



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 28 February 2012

Session 4

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

7th Meeting 2012, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)

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

*Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland)

Terry Lanagan (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)

Bill Maxwell (Education Scotland)

John Wilson (East Renfrewshire Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 28 February 2012

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:01*]

Curriculum for Excellence

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning and welcome to the seventh meeting in 2012 of the Education and Culture Committee. As usual, I remind members to ensure that all mobile phones and other electronic devices are switched off. There are no apologies—we have a full turnout.

The first item of business is consideration of the wider implications of East Renfrewshire's recent decision to delay the introduction of the new national 4 and national 5 examinations as part of the roll-out of curriculum for excellence. I welcome to the meeting Dr Janet Brown, chief executive of the Scottish Qualifications Authority; Larry Flanagan, education convener of the Educational Institute of Scotland; Terry Lanagan, executive director of education services at West Dunbartonshire Council, who is representing the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland; Bill Maxwell, chief executive of Education Scotland; and John Wilson, director of education at East Renfrewshire Council. Members have received the written submissions and a short briefing paper from the Scottish Parliament information centre.

Before I seek questions from the committee, I ask whether members have any interests to declare.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I am a member of the EIS.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am a member of the General Teaching Council for Scotland.

Neil Findlay: I am a member of that, too.

The Convener: Are you declaring both interests?

Neil Findlay: Yes.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I would not usually declare this interest, but I should say that Mr Lanagan was assistant headteacher at my secondary school.

The Convener: I hope that that will not inhibit your questioning, Neil. Quite the opposite, I would have thought.

Neil Findlay: It's payback time.

The Convener: As everyone is being so honest this morning, I should declare that my daughter is a second-year pupil at an East Renfrewshire secondary school. That, of course, will not influence my questioning.

Members should indicate when they wish to ask questions. Instead of jumping about, we should stick to the same area and move on when we have finished.

Liz Smith: Good morning. I want to start with a very general question. As parliamentarians and people with considerable interest in education, we have been hearing slightly different perspectives from the different stakeholders we have spoken to. For example, many teachers on the ground have expressed concern about curriculum for excellence while the bodies that represent them officially have said that, although there might be some concerns, things are generally okay and on track. Will you comment on the fact that many teachers have spoken of considerable concerns? Is that a correct reflection of what is happening on the ground? How extensive are those concerns and to what extent do you feel obliged to rebut some of them?

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland): First, the reports are accurate. There are serious concerns among teachers not simply in the secondary sector, but in the primary sector, about a range of issues. Some of those concerns are natural, because change is happening. In this instance, it is a very big change.

The EIS is in the middle of carrying out a survey of our secondary members. It started last week and will finish next week. We have already had the biggest return from any recent survey that we have carried out. The key concerns that have been raised in the secondary sector are to do with the workload associated with the implementation of curriculum for excellence generally, the timeline for the new qualifications, given that 2013-14 is looming large, and the detail of the new qualifications, which at the moment is largely unknown to schools. There is concern because the detail is unknown; perhaps people will be more reassured when the detail is available to schools.

A number of issues are percolating. The general context is part of that—there are concerns to do with the McCormac review and pensions, for example—so curriculum for excellence can become a focus for a number of issues. Generally speaking, we have been supportive of curriculum for excellence from its inception, and we are still committed to seeing it realised as it was envisaged. Some of the concerns that we have now have arisen because the lack of resourcing, which is partly contingent on the economic

situation that we are in, is creating barriers in schools. Teachers feel that, on a range of fronts, the support is not there and that, at a time when class sizes are getting larger and teacher numbers are dropping, they are being asked to do more on delivering the curriculum.

In the secondary sector, the concern is focused on the new national qualifications, because the change from secondary 3 being year 1 of the two-year standard grade to S3 being year 3 of the broad general education and leading into the senior phase is not clearly understood in schools. There has been a failure to communicate the big messages, and the uncertainty is creating worry. When that is coupled with the other concerns about workload and so forth, we have a serious issue in schools. There is a lack of confidence in the way forward. It is not universal—some schools are good to go. I have had e-mails from people who have said that they do not want a delay but want to push ahead because they have done the work. Equally, I have had more communications in which people have said that a year's delay would give them breathing space and would ensure that curriculum for excellence would be delivered in the way in which we want it to be delivered. That uncertainty has led to the development of scenarios such as East Renfrewshire Council adopting its stance and some private schools taking a different approach, which has served only to heighten the confusion.

We are keen that the issue of workload be addressed by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, that we review the timeline that involves the big-bang approach, with all schools implementing at the same time, and that we address the provision of resources to schools. If we can deal with all three of those conundrums, we will have solved the problem and curriculum for excellence will have been saved. Otherwise, we will face a number of major problems.

Liz Smith: Is it your understanding that East Renfrewshire Council took its decision for exactly that reason—because it felt that it would like just a bit more time and that, if any other local authority or, indeed, any other school or individual department felt the same way, it should be allowed to adopt a slightly different timescale? In other words, it felt that there should be a bit more flexibility.

Larry Flanagan: I am sure that John Wilson will explain the reason for East Renfrewshire's decision, but my understanding is that the purpose of using the intermediates for a further year is to create a year's delay in the implementation of national 4 and 5, which will give schools a bit more time. East Renfrewshire's position is that it is unique in that it already does intermediate 1 and 2, but all schools deliver intermediate 1 and 2 and

are familiar with them from S5, so any school could adopt the same approach and create an additional year to allow national 4 and 5 to be absorbed by departments.

Our position is that we would have preferred an across-the-board delay but, failing that, we are saying that each school community—the staff in the school and the parents connected with it—should be allowed to make the decision based on their understanding of where they are at and their needs. If we do it on that basis, a number of schools will go ahead, possibly with a renewed drive because they have committed to implementation on their own terms. Schools that feel that they need extra time will gain that time, which will ensure that no pupil suffers as a result of the implementation possibly being rushed in a number of schools.

Liz Smith: So it is correct to say that nobody is against the changes in principle—well, not nobody, but the vast majority are in favour of going ahead. It is the timescale that concerns you most of all.

Larry Flanagan: The timescale and the resulting workload are the key issues for us.

Liz Smith: Does anybody else want to answer?

The Convener: Perhaps Mr Lanagan can respond on behalf of ADES.

Terry Lanagan (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): I would be happy to comment. First, I make it clear that I will not comment on the East Renfrewshire decision—it is for East Renfrewshire to organise its curriculum as it sees fit.

Following on from what Larry Flanagan has just said, there has never been a change that has not produced a degree of opposition and concern. There has never been a time during my 35 years in education when the EIS and the other teachers' unions have not been concerned about workload. Those are constants in the system.

However, I was slightly surprised to hear Larry Flanagan use the term "big-bang approach" with regard to this development. We have been following a timeline for some years now that has been known to all parties. In April 2010, ADES surveyed all 32 local authorities to see whether they had a plan in place for the new S1 in 2010-11. At that point, all 32 authorities reported that they had, and no concern was expressed in those returns about the timeline.

Last year, we surveyed all 32 authorities again. Although there were concerns—as there are bound to be with any new development—there was no plea from any local authority for a delay in the timeline. It is worth reminding the committee that there has already been a delay—indeed, the

Scottish Government has been very responsive to previous requests for additional time by providing resources for additional in-service days for training. The training has been spread across the country at local and national level, and what was then Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education was taken off its normal duties to provide further support to secondary schools.

The crucial thing about the current timescale for the introduction of the new qualifications is that there is a group of youngsters in S2 who have been following curriculum for excellence, and the new national qualifications are designed to follow on from that curriculum. I cannot see the logic in arguing that a group of youngsters who have been through one education system should be presented for examinations that are for another time and another system.

The other thing—I am sure that Janet Brown will come on to this, and Larry Flanagan is aware of it—is that, unlike all previous implementations of change of this type, there has been a much more detailed and transparent programme plan for the implementation of the whole programme and specifically of the new SQA qualifications. That is scrutinised at every management board meeting. The SQA, to its great credit, has not failed to meet a single deadline, and there is no evidence that it is about to do so.

