because of the way in which they were able to draw together different elements of funding, rather than having to observe the specific constraints and requirements of individual ring fences. The key argument that I accepted from local government was that removal of ring fencing would expand local authorities' spending power.

Obviously, instrumental music tuition is part of the block grant—if we can call it that—to local authorities. Within the financial constraints with which everybody wrestles, a number of local authorities provide instrumental music tuition at no cost to individuals.

Tavish Scott: You read out the number of councils that provide free instrumental music tuition in your opening statement. The majority of councils are not providing that service. Ultimately, is it not the case that there is a trade-off on this issue? Central Government can decide whether to fund the service, and you are saying that you will not do so directly; local government endorsed that position and is not asking for the service to be funded directly. Therefore, there is no ring fencing and the issue is about core funding. Local government does not think that it has enough core funding—Mr McCabe used the phrase "chronic underfunding". I am not asking you to debate that, because we could be here all day; I am asking about the principle. If there is not enough core funding, I do not see how the situation with music tuition across Scotland will improve.

John Swinney: Among the names on the list of authorities that I read out are a couple of smaller

authorities—the Western Isles Council and Orkney Islands Council—but there are a number of authorities that cover large shares of the population, including our two largest cities, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and Dundee, Renfrewshire, which is one of the largest local authorities, and West Dunbartonshire. Those authorities represent a significant proportion of pupils across the country.

Tavish Scott: That is no consolation for pupils who do not live there.

John Swinney: I accept that, and it raises issues. Clackmannanshire Council, which is one of the smallest mainland local authorities, charges more than any other local authority. Financial challenges will exist, but we cannot glide past the fact that a substantial proportion of young people in Scotland do not pay for instrumental music tuition because they live in areas that are covered by the local authorities that can fund such tuition through the existing local government settlement.

Tavish Scott: Thank you.

The Convener: Mr MacDonald, did you have a further question?

Gordon MacDonald: My question has been covered.

Johann Lamont: I do not think that we want to rehearse the different arguments on local government finance, but do you at least accept Councillor McCabe's point that local authorities do not take the decision to charge for music tuition lightly? They have to make a lot of hard choices. In their view, the decision to charge is due not to discrimination against music tuition but simply to the fact that they have to make hard choices?

John Swinney: I am sure that that is the case.

Johann Lamont: Do you also accept that, although the Government has a working partnership with local authorities, the relationship cannot be equal, because the Government provides 85 per cent of local authority funding?

John Swinney: I do not see the relevance of that point.

Johann Lamont: If I am in a room with somebody on whom I rely for 85 per cent of my funding, and I have to make tough choices, we do not have an equal relationship. Whatever the complexion of the Scottish Government, it makes decisions on funding that have an impact on local authorities and over which the local authorities have no control. I would think that that is evident.

John Swinney: If that is the case, how are some of our largest authorities, which cover a significant proportion of pupils in Scotland, able to offer free tuition?

Johann Lamont: Is your contention that the issue is not about funding but is about different attitudes to music tuition? I agree that Glasgow City Council does not charge—my family has greatly benefited from that free tuition and I am very proud of what Glasgow City Council has done very successfully for many years. However, the council's education convener, Chris Cunningham, said that local government has been disproportionately affected by decisions to cut budgets. Although Glasgow City Council is funding music tuition, I got the sense that Mr Cunningham believes that there are consequences elsewhere. In some local authorities, funding free music tuition has consequences for the other choices that they make.

John Swinney: Johann Lamont prefaced her first question by saying that we would not rehearse the arguments about local government finance, but we are about to do that. The Government has faced very difficult financial choices since 2010, as a consequence of the sustained austerity that has been applied to the Scottish budget. As part of the Government's response, I think that we have treated local government fairly. On that basis, I do not think that local government has had to endure a disproportionately greater challenge than the Scottish Government has, and a number of local authorities, including some of our largest authorities, are able to fund free instrumental music tuition. Therefore, choices are being made, but it is important that we do not simply say that the answer is for the Government to provide more resources to local government in general, because some local authorities are attaching a greater priority to the service than others are.

Johann Lamont: The Scottish National Party's Chris Cunningham, who is the education convener at Glasgow City Council, said that he believes that local authorities are disproportionately affected by cuts. The Government has made that choice and I do not understand why you do not simply own the choice and say that the Government has made its decision on financing. COSLA and other organisations are saying that, as a consequence, they are having to make tough decisions. Some local authorities are targeting music tuition; others are doing different things.

I will move on to the question of whether music is treated differently from other subjects. Is there a view at Scottish Government level on the curriculum and on which subjects must be available in secondary schools?

11:45

John Swinney: The design of curriculum for excellence is structured around eight curricular areas. It is expected that the experience that young people should have as part of the broad

general education up to the conclusion of S3 should include exposure to music education. That expectation is clearly distilled in advice from Education Scotland. In my view, participation in music is a critical part of enabling young people to do what curriculum for excellence aims to achieve through the delivery of the four capacities, which are about ensuring that we equip young people for the world that they will have to face.

Johann Lamont: Do you monitor the range of subjects that are offered to young people in secondary schools? Of course we want young people to have the opportunity to do music. We could argue that they should have the opportunity to study geography, history and modern studies, but the evidence might suggest that the subject choices are narrowing. Do you monitor that?