We have known what is coming. Larry Flanagan is right to say that some of the fine detail is not there, but that is a result of the nature of this particular change. It was led by Scottish society, which considered what it wanted from its education system and decided what needed to be in place to deliver for the young people at the end of that system.

Unlike with the previous changes, which have been led by qualifications, it is inevitable that the qualifications will be the last piece of the jigsaw. We have had repeated assurances from the SQA that that will follow on naturally from the broad general education and the experiences and outcomes that are contained therein. ADES sees no need for any further delay in implementation.

Liz Smith: Mr Lanagan, I totally accept what you are saying; you have made a very logical argument. However, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has allowed the exemption of one local authority—I do not want you to comment on the specifics of that—and some private schools have taken the decision to delay. Do you accept that those facts have raised further doubts in the minds of parents and some teachers that some schools or some departments might not be quite ready?

10:15

Terry Lanagan: I repeat that I will not comment on the East Renfrewshire Council decision. However, I will comment on some of the fall-out from the decision and from the publicity about what private schools have done. There is no doubt that such decisions have led the media and some political commentators to make criticisms of the system that I do not think are justified or reflect views that are as widely held as people seem to believe that they are. I was at a meeting last night of the West Dunbartonshire Council parents strategy group, and the group was keen that the current timetable for implementation be adhered to. The group feels that it has been communicated with throughout the process.

Dr Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority): I confirm what Terry Lanagan said. We are and continue to be on track. We have a detailed plan, to ensure that we not only develop the qualifications but communicate what is in them openly and widely, and to ensure that we are ready to deliver the qualifications through the structure that is in place. We foresee no change to the schedule.

We are aware that the qualifications came at the end of the process, as Terry Lanagan said. The philosophy of curriculum for excellence is about teaching and learning and ensuring that young people get the right skills and knowledge to enable them to go out into the world and be successful, whether they get a job or go into further or higher education. Therefore, the qualifications should come at the end of the process, to capture knowledge and skills and to qualify the young people to move on.

As a result, the timeframe for the development of the qualifications has been much, much shorter than has historically been the case. It is doable and it is being done. Because of the timeframe, we have not only involved all parties in the qualifications' development and specifications but sought to update people regularly on where we are in relation to the nature of the qualifications, what will be in there, what the assessments will look like and so on. For the past year or so we have been publishing draft documents, which teachers, parents, individuals, businesses, universities and colleges could look at, so that they could understand what will be in the qualifications.

We publish drafts because we want people's feedback; when we get the feedback we make changes that are appropriate to the level of feedback and to what the qualifications are designed to do. There will be some change from the draft documentation that is out there, but it is not likely to be significant. For instance, we have added a particular course and we have modified

aspects of maths, because of feedback that we got. The information about what is likely to be in the qualifications has been published. Draft assessments information for schools and colleges was published in November, and at the end of January we published the support notes for the units and courses that will be delivered in the school and college sector—again, the information was published in draft form, but to a significant extent it is what will be available.

A significant amount of information has been published and we will continue to update it. As you saw from our submission to the committee, there are many mechanisms whereby parents, teachers and pupils can engage and give us information or get information from us. We acknowledge that qualification development is happening faster than normal, but the information is out there and we think that the timetable is doable and achievable.

The Convener: You are saying quite clearly, first, that although the information has been published in draft form it is pretty close to what it will be, and secondly, that the information has been out there for a reasonable time. What do you make of suggestions, which Mr Flanagan has reiterated, that there is a lack of information and a lack of knowledge on the ground among teachers and others?

Dr Brown: The word “draft” always makes people uncomfortable. This is the first time that the SQA has undertaken qualifications development in such an open way. We used to just publish the stuff at the end, but we believe that we should share information as we do it. The information is out there. To be fair, it came out at the end of November and at the end of January. We are just at the end of February and a lot of information is out there, but it must be taken on board by teachers and lecturers, and that takes time. It is important to give people the opportunity to see it, which they have had, and the qualifications will not change until the summer of 2014.

The students are currently in S2 and are going through the learning experiences and outcomes in the broad general education phase of S1 to S3. The qualifications are built on what they will have learned in S1 to S3, so there will be a seamless transition. It will be possible for students to learn aspects of the information that will make them successful in those qualifications in the course of that broad general learning. They can get a handle on where they are going in the future.

The information is coming out. It is a different way of doing it, but the information is there. The feedback that we are getting from teachers when they have seen the information is that it is very helpful to them and it is allowing them to see what they will need to have ready for the summer of 2014.

Bill Maxwell (Education Scotland): I reaffirm what others have said. This is a carefully paced and planned programme that has been over eight years in the implementation. Throughout that period, the management board has discussed at every stage the roll-out of the information that is necessary for the next stage. As Janet Brown says, the key thing for next year is the experiences and outcomes at levels 3 and 4, which have been available to schools and in the public domain for some time. The new qualifications that will come into play from fourth year onwards for pupils will build progressively on what is already articulated in the level 3 and 4 experiences and outcomes. The information is available.

Of course, it is a major change programme and, as Larry Flanagan said, third year is intended to be different from how it would have been in the past. Schools are required to think carefully about how they deliver that, and Education Scotland is in constant contact with schools throughout the country. We are in hundreds of schools each year, talking directly to teachers and front-line staff, so we have a very good cross-check on what, for example, the local authorities are telling the management board about the readiness of their schools and the system. Although we detect some variation, as you would expect at any point in a major change programme of this sort, our view is that that is within perfectly acceptable bounds. We are ready and actively engaged in providing support where there is a clear need for a school, or a department within a school, to seek additional support in preparing for the forthcoming implementation.

Generally, we feel that the programme is on schedule. The point has been well made that it would be doing a great disservice to pupils who, since primary 6, have been following a curriculum for excellence programme to pull the plug on the programme and introduce another year's delay when they are set up to proceed. There is no strong demand from local authorities or other sources for that to happen.

The Convener: Mr Wilson, would you like to make any comments on the general points that we are addressing at the moment?

John Wilson (East Renfrewshire Council): Yes, thank you. This is the first time that I have spoken in public on the matter. I have decided not to put out press articles, appear in radio interviews or do anything like that out of respect for my colleagues. This is a decision that East Renfrewshire Council took on behalf of our young people in East Renfrewshire, not to protect timelines, frameworks or whatever. That is the way that we do things. We are totally behind curriculum for excellence and have been for a long time. In fact, we are making a bigger contribution to the

development of curriculum for excellence and to the qualifications framework than any other local authority in Scotland.

My officers are not only attending conferences about the curriculum for excellence and the new qualifications, but are delivering the courses. We have not turned our back on curriculum for excellence and are not looking south of the border to other qualification authorities to introduce other courses; we simply want secure—I emphasise that word—implementation of every aspect of curriculum for excellence. At the moment, we, our teachers and headteachers feel that we cannot make a decision on that.

We always use the HMIE criteria for intelligent accountability when we make any major change in education. The five criteria, which are very useful—I am sure that Bill Maxwell uses them—were brought out by Graham Donaldson, and we were encouraged to use them to look at educational gain, consultation and evaluation when making any timetabling structure change or introducing a new aspect to the curriculum. We apply the criteria rigorously in our schools, but we cannot get a yes answer in respect of each one at the moment. I am sure that we will be able to get yes answers when our teachers feel secure and when they have developed courses with the correct depth and challenge for our young people in East Renfrewshire.

I speak only for East Renfrewshire and have no ambition to be the director of education in Scotland or anything like that. We have a proven track record of success in East Renfrewshire and we want to maintain it. We do not want to take a risk.

I have heard a lot, rightly, about S2. I do not see our present S2 in East Renfrewshire being any different at all from the S2s that we have had in the past four or five years. We started on this journey seven or eight years ago, and, yes, the present S2 is different from that of seven or eight years ago, but it is no different from last year's S2 or that of the year before. We also have to take account of the young people in S3, S4 and S5, because they deserve the very best and are going through the system at the moment, too.

As Larry Flanagan said, our teachers feel a wee bit insecure and nervous, but they want to do their very best for all young people. When teachers become insecure, they need time to reflect and to develop according to their own standards. They are working very hard indeed, and I do not want their insecurity around the present S2 to move into insecurity around S3, S4 or S5. Security cannot be switched on and off.

Those are all reasons why we took the decision to delay implementation of curriculum for

excellence for a year. It was a transparent decision. I have been flagging it up in various presentations to HMIE and, indeed, to colleagues from the SQA since 2006. My most recent meeting was with Bill Maxwell and Gill Robinson, and was very productive. I did not want to go to the committee without Bill knowing exactly what I was doing. We had a long discussion with them in my office, made a presentation and outlined the reasons why we are doing what we are doing in East Renfrewshire. The meeting was very constructive.

For the life of me, I cannot understand why things went so smoothly but then, two a half weeks after the date of the committee, everything seemed to fall apart. It certainly was not a result of East Renfrewshire doing anything through the press, so I do not know where the acrimony came from that leaves us in the position that we are in today.

I speak only for East Renfrewshire, but I do not have a single teacher clamouring to introduce the new qualifications at this point in time, or a single headteacher wanting to go it alone; it is completely unanimous. That is why we did what we did. People forget that even in S2, young people either have already made or are making their course choices. If there is going to be a change, there is insufficient information to allow them to do that.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that. I thank everybody for their opening remarks. A lot of committee members want to come in—I have a lot of questions myself—but Bill Maxwell indicated that he wants to make a short response. I will bring in Neil Findlay after that.

Bill Maxwell: I just want to clarify something. John Wilson said that we met back in December, which is right. On the basis of consultation that John had undertaken with headteachers and parents in East Renfrewshire, we had become aware there was an intention to take the proposals to the council. We had a constructive meeting around that.

I am sure that the committee is aware of this, but I should make it clear that when we are talking about curriculum for excellence we are talking about a process of consensus. We do not have a statutory curriculum in Scotland, and I do not have a veto over what a local authority might choose to do in the implementation of the curriculum, but we were keen to understand exactly what East Renfrewshire proposed to do. We became concerned in January—once the matter had become public knowledge—that an unhelpful perception could be created that East Renfrewshire was in some way cutting loose from the curriculum for excellence programme. John has made it clear that that was not the council's intention.

10:30

At that stage, reassurance was simply being sought that the council was fully behind the programme, and we have seen ample evidence that it is. We have seen some very good practice in broad general education in East Renfrewshire in recent inspections. We needed that reassurance, and on that basis we are satisfied that our curriculum for excellence will progress in East Renfrewshire, as in the 31 other authorities.

The Convener: You mentioned that Mr Wilson had said to you at the December meeting that there had been consultation with parents. What consultation with parents took place before the decision was taken to delay for a year? Perhaps Mr Wilson is better placed to answer that.

John Wilson: Each school consulted parents—not the whole parent body but the parents who would have been affected—through parents evenings and other meetings at the school. The information was fed back to me.

The Convener: I do not want to make this personal, but I am a parent of a pupil in one of your schools and I am not aware of any consultation that took place. I have attended meetings this year and late last year, but there was no consultation about, or mention of, a possible delay in the implementation of curriculum for excellence.

John Wilson: You could refer to the minutes of Woodfarm high school's parent council, for example, which state that the results from open evenings and consultation evenings were reflected at the council meeting. I have checked it all.

The Convener: I do not know what those minutes say, but I can assure you that the matter was not raised at any open meeting of parents that I attended.

Neil Findlay: I have a specific point to raise with Mr Wilson. You told us that the determining factor was the interests of young people and not the fact that you do intermediates. Is that correct?

John Wilson: The fact that we do intermediates is helpful in this regard, because they will carry on for longer than standard grade, which we have not done since 2005.

We went down the road of intermediates, using the HMIE criteria on intelligent accountability, because we were told that the learning gradient for young people was not correct, with too big a jump when it came to moving on to higher. We have evidence—you just have to look at our results—that we have smoothed out that gradient, so we do not want to throw out any gains for young people by making a sudden change. The reason for our decision is twofold: teachers are insecure and feel that they have insufficient evidence to develop

courses of the correct depth and challenge for our people in East Renfrewshire; and we have this helpful situation in which intermediates carry on.

Neil Findlay: If you were the head of education in another authority, which, having consulted staff and parents, was in the same state of insecurity but was setting a different exam, would you take the same decision?

John Wilson: I have made it clear from the beginning that I am prepared only to talk about East Renfrewshire. There are people here—

Neil Findlay: I know that my question is hypothetical, but it is important. If you are making the decision only because you are setting a different exam, I need to tease that out. Alternatively, are you making it because of the situation in which your pupils, teachers and parents find themselves?

John Wilson: It is for both reasons.

Neil Findlay: If one of the best performing local authorities decides to delay the national curriculum, that is something of which we must take note.

I also have questions on a few wider points. I am getting back from parents and teachers in my area the message that the picture is mixed and confusing. Some schools are allowing subject choice at the end of second year, and some are allowing it at the end of third year. Schools in the same authority area are doing different things. In some schools, eight subjects are chosen, and in others in the same authority, seven subjects are chosen, and that is certainly causing confusion in parents' minds.

In my time in schools—before last May—we went through all the continuous professional development related to bringing in the curriculum. After going through a day's CPD, many teachers would look at one another and ask, "What was all that about?" People would say to one another, "It's okay. Let's just continue, because something is bound to happen." I experienced that level of confusion in school, and that is the message that I am getting back from parents and teachers.

Larry Flanagan: A secondary issue flows from what East Renfrewshire Council is doing. With secondary intermediates, it is sticking with a timetable model that involves S1 and S2, S3 and S4, and S5 and S6. That is a familiar pattern for most schools. A number of schools are doing what Mr Findlay says, even if they are not looking at national 4 and national 5. They are sticking with the two plus two plus two model. In effect, they are replacing standard grade courses with national 4 and national 5, but that is all that they are doing. Basically, they are changing the qualifications. I support curriculum for excellence, but I am worried

about that, as that is not broad general education at the senior phase.

A further worry is that, if that is being done and a two-year course is run for national 4 and national 5 over S3 and S4, people will not wait until 2013-14 to start to run their course; they will start it in August. Indeed, some schools will start it in June. The final detail of the qualifications will come out in May. Therefore, some schools, although they are not using intermediates to create delay, are launching into qualification routes literally weeks after the detail has been finalised because of the timetable model that is being used. That is a real concern. Many of my members in schools will be happy with that arrangement, as there is minimal change and they are familiar with the system, but my big concern is that, if that approach takes root, it will be extremely difficult to get back to the three plus three model, which curriculum for excellence is based on.

It comes down to the issue of capacity in schools. When Janet Brown talked about the SQA publishing documents, she meant that things are on the website. One round of paper publications was sent to schools—that happened after a meeting that we held. The papers arrived a week after the close of the consultation. Most of the other information is on the website. That was a big issue when we were considering experiences and outcomes. I do not know whether colleagues were involved in that three and a half years ago. Learning and Teaching Scotland published things on the website, but they did not penetrate into schools. I recognise that the SQA is meeting its work deadlines, but there is a difference between information being published on a website and schools having time to assimilate and to prepare.

Less than 18 months ago, the managing board received a report from Bill Maxwell on progress on curriculum for excellence. At that point, 10 per cent of schools did not even have curriculum for excellence in their school improvement plan. In the next report that we received, there was up to 100 per cent compliance in relation to curriculum for excellence and the improvement plan, but if you analyse the secondary schools' school improvement plans, you will see that the new qualifications are way down the agenda, as people are looking to deliver S1 and S2 experiences and outcomes. We are delivering as things come on stream. Next year, there will be the challenge of delivering S3 broad general education at the same time as trying to develop the new qualifications. That is a circle that cannot be squared, and it is where the issue of capacity and resources comes in.