John Swinney: We look carefully at the delivery of the broad general education, which continues until the end of S3. When we look at the range of qualifications that are achieved by young people, we see a pattern of rising attainment as a consequence of young people's participation in the senior phase of education.

Johann Lamont: It is possible to have a rise in attainment and a narrowing of subjects, which will narrow pupils' opportunities at a later stage.

My final question has been prompted by the suggestion that you should devolve decision making to headteachers. I think that Midlothian Council has suggested that decision making should be devolved to schools, which could decide whether to make music tuition accessible. Some people are concerned about that. Under your model of devolving more power to headteachers, could you envisage a situation in which a headteacher might express a desire for their school to be a centre of expertise in music, drama or something else and might therefore choose not to invest in another area of the curriculum? Could that happen under your model, which involves giving significant powers to headteachers? Could that result in a situation under the model that is being pursued in Midlothian in which a headteacher decided not to offer music tuition but to use the money for something else?

John Swinney: No, because the model of empowered schools that I am progressing is set within the framework of curriculum for excellence, which imposes a requirement on schools to ensure that young people have a broad general education that supports the objectives and aims of CFE.

Johann Lamont: That would not require the headteacher to ensure that everybody could be offered an advanced higher in music.

John Swinney: But no such requirement exists today.

Johann Lamont: Either we are empowering headteachers or we are not.

John Swinney: We are, but we are—

Johann Lamont: I am wondering whether the approach that Midlothian Council is exploring would be easier under your model of giving more powers to headteachers.

John Swinney: No. The question that arises, which I rehearsed in my response to Liz Smith about the Midlothian Council model, is what degree of financial flexibility the headteacher has and what level of resources they control. I am sceptical about whether, in that model, the headteacher has extensive control over finances in the school. It looks to me as though an internal charge is being passed on to a school without the commensurate degree of financial flexibility—

Johann Lamont: But your preferred model would be for the headteacher to have more authority and control.

John Swinney: That is absolutely correct.

Johann Lamont: Therefore, if a headteacher decided not to invest in the music tuition that would be required to enable a young person to take a higher or advanced higher in music, that would be acceptable to you, because it would be a case of devolving decision making.

John Swinney: No, it would not. As I said in my earlier answer, under the model that I am pursuing, we will expect headteachers to deliver the full range that is envisaged under curriculum for excellence.

Johann Lamont: I think that it is impossible for it to be both things at once.

Rona Mackay: Cabinet secretary, could I have your view on the option of music tuition being delivered through a national agency or perhaps a move towards the Finnish model, where I think there are about 89 Government-subsidised music schools and music tuition is mandatory in primary schools? Is that something to consider for down the line?

John Swinney: I am reluctant to think about the creation of a new national agency to deliver music education tuition. That is not the problem that we have here; we have capacity and capability in the education system to provide instrumental music tuition. The model of a national agency that Ms Mackay raises is something that would be established to address a weakness in that respect that I do not think exists.

On the question of centres of excellence, again, we have taken some decisions over time to recognise that a focus on developing expertise in this area exists in a certain limited number of schools around the country. However, I am

interested in making sure that, across the education system, there is participation in and exposure to music education, which is available to all young people. That is an important characteristic of the service that we have today and it should be maintained in the future.

The Convener: I will pick up a couple of points. We had a discussion with COSLA and we have talked about COSLA not liking ring fencing. However, the youth music initiative strikes me as a project in which the policy objectives of the Government have been met by the partners that are delivering it in COSLA. The YMI works very well and we heard nothing but praise for it, so do you think that there are mechanisms that can be used to achieve your policy objectives working with COSLA?

John Swinney: That is an example of the collaborative approach, which can be successful, and it is certainly something that is worth exploring as part of the working group in which we are both participating.

The Convener: Finally, we heard a lot about sustainability and the idea that we are at a tipping point for music tuition, whose position is becoming precarious for the future because of the pressures. When we met the young people from the conservatoire, we heard that a couple had come through the Glasgow schools and were exposed to music there, but every one of them had to have additional funding through bursaries to cover grades and access to the conservatoire juniors or other projects that they were involved in. Also, every single one of the young people we spoke to, from whatever background and whatever school, had to have additional training, particularly for piano, which they need to be able to perform at grade 8 to access the conservatoire to become music teachers. However, we are unaware of piano being taught anywhere other than through private tuition. Do you have concerns about whether the curriculum is supporting people in our state schools who have an aspiration to become music teachers?

John Swinney: We certainly have to make sure that the curriculum experience is sufficiently broad to enable young people to access those pathways into higher education. If there are specific areas where there are impediments to that, I am certainly happy to explore them.

Jenny Gilruth: I have a brief supplementary to Rona Mackay's line of questioning about music tuition being developed at a national level. Is there an opportunity to look at how it could be driven forward through the regional improvement collaboratives with regard to consistency of provision and sharing good practice at a local level?

John Swinney: Undoubtedly, there is an opportunity to do that. The regional improvement collaboratives have been established and are making good progress and having a significant impact in the education system, because what they are about is sharing expertise and good practice to enhance provision in individual schools around the country. Undoubtedly, there is an opportunity for such collaboration to assist in overcoming some of the challenges that we face.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, thank you very much for your attendance. I thank Mr Pentland as well. We are about to move into private session but, before we do, as this is the committee's last public meeting before recess, I wish everyone the very best for the festive season.

11:54

Meeting continued in private until 12:05.

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