If Terry Lanagan is confident that schools in his authority are good to go, that is fine. All I am suggesting is that we should let the school

community decide. If it is good to go, that is terrific; after all, we want the curriculum for excellence to be delivered. However, if a school has concerns and feels that the extra year is important, it should be allowed to go through the same decision-making process that East Renfrewshire and some private sector schools have gone through. The school community is better placed to make that decision than any directorate or Education Scotland.

Curriculum for excellence is not a big-bang thing; it will evolve over five to 10 years. However, a big-bang approach is being taken to qualifications, given the way pupils have been scheduled to move. We introduced standard grade and higher still through dual running, and allowing schools to decide to go for 2013-14—to delay things—would, in effect, give dual running this time round. Take-up of general curriculum for excellence might be 90 per cent; indeed, that would be seen as good progress, because it would mean that the vast majority of schools were on track. However, if there is 90 per cent compliance with the new qualifications, it means that 10 per cent of schools are not ready and 10 per cent of the pupil cohort is being disadvantaged. We are concerned to ensure that no one is disadvantaged; indeed, we saw the fallout with higher still when a tiny percentage of pupils lost out in the changes. If we can put in place safeguards to allow schools to control this development, we will be able to ensure that no pupil ends up disadvantaged in this period of change. That is the key element.

Dr Brown: I want to talk about the transition from broad general education to qualifications. Larry Flanagan is right to highlight the view that the amount of assessment undertaken in the current school system is extensive and does not necessarily always add to students' learning; indeed, Larry is one of the big supporters of activity on that matter. We are all of the view that we should ensure that people have the right qualifications for the next stage. However, the situation will vary, depending on what an individual's next destination might be.

In developing the qualifications, we are absolutely seeking to ensure a continuum of learning through S1, S2, S3, S4 and S5 to S6. The fact is that the way one attests to the skills and knowledge that those individuals have developed during that period will change. There is assessment in the school sector from S1 to S3 but, with national 4 and national 5 and then higher and advanced higher, we have a quality assurance component and an examination rather than qualification elements that are moderated, assured and standardised by SQA.

The challenge is to ensure that, as pupils move from S2 to S3, they still get a broad general

education. However, during S3, students will learn aspects of what they need to know to be successful in the qualification that they undertake, be it national 4, national 5 or ultimately a higher. This is not so much about choosing to develop and deliver a qualification course as about looking at what people need to learn and finding out how it might be validated and certified by a qualification at a point in time that the educationalist has defined as right for that child. In some cases, children will get a national 4 or national 5 at the end of S4; in other cases, they might choose to bypass all that and take a higher qualification at a later point in time. However, it is really important that we think of this not as a rigid two plus two plus two system or a three plus three system, but as a continuum of learning that should be validated and certificated at the right point in time. Different people will choose different things and, as we have heard, East Renfrewshire has chosen a particular path and Larry Flanagan has articulated another. That is good, because that is what curriculum for excellence is all about.

The Convener: A lot of members want to come in, so I will move things on. Joan McAlpine can go next.

10:45

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I want to ask a further question about the two plus two model versus the three plus three model. The head of St Aloysius' college was quoted on the BBC website earlier this week saying that he is not going to implement the new system. His concerns are not to do with resources and capacity, which Mr Flanagan has suggested are the issues; those things are clearly not affecting St Aloysius' college. He says that he thinks that the new system is bad for education, and that

"There's no way they can reach that standard in eight or nine subjects in one year."

I feel a bit uncomfortable that he thinks that the system is bad for his pupils, and that some may not get that choice.

The Convener: I will bring Mr Lanagan in first; I see that everybody wants to have a go.

Terry Lanagan: The statement from the head of St Aloysius' college shows a misunderstanding of the continuum that Janet Brown has just mentioned. The new system is not about going for eight or nine qualifications in one year—it is a continuum of learning. Those are not just words: the new qualifications will—and do—build on the experiences and outcomes in broad general education.

The two plus two plus two versus three plus three issue is a bit of a false dichotomy. Broad

general education goes up to S3, but that does not mean that there is no choice before that stage—indeed, personalisation and choice are an entitlement in curriculum for excellence.

Neil Findlay is right to say that there are different models in different schools in the same authority. There are even different models for individual young people in one school. An advantage of curriculum for excellence is not only that it reduces the assessment burden, which was one of its aims, but that it allows the curriculum to be tailored to the needs of the individual.

One of the weaknesses in the current system is the well-known two-term dash to highers. The new system will allow the most able young people to start a two-year higher course at the beginning of S4. The other myth that has grown up is the idea that those schools that choose to present some or all pupils for eight qualifications in S4 are somehow doing better than those that adopt another model. The whole point about curriculum for excellence is to ensure that the needs of the individual young person are addressed, and that each young person gets the chance to attain qualifications at whichever point is appropriate for their needs.

In this discussion, we are missing out the whole question of wider achievement, which was another important thing that curriculum for excellence was designed to address. The senior phase is not all about qualifications; it is also about continuing to deliver entitlements within curriculum for excellence so that we produce the type of young people that are needed for Scotland's future.

Bill Maxwell: It is important that we keep our eyes on the prize. Curriculum for excellence is about raising young people's overall attainment by the time that they leave the formal education system, and it is doing that. Terry Lanagan mentioned the two-term dash, which was one of the issues that we sought to get beyond through curriculum for excellence and by planning for a much more flexible senior phase.

The previous perception that S1 and S2 was a rather flat period in the profile of educational progress was another key issue that curriculum for excellence and broad general education seek to address by implementing a much faster pace and more personalised experience up to the end of S3.

If people look carefully at the experiences and outcomes that are defined at level 4 and level 3 for the end of S3, they will find that those are very demanding and challenging, and at a much higher standard than was previously expected at the end of S2, for example. The whole programme is much more about customised, flexible programmes of learning that maximise attainment by the time young people leave the system.

The Convener: I am conscious of the time and I want to move things on quickly. If the witnesses want to add any further points, please do so briefly.

Dr Brown: It would be possible to do eight subjects if that was the right thing for an individual class or a particular student, but one must ensure that that was the right thing to do.

Larry Flanagan: I disagree with that slightly—I am a school timetabler, so I deal in practicalities. If a school is doing eight national 5s, it is doing eight 160-hour courses. That is the way in which the courses are validated: 160 hours have been allocated as the basic requirement.

The Convener: Three people just shook their heads, Mr Flanagan.

Larry Flanagan: That is because they do not like what I am saying.

The Convener: I suspect it is because they disagree with you.

Larry Flanagan: To reach level 5 of the SCQF ratings, one of the requirements for national 5 is that it must be allocated 160 hours. If my school is told that a national 5 course needs 160 hours, as a timetabler I have to put 160 hours on the timetable, or the maths department will tell me that it cannot deliver the course in one year. That is why it is not possible to do eight national 5s in one year—there is not enough time in the school timetable.

If a school is doing eight national 5s in S4, it has to do them over the course of S3 and S4, in the same way as intermediates must be done over two years. That runs a coach and horses through the real intention of the senior phase, which I agree with. The intention is to keep wider achievement, bypass low-level exams and work towards higher qualifications in S5. That is what schools are adopting—even those that are doing national 4 and 5. They are presenting an S4 that is pushing back into S3, which will undermine broad general education. That is one of the challenges.

The Convener: Let us clear up this point. Dr Brown, you seem to disagree with Mr Flanagan's point.

Dr Brown: I agree with the amount of learning that is needed to achieve SCQF level 5. It does not have to be done all in one year. There is a continuum of learning from broad general education to the qualifications, so pupils can learn some of it during their broad general education. A student doing a university degree in mathematics needs to know that two plus two equals four, but that is not something that they have learned on their university course; they have learned it throughout their learning.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP):

After eight years of planning, why are some schools—in your words, Mr Flanagan—“good to go,” while others are not? Neil Findlay has said that there is confusion about what is happening. In my local authority area—North Lanarkshire Council—my son is in his third year and is sitting standard grade English this year. Pupils in other schools are sitting maths and English, while those in the only top 50 school in North Lanarkshire do all the subjects in their third year.

You have also raised concerns about resources and teaching numbers, which are the responsibility of local authorities. Is there a geographical split in relation to the local authorities of the schools that are “good to go”, or do such schools have better attainment? Is there a pattern?

Larry Flanagan: In one sense, it is wrong to say that this has taken eight years of planning. There has been a long development period, but we only published the draft form of the experiences and outcomes when I joined the board about three and a half years ago, and the development work did not really affect schools until then. School implementation of curriculum for excellence has, therefore, taken place over three to four years. The experiences and outcomes focused largely on primary and the early years of secondary; the senior phase came later. Janet Brown has made the point that we deliberately kept the senior phase until after the curriculum changes. Although it may seem that curriculum for excellence has been in the ether for a long time, school planning and progress have taken place over a relatively short period. An evolutionary change such as curriculum for excellence is a 10-year programme in terms of impact.

I am unable to say how many schools are ready to go and how many are not. Some schools have contacted me to say that they are happy, because their senior management teams have opted for a two plus two plus two model that feels familiar, while others have said that they are unhappy, because that is not what they were told curriculum for excellence would be about. I know of some schools that are presenting S2 and S3 for standard grade to create a year's delay.

I am always surprised when ADES tells me that 32 local authorities have signed up, because I can cite a school that has serious concerns in almost every local authority. There is a difference between being committed to achieving curriculum for excellence as a programme and being committed to the current timetable. Our main concern for secondary schools is that that timetable poses serious problems. If we want to safeguard the interests of pupils, we should allow the schools to make the decision, because they are best placed to do so.

Terry Lanagan: Larry Flanagan and I have had conversations about the issue. There is a fundamental misunderstanding in talking about a school being good to go or not good to go. I cannot envisage there being any secondary school in Scotland that is in no way prepared for the new qualifications, although there might be variety in levels of preparedness in individual departments and for individual subjects. The current system deals with that because departments can, if special circumstances affect them, and after discussion with the director of education and Education Scotland, and where the department already presents for intermediates in the subject in question, get a further delay.

No curricular change or other major change in education is an exact science; we will never have 100 per cent of schools, departments and teachers being equally well prepared. Education Scotland's recent reports have shown growing confidence that schools are getting to the point at which they are prepared. Some will be better prepared than others, but we could defer for five years and some schools would still be better prepared than others and, within schools, some departments would still be better prepared than others.

We must be confident that the system is good to go and that teachers have the information that they need to be able to deliver it. I believe that we are at that stage. Individual departments might not be ready but, as I said, we have a way of dealing with that.

John Wilson: I do not want to go through the HMIE criteria one by one, but the second one is about whether all the implications have been fully thought through. From listening to the discussion, it seems that there is still a wee bit of debate to go. That is not to say that everything is wrong but, for sure, not everything is quite right and we want to get it right and to make it right for our young people. At the end of the day, they only get one chance in second year, one in third year and one in fourth year. We want to maximise that chance. Bill Maxwell mentioned that the process should be about raising attainment. I whole-heartedly endorse that. I make no apologies for that, because East Renfrewshire is about raising attainment. We drive attainment—and in the right direction, I hope.

As Larry Flanagan and Terry Lanagan said, some schools are "good to go", so they will go. At the end of the day, the gap between those authorities and our authority in relation to the benchmark—East Renfrewshire is higher on that—should close. However, at this point in time, I am not convinced that it will.

The Convener: I do not like the phrase "good to go"—I accept Mr Lanagan's more subtle and

refined point about individual differences. However, I am struggling to understand why one local authority has decided to delay for a year, but 31 local authorities have not. It seems to be odd that directors of education in 31 local authorities feel that they are ready to move forward with curriculum for excellence as per the agreed and laid-down timetable, but East Renfrewshire, which is the top attaining authority in the country, does not feel that it is ready.

John Wilson: I whole-heartedly agree; I, too, find it astonishing. However, I have not simply heard my headteachers; I have listened to them. They have said unanimously that, in our patch and in our schools, we are not ready to implement everything securely. They want to do the best they can for all the young people. As I said, they are not saying that we should not touch curriculum for excellence with a bargepole and that we should start thinking about the general certificate of secondary education—GCSE—or whatever. That is not at all the case. We are fully committed to curriculum for excellence and to securing implementation of the new qualifications, but we do not yet feel that we can answer all the questions correctly.

Neil Findlay: I am astonished by the way in which the discussion is developing. Mr Lanagan has just said that he cannot foresee any school in Scotland not being ready to go, but Mr Wilson tells us that all the headteachers in his authority have decided that they are not ready. There is not a chance that only that local authority and those schools have arrived at that position. Are the directors not listening to the head teachers? Is there complacency? What is going on?

11:00

Terry Lanagan: I assure Mr Findlay that there is absolutely no complacency in the system. My colleagues and I are working extremely hard for the benefit of the young people whom we serve and to ensure that the system works well. As I said at the start, I cannot comment on East Renfrewshire; however, I can comment on West Dunbartonshire. There are questions—

Neil Findlay: Excuse me, but you said that you could not foresee any schools in Scotland not being ready to go with the curriculum.

Terry Lanagan: No. Larry Flanagan sometimes makes the point that some schools will not be ready to go. My point is that, within individual schools, there may be variation in the levels of readiness of individual departments. I cannot speak for East Renfrewshire; it is obviously a matter of judgment that teachers there feel that they did not have enough information. However, given the quality of the schools in East

Renfrewshire, I am absolutely sure that, had the council taken a different decision, they would have implemented the new qualifications exceptionally well. That is a matter of judgment for East Renfrewshire Council. I am saying that, although individual departments within schools may not be ready to go, the schools that I am talking to know where they are going with it. Although they may have concerns about certain parts of the jigsaw, no one is telling me that they want a delay in the introduction of the qualifications.

Bill Maxwell: As has been mentioned, there are established arrangements to allow any individual department in any school to plead exceptional circumstances and to seek assistance to get ready in time, should it feel that it is not going to be ready. Such requests come through local authorities and we discuss them with local authorities. So far, however, there have been no official requests for such support.

With due respect to Terry Lanagan and his colleagues, Education Scotland engages in extensive reality testing of what is going on on the ground, not least through our extensive inspection process. We are in schools in every authority area regularly. We will soon start a deep audit with the local authorities to check out exactly what the state of play is in each of the 367 publicly funded secondary schools around the country. I assure you that we are looking closely at what is happening.

I am, on one level, surprised to hear John Wilson taking the line that his schools cannot be ready to implement the new qualifications, given that the quality of the secondary schools in East Renfrewshire is generally very high and they are doing very good work in broad general education. I will be keen to discuss with East Renfrewshire Council later what additional support we can offer it to help those schools to become ready. That offer is very much on the table and has been for some time. When schools or even individual departments feel that they are not going to be ready without additional support, the first port of call is the local authority, through which additional support can be provided before any decision is taken.

Larry Flanagan: I will comment briefly on exceptional circumstances. At the management board, the EIS moved that we should have a fall-back position to ensure that pupils do not suffer. We initially tried to get a one-year delay, and the concept of exceptional circumstances developed from that. It is very difficult to operate, though. As Terry Lanagan said, it allows a department to indicate that it needs support around national 4 and national 5; however, a department has to comply with the school's arrangements. A department cannot opt out of the school's model,

whether that is two plus two plus two or three plus three. So, in one sense, the department is trapped in the school's decision.

The other issue around national 4 and national 5 is that most departments do not know what they do not know yet; there is not yet the detail that would enable them to make that decision, so it is not surprising that departments have not put their hands up and said that they need additional help. In effect, the exceptional circumstances that have been mentioned amount to nothing. If the principle is that, within a school, a department can be excepted, why, within a local authority, cannot a school be excepted? That would cut to the chase.

The Convener: You have said quite clearly that departments cannot take a decision about something that they do not yet know the detail of. However, you said earlier that there are departments in schools that have contacted you that are fully ready to go. How can they make the statement that they are fully prepared for curriculum for excellence when you are saying that no departments have enough evidence or information?

Larry Flanagan: I should have specified that the communication that I mentioned was singular, by which I mean that I have had one communication complaining about a possible delay. That referred to the question of structure—the question of a two plus two plus two model versus a three plus three model. The person who wrote it said that they did not want the one-year delay because they were ready to move to year 3 of broad general education. That school is introducing the qualifications with the bypass, which means that—as in my school—it will be 2014-15 before pupils hit the qualifications, as we have two-year courses. That was a specific example, based on that school's experience.

The Convener: That seems to me to be exactly what is on offer. Why is that an exception? Why is it, in your words, a "singular" example?

Larry Flanagan: It was "singular" in the sense that I only got one e-mail advocating that. It was one representation in favour of there not being a delay. The general point is that, if—due to reasons around school development, absences, lack of progress or whatever—a school did not feel that it was fully prepared and felt that having an extra year would be a safer option for its pupil cohort, that school should be allowed to make that decision.

In the higher-still meltdown, a tiny percentage of pupils suffered as a result of the confusion around the marking. If only 5 per cent of pupils are disadvantaged as a result of schools pushing ahead with the new qualifications when they are not ready, that will be another catastrophe for

Scottish education. If that can be avoided by allowing a phased introduction for one year, we should take that opportunity.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Mr Flanagan has articulated most of what I wanted to ask about.

I am struggling to understand what the exceptional circumstances are in relation to East Renfrewshire. I understand what has happened in relation to curriculum development there, but the issues around the state of readiness, security, unforeseen circumstances and so on are being expressed by a number of teachers across the country. Following on from Clare Adamson's question, I say that I do not think that it is a straightforward matter to assess whether there is a geographic or attainment corollary in that regard. Nevertheless, everything that Mr Wilson said is echoed by the concerns that have been raised with me and other members about uncertainty around the change.

In an attempt to reconcile the position of Mr Flanagan and the position that Dr Brown adopted earlier, is there a possibility that, through a process of in-service days and additional support, we could reach a position in which the confidence that Mr Flanagan says is lacking could be buttressed, which would offset the need for delay? Is there time capacity to reconcile the difference that quite clearly exists in terms of how the situation is assessed?

Larry Flanagan: Given the current timetable, there will need to be a massive programme of in-service training around the new qualifications. I know that some of that has been planned already. Delivery of that will require additional resource. We have spoken to the cabinet secretary about the need for additional in-service days and resources and have had some indication that he is liable to respond positively.

The key issue at this point is that schools have to make a decision about their school structures for next year. If a school is going to use intermediates for a one-year delay, it needs to make that decision now, as S2 pupils need to make their choices now, in order for the courses to be set up.

With regard to the decision about whether to create a delay, there is no time left. We are down to the wire if schools are going to exercise that option; otherwise, we will run into difficulties with option choices and course planning. If additional resource was promised, we would be embarking on a path with a degree of optimism, rather than being absolutely reassured that it would work.

Liam McArthur: As you said at the outset, any change is difficult to manage and a level of uncertainty will always come with transition, so we

must always embark on change with some optimism that, if it is not faith based, rests on others delivering what they say they will deliver. How optimistic can we be that, if a year's delay were to be granted, we would not find ourselves 12 months hence facing similar concerns about uncertainty and transition?

Larry Flanagan: One of the issues with schools being able to opt out for a year is that, as Terry Lanagan indicated, a number of schools will not opt out but will proceed. When we introduced standard grades and higher still, we had pilot schools that progressed work on the new qualifications. There being some schools that would introduce national 4 and national 5 would be beneficial for those schools that did not introduce the qualifications because there would be experience to be gained and lessons to be learned from that.

I honestly cannot tell you how many schools would exercise the option to delay. The schools that decided to proceed would do so with renewed confidence because they would be committed to it and schools that decided to take the year would be reassured in that decision because no pupil would suffer as a result.

Terry Lanagan: One of the questions that is raised by the point that Larry Flanagan has just made is what the effect would be on a school that asked for a year's delay. I accept that East Renfrewshire is unique in that its schools present only for intermediates in S3 and S4. Most schools throughout the country, including all secondary schools in my local authority area, present for a mixture of standard grades and intermediates.

If a school that currently presents for a mixture of standard grades and intermediates—that is most of the schools in the country—were to ask for a year's delay, it would have to start its current S2 on a system of intermediate courses in S3 and S4. The amount of change that that would mean for departments that currently present for standard grade, some of which will not present for intermediates in the upper school, would be far greater than the gradual change that we have been contemplating for the implementation of curriculum for excellence and the new national qualifications. If you were to allow a school to decide that all would go into intermediate, there would be a huge risk to that year group and a huge workload implication for the staff in the school who had previously presented for standard grade, which would longer exist.

Liam McArthur: You quote the exceptional circumstances as being the set-up in terms of intermediate exams in East Renfrewshire. However, on at least three separate occasions, Mr Wilson has articulated the view that the request for a delay of a year is about security and certainty,

and that he seeks it because headteachers in his local authority area are unanimously worried about, and not confident in, the circumstances into which they are being asked to step. Those do not seem to be exceptional circumstances.

Terry Lanagan: They are not—although there is one respect in which East Renfrewshire is exceptional, which is that it presents only for intermediates in S3 and S4.

Let us be clear about what Larry Flanagan proposes. Imagine yourself as a teacher of English in East Dunbartonshire who has taught standard grade until now and has not taught intermediate. If you were to ask for the year's delay, your department would have to get up to speed between now and the summer to be able to deliver an intermediate course for two years for the current S2 year group. There is a huge workload implication to that and—I think—a big risk that the course would not be properly delivered. Another point is that, in my view, intermediate courses do not dovetail with the broad general education that our youngsters receive in S1 and S2.

Larry Flanagan: The basic issue is that, in the vast majority of schools, most subjects are represented at intermediate 1 and 2 in S5.

If I, as an English teacher, did intermediate 2 or intermediate 1 instead of standard grade, that would not be an issue, because I already do intermediate 1 and intermediate 2—I am familiar with the course. I am touched that ADES is concerned about teachers' workloads.

Terry Lanagan: Absolutely.

Larry Flanagan: However, the bottom line is that the decision is for the school. We should let the school evaluate that and base the decision on its understanding of where it is. The key principle is not to impose the decision but to let the school decide.

11:15

The Convener: I will play devil's advocate for a second. Would we end up with a complete boorach across the country? Some schools would go for curriculum for excellence, but some schools would not go for it. In some places, half the schools would go for it, whereas the other half would stay where they were, and some would go to int 1. That sounds like a total mess.

Larry Flanagan: When standard grade and higher still were introduced, we had a one-year phase-over period of dual presentation. In relation to higher still, schools decided whether they were going for intermediate 1 and intermediate 2 or sticking with Scottish Vocational Education Council modules. For one year, schools could

cope with that—I am not suggesting that the period would be for ever and a day.

Intermediate 1 and intermediate 2 articulate with higher—they are part of the current qualifications regime—and they are good, solid qualifications. Pupils and parents understand them and they are part of the system, so pupils would not be disadvantaged and would have pathways forward.

The key issue is ensuring that no pupil suffers as a result of a school being rushed into introducing qualifications for which it is not ready. I would rather have a bit of confusion for a year but safeguard pupils' interests than run the risk of even 1 per cent of pupils suffering.

Bill Maxwell: It is clear that any such strategy has an opportunity cost, as a large number of young people would miss out for a year on the benefits of curriculum for excellence that they were lined up to receive. The situation could be confusing. As has been pointed out, not only would there be a potentially wasted workload for teachers who made a temporary transition through two stages rather than one, but local authorities would have a difficulty—I will speak up for them and for directors of education—in managing the necessary support for their schools to move forward into the new curriculum, as would we. If a patchwork of activity was going on across the piece, delivering the smooth support that is necessary for the programme going forward would be much harder.

The Convener: Again, a lot of people want to speak.

Clare Adamson: I am not an educationist, but I understand that curriculum for excellence is a philosophy of education and represents a change in what happens. The point has been made that we do not want to disadvantage a single pupil. My son went through the five-to-14 curriculum and all that process, but the year behind him experienced a different philosophy of education and worked to experiences and outcomes. Surely stopping that process in the final qualification period could damage those pupils' ability to perform to the best of their capacity.

Larry Flanagan: We need to be careful. If there was no feedback from schools about issues and if we were all signed up, that would be ideal, but we are not there. No one suggests that pupils in East Renfrewshire will be disadvantaged by the one-year delay.

We should not disregard the importance of intermediate 1 and intermediate 2 as qualifications. Our current senior cohort is going through that qualifications system, which has been used for the past 10 years. A one-year delay would deliver a good, sound education, with pathways forward for individual pupils.

Being one year behind on curriculum for excellence is regrettable, but it is a smaller price to pay than that of pupils being disadvantaged by losing out on qualifications down the line. We have a duty to protect pupils from precipitate change.

Joan McAlpine: I want to clarify a point with Mr Wilson. Mr Lanagan said that the Scottish Government had provided a large amount of support and input. Mr McArthur and Mr Flanagan both said that resources were central. However, I got the impression from Mr Wilson that resources are not a factor in his reasons for delaying implementation.

John Wilson: Resources were not the issue, as far as our decision was concerned, although I will always accept more resources.

Joan McAlpine: Yes, of course. However, resources were not the issue for you or for St Aloysius' college and, I presume, the other private schools. It is about attitude and philosophy, not resources.

Larry Flanagan: There is a resource that is crucial: time. Most teachers will tell you that what they need to deliver curriculum for excellence is not loads of money—although they would not say no to loads of money—but time. It is not about top-down change; teachers in the classroom are being asked to lead the change, so they need time to talk to colleagues and develop the work. The workload issue cannot be addressed by a quick fix with finance; it is about creating time in schools for people to consider the changes that they are being asked to make.

Terry Lanagan: Time is always the scarcest and most valuable resource in any development and throughout education.

Neil Bibby: A lot of concern has been expressed about the timescale. This question is for Bill Maxwell and Janet Brown. Given that teachers have on-going teaching commitments, why do the management board and the SQA think that eight weeks is enough time to develop and finalise new courses and materials? Mr Flanagan said that in some schools teachers might have only four weeks, if new courses are to start in June. Why could the exam specifications not be published earlier?

We have heard about the implications of delay for East Renfrewshire and specific schools. There are problems in different departments. What would be the implications of a general delay?

Bill Maxwell: I think that your question is based on a misunderstanding that schools need the exam material to be ready for August this year; in fact, August next year is when they must be clear about the arrangements for the new qualifications. The basis on which schools should be planning

their courses this year—levels, experiences and outcomes at levels 3 and 4, for example—is in the public domain and has been for a wee while.

The timetable has been agreed through the management board for some years on its current basis, and everything is being delivered according to the schedule, which has been explained.

Dr Brown: Neil Bibby's question about teachers having eight weeks to prepare takes us back to the discussion that we had about when the learning for the qualification starts, which is a fundamental issue. The learning for the qualification can be undertaken during the course of the experiences and outcomes that are currently available in the broad general education area, as Bill Maxwell said. The specifications for the final assessment, the finalised course outlines and the units and courses will be published by the end of April, but the drafts are already out there. However, the things that we are talking about will not need to be done until the point at which someone decides that they will present a child for a qualification, which will not happen until the subsequent year, at the earliest.

Neil Bibby: I will repeat my two questions. Why could the exam specifications not be published earlier? What would be the implications of a general delay?

Dr Brown: On your first question, everyone on the CFE management board, which included the vast majority of stakeholders in Scotland, agreed that the qualifications should come at the end of the entire process. We started to develop the qualifications as early as we could. We shrank the timeframe in which we were able to develop qualifications from the historic norm to something much shorter. We are doing the work as fast as we can.

As a result of that approach, we are communicating what is happening during the course of the development. That is why draft documents are on the website. The documents are easily accessible and a teacher can register to be informed when a document comes up in an area in which they are interested. We have something called a my alert service, which every teacher, parent and pupil can register for, so that they can be given an update when something changes in, say, national 4 history. It is not a question of people having to trawl for information. The information was out there as early as it could be. We could not have brought the developments in any earlier.

Neil Bibby: Sorry, but can I try again with Dr Brown and Mr Maxwell? What would be the implications of generally allowing delay in implementation?

Dr Brown: No one on this panel and no one on the management board has denied the fact that the changing environment in the world today means that we need to take a new perspective on education in Scotland. Curriculum for excellence has been designed to do that. It is important for our young people that we implement it as soon as possible, because it will make them and Scotland successful. Any delay will also delay that success, which is a crucial point for us to remember.

Bill Maxwell: For a start, a delay would mean a huge loss of momentum for the programme and, as Janet Brown has outlined, it would have a great opportunity cost in terms of not getting the benefits of curriculum for excellence for young people in Scotland.

Terry Lanagan: I agree with both those broad philosophical points. A delay would also cause incredible practical difficulties for many schools and teachers. I said earlier that there is currently a mix of intermediate courses and standard grades in the middle school. Larry Flanagan is right that an English teacher would probably know about intermediates, but many teachers of minority subjects who currently present for standard grade in the middle school and who do not have intermediates in the upper school would have to develop those courses for presentation because standard grade is not an option. If standard grade is not an option, we would be imposing intermediate courses across the system in a way that I think would cause significant disruption and present a far greater risk to young people than to proceed with the current timetable.

Neil Bibby: I want to follow up on Mr Maxwell's opinion that East Renfrewshire Council should be offered additional support for implementation. If the best-performing education authority in Scotland requires that support, what does that say about the support that is required for all other education authorities? How much money has been spent by Education Scotland on developing resources for curriculum for excellence?

Bill Maxwell: We spent a great deal of our resource on supporting implementation in a variety of ways. We do not usually provide published resources; it is a matter of getting staff out to work with schools and local authorities. For example, when we cancelled the inspection programme in 2010 and redirected the resource to that staff activity, we ran more than 400 events around Scotland with individual schools or clusters of schools, often jointly with SQA and others, in support of the implementation of curriculum for excellence in the secondary school. That has continued, albeit at a lower level. However, we have undertaken at least 100 events since that time and we will look again next year at how we plan additional support where it is necessary.

The support is targeted and relies on discussions with each local authority about needs in particular schools, departments or subject areas. We negotiate that individually. We will negotiate with East Renfrewshire Council, as we would with any other local authority in Scotland, about exactly what the barriers are that we can address in the next few months and years to ensure that East Renfrewshire secondary schools are more confident about implementing curriculum for excellence at stages 4 and 5 of the national qualification. However, that is an individual negotiation that is yet to be discussed with John Wilson.

Liz Smith: Each of you has said that curriculum for excellence is about getting it right for the individual pupil. I entirely agree that that is one of the great plus points of curriculum for excellence, so if there are schools and individual departments that feel that they are not ready, where is the logic in saying that the timescale must be prescriptive?

Your helpful briefing paper lays out a different timescale, with standard grade going off the agenda slightly earlier than intermediates, advanced highers coming in slightly later and so on. As I understand it, all that has been designed in the pupils' best interests. Mr Wilson has stated very clearly that he has based his opinion on what teachers and head teachers in his area have told him about a short delay being in the best interests of the pupils. Why should we move against that?

11:30

Larry Flanagan: Clearly, we should not.

The Convener: We have heard Mr Flanagan's opinion. Does anyone have another view to offer?

Bill Maxwell: As has been explained pretty clearly this morning, East Renfrewshire has taken the opportunity to have a delay because it is in the unique situation that the disappearance of standard grades will have no impact on it at all. Indeed, John Wilson pointed out that that was part of the calculation for East Renfrewshire. However, for every other local authority and school around the country, the withdrawal of standard grades will have a major impact and, as Terry Lanagan has made clear, introducing a global or whole-school delay would force some departments in schools that have not offered intermediates to put them in place for a year as a bridge to the new national qualifications. Although that would be easy for some departments, for others it would create a huge workload and be a waste of effort.

Liz Smith: Forgive me, but it is not unusual for different departments in the same school to have slightly different transition periods. For example, it happened when the Scottish certificate of education translated into SQA.

Bill Maxwell: Yes, but the withdrawal of standard grades affects everyone uniformly. Departments cannot simply carry on with standard grades—in other words, their previous practice—for a year longer. If national qualifications were not going to be introduced on time, many departments would have to change to something else and, in effect, bridge the gap by converting quickly to intermediates for one year and then converting to NQ4 and 5.

Liz Smith: Not if you had a delay.

Bill Maxwell: No. What I have suggested would indeed be the case unless you kept standard grades running an extra year—and that would be very risky indeed.

Neil Findlay: What is so difficult about allowing standard grades to run for another year?

Dr Brown: As you will have seen in our submission to the committee and heard from this morning's discussion, we are already planning to dual run national 4 and 5 and intermediate 1 and 2. We cannot triple run.

Neil Findlay: Why not?

Dr Brown: The resources that would be required in SQA and the additional risk to our ability to deliver a successful diet would be over the top. The option of triple running is simply not viable. We are able to dual run and that is what we will do—indeed, that is what happened during the transition period in the earlier change to qualifications—but we cannot triple run.

The Convener: Jean Urquhart has been waiting patiently to ask her question.

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Some of my questions have already been answered. However, I believe that Bill Maxwell said that no department had applied for help. Given that such help would be directly targeted at teachers who feel that they are not ready and have work to do, why would they not ask for it?

Bill Maxwell: The help has different layers. I presume that departments might raise these issues initially with the school, which might provide some help; they might also raise concerns and seek help from the local authority. If, beyond all that, they agree with the local authority that, in their case, there are exceptional circumstances that prevent them from being ready on time, they trigger a mechanism that will involve discussions with Education Scotland about any additional support that we can offer. That stage has not yet been reached and we have not gone through that process in any area.

That is not to say that many schools have not received additional support from their local authorities—I am sure that they have. Indeed,

quite a number have had support from us, because we have been undertaking a planned programme of support activities in local authorities and we have been involved in follow-up activity around inspections. So quite a lot of support has been provided to departments that have been concerned and that need extra support. However, nothing has yet triggered the exceptional circumstances arrangement.

Jean Urquhart: You talked about carrying out an audit of the 367 public secondary schools in Scotland. Is that audit current? Is it coming to an end or just starting? What will you look for in relation to the curriculum for excellence?

Bill Maxwell: In the next few weeks, we will sit down with each local authority. We have a set of district inspectors who link directly with each local authority, and we have area advisers who work on support activity with local authorities. Our teams will sit down with each local authority and undertake a review of what we know about each of the schools in their areas. In effect, that is the national audit.

Jean Urquhart: Will that end before the introduction of curriculum for excellence, given that we are nearly there? That would make it relevant.

Bill Maxwell: It will help us to prepare for the next year's support activity. The curriculum for excellence implementation group, which was set up in January and which has already met once, will aim to publish a plan for national support for the year ahead, after Easter. We will work towards that and we will look to inform the programme through those deep discussions with each local authority about what they perceive to be the needs in their schools and areas. We will feed that into the next annual support plan. The previous one was published in June last year by Colin MacLean, as an annex to a letter from the curriculum for excellence management board. It is important to get a clear plan for support out to all stakeholders.

Jean Urquhart: Does that reassure you, Mr Flanagan, or do you think that it is not relevant to the case?

Larry Flanagan: The Education Scotland audits are in effect on-going. A lot of the feedback that we get from Education Scotland relates to its inspections. There is an issue about Education Scotland's capacity to meet the demand for additional support. Bill Maxwell can give the exact figures, but the body has, as part of the merger, had a huge reduction in its staff. There is a limit to the support that Education Scotland can offer while maintaining its inspection regime.

On your previous question about the number of departments that have asked for support, the current situation reflects where schools are on

engagement with the new qualifications. As I said, many departments do not know what they do not know, because they have not been able to engage fully with the new qualifications.

In relation to Bill Maxwell's response to the question about using intermediates, it is clear that, if standard grade is there, that would be a preferable option in the case of a delay. However, without wishing to muddy the waters, we could always reverse the exceptional circumstances so that, if a department was not willing to do the intermediates, it could get support to do national 4 and 5. That would keep us all on stream, but perhaps that is just being perverse.

The Convener: Perhaps.

The session has been relatively long, but that is appropriate as the subject is important and there are five witnesses on the panel. I will finish by asking a practical question. I am still not entirely clear as to why one education authority—in fact, the top performing one—feels that it is unable to move forward, when 31 others feel able to do so. However, given that that is the situation, will the panel members explain the practical implications of any transfers of pupils from East Renfrewshire to another authority and vice versa? Does anybody envisage problems with pupils going from authorities that are proceeding with the three years of general education to East Renfrewshire, which is sticking with the current system? Do you envisage problems, Mr Wilson?

John Wilson: I certainly do not envisage problems. Not too many parents want to choose a school outwith East Renfrewshire—in fact, the situation is the reverse.

The Convener: Some people move house, Mr Wilson.

John Wilson: Yes, but at least we know that we have given those pupils a good grounding to go forward. Their attainment will, we hope, be first class wherever they end up. I do not foresee any problems with anyone coming to East Renfrewshire. We are used to that, because it happens all the time. As you know, we are expanding our buildings and we get a lot of placing requests from other authorities. Therefore, it is not an issue—

The Convener: Sorry to interrupt, but at present pupils who come from another authority have basically studied for the same qualifications in the same system that is in place in East Renfrewshire. Next year, a person might move from an area that is doing curriculum for excellence, with three years of general education, to a situation in East Renfrewshire in which, in third year, pupils have already chosen all their subjects at the end of second year and are carrying on with intermediate

1 and 2. You think that that has no practical implications.

John Wilson: I do not think that there are any practical implications. The schools will cope with that and we will—

The Convener: It was the pupils that I was thinking about, more than the schools.

John Wilson: The young person will get the proper support. At present, pupils come in having started standard grades and so on. It makes no odds.

The Convener: I ask Mr Lanagan the same question, given that he represents another authority.

Terry Lanagan: I do not see that as a major issue. To be honest, whenever a child moves from one school to another, especially in the secondary phase, it is disruptive. Sometimes, the school that they move to cannot present them for all the subjects that they have previously chosen and they have to make changes. The pupil might go from a system in which it was all standard grades to a school with a mixture of intermediates and standard grades. We generally cope well with that but, for the individual child, it is undoubtedly disruptive. Such moves will continue to be disruptive on that level, but I do not think that the problem is insurmountable.

The Convener: I am grateful for that.

Neil Findlay: Convener, can I ask a question?

The Convener: Yes—if it is very quick.

Neil Findlay: I do not know whether any of the panel have children but, if you do, are you happy with the way in which the school that your children attend is handling curriculum for excellence?

Terry Lanagan: I do not have children.

Larry Flanagan: My children are at university.

John Wilson: I have loads of children, and they are all working.

Dr Brown: Mine are still a drain on my university.

Bill Maxwell: I am afraid that we are all too old.

Neil Findlay: Thank you.

The Convener: I thank all our witnesses for their evidence. No doubt, the committee will return to the subject, probably more than once in the coming months. It is too important for us not to do that.

The committee has agreed to take the next agenda item in private.

11:42

Meeting continued in private until 12:04.

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